



SIGN OF THE TIMES

There's an old saying that goes 'a business with no sign is a sign of no business' – in today's tough retail market, it's truer than ever.

Research has shown that increasing marketing and advertising expenditure helps businesses increase – or at least not deplete – sales during a recession. If consumers are finding it hard to open their wallets, retailers need to work harder to make sure they do.

Peter Wethey, director of Auckland graphic display systems provider Pizazz, says in-store promotion can end up in a number of budgets – but effectively it'll be in the advertising and marketing budget.

"When stores find they are not making enough sales, too many of them decide to cut back on changing their in-store images – so, instead of making changes every month, they do it every six months.

"What the customers will see is a tired and uninvigorating environment. "Retailers should be making even more of an effort."

These days retailers have at their disposal a massive range of products and technology to ensure their stores are invigorating and appealing environments for their customers. And, as the technology develops, it will become cheaper.

EVOLVING

In-store signage has been evolving over the last five or six years from mostly non-illuminated towards illuminated (characterised by LED and electronic data display products) and – on the horizon – interactivity signage.

Wethey says illuminated interactive displays are attracting considerable interest among retail and brand managers. "They allow customers to choose what information they want to see and access it by touch screens or sensor pads."

But, for the majority of shops, digitally produced static signs and displays – such as pricing and product information, posters and banners – will remain most important.

For some observers, the jury is still out on the effectiveness of electronic signage. They say that in some instances it doesn't have the same impact as more traditional signage, but add that it depends on the audience and there's

evidence that younger people react to it better.

Wethey says in-store signage is a key element of the total retail store environment which, again, needs careful attention during a recession.

The rule of thumb, he says, has been that 70 per cent of purchase decisions are made in-store – often within seconds. "So you have to make sure your retail environment attracts, informs and, most importantly, sells your product."

But, he says, there is talk coming from the US that consumers are spending more time at home researching prospective purchases. They have been aided and abetted in doing this by the bombardment of advertising for sales



Left An acrylic, edge-lit UltraSlim lightbox from Pizazz Changeable Graphic Systems.

Middle A very large Pizazz POP Panel display featuring a silver, brushed aluminium back panel.

Right Pizazz illuminated displays in Regency Duty Free combines LED edge-lit panels with Easy Loader snap-lock displays with black powder-coated frames.

Opposite Pizazz's Easy Loader snap lock display with powder-coated frames to match the McCafé colours.

and special offers. Giving impetus to this trend is the range of tools available to help consumers research products – for example, bestdealsonline and Google.

With the drop in spontaneous purchases, Wethey says some in the industry are wondering about the effectiveness of the traditional shop environment, including signage.

“But one thing that hasn’t changed is the need to get the store environment right, including signage.”

The customer takes a journey from brand messages through to product information and there should be targeted displays for every part of the retail environment...

“People who don’t understand all the synergies – they are going to struggle,” says Wethey.

As an example, he says retailers should not send customers mixed messages with signage. “For a quality product range, the in-store promotion and signage must be of a similar quality level to match the product range. A good quality – but relatively inexpensive – poster display system can achieve this.

“Posters stuck to walls with sellotape, pins, etc. may be okay for discount or clearance stores, but are not for the better-quality product ranges sold by a majority of retailers.”

SIGN OF A TOP SHOP

The quality and effectiveness of in-

store signage is one of the criteria for the TOP SHOP® retail excellence awards. An awards judge, Sarah Webb from Retail Research Consultants, says in-store signage is an important part of what she and her fellow judges are looking for when they are judging TOP SHOP® entries.

“Getting in-store signage right is a very important factor in making a sale.” One common problem she sees is too much signage. “More is not better; overload just confuses people. It shouts out at you. It’s like visual pollution.”

She says it’s a common problem with liquor stores which often have a large number of promotions on at the same time.

A speaker at the Digital Signage Expo 2009 held in Las Vegas, US, also highlighted the dangers of trying to do too much with digital signage. Phillip Lenger, president of digital media production house Show + Tell, said “With digital signs, it’s okay not to be 100 per cent compelling all of the time”.

Retailers need to put themselves in the customers’ position. “They need to be guided through from the time they enter a store ... the signage needs to help the customer along the way through to purchase,” he says.

“Our research shows that when people first walk into a store, it takes time for them to adapt to the new environment. They are not open to new things and

they need time to adjust.”

A store entrance is not a good place to put signs you’d like customers to notice.

Webb comes down hard on unattractive and unprofessional signs. “If they are unattractive, then people will think the products [are] the same. It’s a very visual thing – people use signs to help them determine their attitude to a product.

It’s a snap decision, she says and if the impression is bad, that’s a sale lost.

MOVE TO DIGITAL

The big trend in in-store signage has been the move to digital.

Dan Lauder, director of Speedy Signs in Wellington, says that in the last five years the signage industry has moved rapidly to the digital model. “In-store signage is now 80 per cent digital, with the remainder in screen printing and a very small amount of traditional brush work.

“I had my first-brush work job today in six months.” It tends to be expensive and is dying out, he says.

Terry O’Neill, director of Dynamic Displays, sees traditional displays, such as posters, eventually (perhaps in 3–5 years) being overtaken by digital signage.

New Zealand, he says is “just starting to get its head around its potential and benefits. It enables you to target specific customers at specific times and the ability to add interaction (touch), gives another level again.

“Digital signage is in the same position as the internet 20 years ago.”

