

IDEAS

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INDEPENDENT RETAIL | BY TED ESCHLIMAN

SIGNS, SIGNS

We boomers are old enough to remember the original Five Man Electrical Band version of “Signs,” later covered by Tesla. The song transcended its pop-culture status in an era when rebellion against authority was hitting its stride.

“Do this, don’t do that, can’t you read the sign?” The lyric resonated in my teens, and I have to confess it still speaks to me. It wasn’t just about directive, communal authority. It was a reaction to Madison Avenue and the media bombardment of junk advertising, which is now exponentially more prolific. And as retailers, there is one stage where we need to be very sensitive to the impact of signs: our stores.

Volume. Your first concern about signage is frequency. The more words you put in front of a customer, the more invisible the words become. (Have you read your iTunes user agreement lately?)

You must choose your words carefully, as the more you clutter your showroom with signs,



especially regarding policies, the less likely people are to read your message. Where things are (restroom, cashier, lessons, repair) is the single most important text in your store. Relegate less relevant information to fine print — there’s nothing wrong with keeping exchange policies and returns as small as possible. Even better, have them printed on the back of receipts. One percent of your customers will take you to task on some esoteric point. The other 99 percent don’t need the clutter to interfere with a rich, pleasant purchasing experience.

Tone. Rule No. 1: No negative signs. “No cash refunds.” “No touching without a salesman’s help.” “No loitering.” You might as well add, “No fun.” There are positive ways to communicate these messages. “We want to help you enjoy this instrument.” “Thanks for limiting your playing to 30 minutes.” I’d argue that we oversign areas, and a sign laced with sarcasm or passive aggression — “You break it, you buy it” — is a huge turn off. We live in our showrooms. Our customers are company, especially new ones. They should be treated like guests.

I recall visiting a friend’s house in college. The mother spent 10 minutes outlining the house pool rules, as if we were grade school kids. Funny how none of us felt like swimming after being belittled.

Verbalization. The way words are used on the sign, not only their grammar and spelling but also their sophistication level, speaks volumes about your business. Signs should be expressive, concise and uplifting. Text should only be fashioned

by your best staff wordsmiths and painstakingly proofed — by several people!

Aesthetic. Outside of an expensive cosmopolitan bistro, signs should never be handwritten. A sign in black Sharpie tells your customer your business can’t afford a computer. Avoid multiple fonts, and again, use as few words as possible. Also, art and text should always be kid-appropriate and consistent in appearance to the other signs in the store. Use a clean font (Arial), and avoid hard-to-read art fonts.

Internal. You probably have two kinds of signs in your store — one for the customer and one for the employee. Be polite to your employees, too. Insist on no personal (“grudge”) signs in the break room or near the time clock. If they don’t apply to everybody, they don’t belong.

“And the sign said, ‘Everybody welcome, come in, kneel down and pray.’” **MI**

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