O’Neill says digital signage has a medium upfront cost but, in the long run, it could cost less than traditional signage. Overseas digital signage is already a nine–11 billion dollar business and is set to change the way we communicate with our customers in New Zealand.

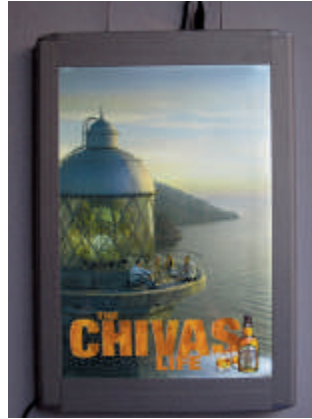
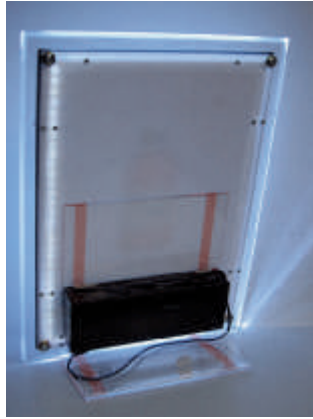
As in all electronics media, he says, the cost of the hardware is reducing and the quality and versatility is increasing but the biggest problem is making sure you have current, appropriate and timely content.

Speedy Signs, a franchise with locations throughout New Zealand, sees electronic data displays (EDDs) as a big trend in in-store signage. A common household EDD product is the digital photo frame.

Lauder sees EDDs as a powerful, convenient, flexible and increasingly cheap multi-media tool for store owners to use to get and hold customers attention. “The dimensions are pretty exciting. Instead of coming to me to print a display, all the store owner needs to do is e-mail me the content and we will put the display together.

“We can even do this remotely through the internet or cellular phones.”

He says the price points are now very attractive. “You can now get a display for around \$3000, including the software. The technology is becoming better and



Above Edgelit and frameless, battery-powered, counter stand display from Arica Digital. **Middle** Rear view of batter-powered, counter stand display from Arica Digital. **Right** Arica Digital flip-out frame mounted on Plankwall.

cheaper and EDD products are coming out left, right and centre.”

The other attraction of EDDs, he says, is that once you’ve paid the upfront cost for the display, the ongoing costs are much less than for digital printing – while, at the same time, you get all the flexibility EDDs offer such as being able to run animation and video. The displays can also be leased.

Lauder says EDDs won’t suit all businesses but it is great for businesses that have lots of items on sale, that need to change signs often and want to project a sophisticated image.

Hotels and sports arenas were the first to get into EDDs. “Now we are seeing requests from food and beverage outlets and fashion stores.

“From the customer’s point of view, a retailer’s ability to regularly change highly visual content will help create an interesting shopping experience.”

KEEPING IT TRADITIONAL

During the last 12 months, the biggest change in in-store signage seen by Chris Booth, from sign-writing and display product supplier PSP, is the move from traditional sign plywood to aluminium composites. He says the composites are more durable, flatter and come in a range of finished colours.

Booth says new products have also been introduced that can enhance traditional systems; for example, acrylics

which are lighter, more versatile and stronger than glass.

“These types of products, for example, can change the way lighting can be used for signage. You can light the edge of the Plexiglas® EndLighten which provides uniform backlighting of ultra-slim units. The EndLighten panels contain embedded, colourless diffuser particles which cause the light to diffuse forwards. Development of such specialised products is changing the way signs and displays are created.”

Another shift, Booth says, has been towards products that better accept digital printing. One such product is X-Board, an exceptionally strong and lightweight, composite fibreboard made from recycled materials that can be directly printed on and cut. It is also fully recyclable. The combination of printability and structural strength allows for a wider variety of uses and the minimised use of additional products.

LIGHT ON THE SUBJECT

Glenn Spiller, director of Arica Digital, a relatively new player in the LED lightbox design and install market, says poster lighting products now offer an inexpensive and flexible way to both draw customers in to a store and then direct them to displays, areas or products.

The new generation of LED lightboxes are ultra thin (10 mm), lightweight, available in a huge range of formats, and

are portable and easy for staff to change out the poster image, product offer or store information. The back-lit posters can project images such as cosmetics in pharmacies, hair styles in a saloon or fashion styles in a clothing store.

Poster images can be printed in-house or by a sign writer and changed out or rotated in minutes by staff. Spiller says that, increasingly, designers are specifying LED for impact, style and simplicity.

“They give you the flexibility to display an image in-store anywhere with little effort at any time. In the past, there were limitations to finding an electrician and fixing a 150 mm-deep fluoro lightbox behind the counter or

next to the till or suspended from a ceiling. Thin-line LED technology – where the acrylic sheet is side-lit with LEDs powered by a small, 12 volt battery or plug-in charger – makes all this possible.”

He says backlit LED light- and sign boxes complement other signage in-store, in the front window or outside under-roof and increase the impact of all brand and positioning elements.

And, due to the plug-in nature of the lightboxes, they can stay on 24/7 and attract eyeballs to front windows even when the general store lighting is switched off at night. ■

By **Mike Booker**, a freelance writer based in Paraparaumu and regular contributor to *NZRetail*.

DO'S AND DON'TS

Do:

- Put yourself in the customer’s position;
- Tie your signage in with your brand and positioning;
- Make your signs easy to read;
- Have attractive signage;
- Regularly change-out your signage; and
- Use reputable suppliers.

Don't:

- Cut your in-store promotion budget;
- Have signage that is difficult to understand;
- Have too much signage;
- Have too little signage;
- Put up signs that are too high or low; and
- DIY.