

Church Signage

Five questions to answer before you buy

AN EXTENSION OF CHURCH
MINISTRY, SIGNS ATTRACT
POTENTIAL NEW MEMBERS

- Studies have shown that being located where prospective new congregation members travel frequently is key to attracting them as church visitors. Signage plays a significant role in converting awareness of a church's location into actual visits by prospective members.

A sign can be the first impression for the community around the church and an extension of the congregation within. So what should you consider when determining the type, style, size and cost of a sign? Here are five questions to answer before you order:

WHAT DOES THE SIGN NEED TO COMMUNICATE?

Sometimes the simplest questions yield the best answers. It is important to consider how a sign will either reflect your church's ministry or possibly extend it. As part of the church staff or leadership involved in purchasing a sign, you should ask yourself what the real purpose of the church signage may be.

For example, will the sign serve only to finish off the property aesthetically? Or do you want to use it to effectively engage the unchurched general public as they drive by? It can serve as an invitation to your neighbors who might be ripe for a visit. In other words, how does the mission of your church play into the decision for a particular sign?

According to sign consultant Clayton Brumby of Stewart Church Signs, people often drive by a church building without ever considering it for two simple reasons: 1. they feel the church is indifferent to them; and 2. they have a natural fear of the unknown.

A sign that only identifies the building may seem indifferent to an unchurched person, Brumby says.

"There are 100 feet of 'no man's land' between the church and the street and people are not going to cross that land unless we build a bridge." That bridge can be built by engaging people through thought-provoking words on a sign, Brumby says. Anything insightful or humorous that "makes people do a mental double-take" will make the church more relevant to people.

Displaying that the church is open and loving can begin on a sign, too. Perhaps that is done with the sign message or with an electronic sign through graphics and video. Anything that can dispel most people's fears that a church will be cold, hard, judgmental and cliquish can begin with a sign.

"If the church can display that on the sign, then they have built a bridge," Brumby says.

The church name and service times are the obvious information to place on a sign, but



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"There are 100 feet of 'no man's land' between the church and the street," says Clayton Brumby of Stewart Church Signs. That gulf can be bridged by thought-provoking words on a sign.

Brumby says that information is irrelevant until the church itself becomes relevant to people's lives.

"The church has to find a way to invade their preoccupations and engage them in some way," he says. A well-written sign can actually develop a readership. "People will come by to get their thought for the day," Brumby says. That thought for the day may progress into venturing into a worship service and hopefully eventually becoming part of a congregation.

"Churches miss this," Brumby says. "They just don't think a sign can do this."

He encourages churches to be proactive with their sign. It is important for a church to determine how the mission of the congregation should impact a sign choice. Secondly, a church should consider the community in which they serve.

WHAT SIGN IS BEST FOR OUR COMMUNITY?

Church planters already know how to use demography to study their community and to relate a new church to would-be members. This same information can also be helpful when determining what type of sign to use for either a new church or an established one.

But before choosing a sign according to its possible community appeal or aesthetics, check zoning regulations. Zoning laws in your area will dictate many of your sign decisions. In particular the three big questions of size, site and set-back, are largely answered by local regulations.

According to church sign consultant Donna Steinmetz of Stewart Church Signs, calling the local planning and zoning department is an important step in choosing a church sign.

"Every block within an area may be different," Steinmetz says. Even a church down the street may be under different regulations than your church if it is in a different zone. Once you determine the regulations for zoning in your area, your sign choices are significantly narrowed down.

Zoning usually determines size and placement and sometimes more. "Zoning sometimes controls the aesthetics, but almost always governs size, safety, wind load and location," Steinmetz says. "There are a lot of issues that are really important to the entire community."

For example, while wind load is an important issue in Florida, where communities must deal regularly with the threat of hurricanes and tropical storms, seismic codes must be adhered to in other areas, such as California, where the threat to a sign comes from potential earthquakes. These various codes determine the height of signs and how they are put in the ground — amount of concrete, strength of steel legs, size of base plates, etc.

All of these issues are easier to deal with early in the sign buying process, which is why consultants recommend that you talk with zoning experts. "It should be one of the first things you do," Steinmetz says.



Photo courtesy of Stewart Church Signs

Letting passers-by know that the church is open and loving is an important element in attracting potential new members. This can be done with graphics or video displayed on an electronic sign.



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CHURCH SIGNAGE

By telephone you can usually get general regulations and parameters simply by providing your church address. Meeting with someone in person will result in more information, according to Brumby, such as the rules regarding newer technology. Some areas don't allow electronic displays. Others specify that electronic signs cannot be animated.

In Versailles, Ky., community uproar over a new lighted LED sign at The Kings Way Assembly of God forced the church to stop scrolling text and pictures after complaints were lodged with the planning and zoning board.

"We failed to get local planning and zoning approval," David Floyd, a board member at Kings Way, told Church Central. It was an expensive mistake, both financially and in terms of community impact, he said.

"I ask the churches to get to zoning early in the process," says Brumby, "before falling in love with design and colors — and wasting months of committee work."

WHERE SHOULD WE PUT THE SIGN AND HOW BIG SHOULD IT BE?

Placement is critical. While corporations already know this, churches often don't consider it. Passing drivers cannot read a sign that is parallel to the road. Perpendicular signs are much more readable. Also, Brumby advises churches to place the sign on the busiest street bordering church property and to make the sign double-sided for twice the impact.

Again, zoning regulations will dictate many placement decisions. Sign set-back from the right-of-way will be regulated as this is an important safety and visibility issue for passing traffic and church parking lot traffic.

In addition, watch out for viewing and site obstructions. Check the property map to avoid digging a hole into the church septic tank or gas line.

Other factors in determining where to place a sign revolve around the traffic in the area. "The first thing I ask about is the speed limit," says Brumby. He recommends churches know what the "actual" traffic speed is, not just the "posted" speed, to determine the correct letter sizing for a sign.

Churches can learn from the advertising industry how to ensure that their sign is generating enough visual impact. According to Brumby, the five-second rule dictates that driving readers must be able to see copy five seconds away and be able to read it before they drive past it. Brumby walks churches through general parameters for this, such as: four-inch letters for a 25-30 mph zone; six-inch letters for a 30-35 mph zone; eight-inch letters for a 40 mph zone.

Letter size dictates cabinet size. Those parameters limit messages to a maximum of seven to ten words in order to maintain interest. "People won't read more," says Brumby



Photo courtesy of Stewart Church Signs
When choosing a sign, several issues must be addressed, including zoning regulations, placement and size. The sign's lettering should be large enough to generate sufficient visual impact.

HOW WILL WE PAY FOR THE SIGN?

Often a sign is part of an overall building or remodeling project for a church. Don't forget to budget for this item when determining your stewardship campaign goals.



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When it comes to budgeting, Brumby says churches should understand the differences between commercial- and institutional-grade signs. Churches, schools and municipalities typically want an institutional-grade sign because it lasts an average of 25 years. Other commercial-grade signs, such as business signs, may only last between 5-7 years. The durability of an institutional-grade sign is reflected in a higher price — sometimes twice the price of a similar commercial-grade sign.

Higher quality in sign features make the difference between a sign that lasts decades and one that lasts only a few years. A fade-resistant painting process, high-grade materials that do not yellow or become brittle with age, and a lifetime warranty are some of the features that will cost more, but last much longer.

Often, budgeting for a sign is an after-thought of a building program, according to Brumby. Churches put whatever money is left over, if any, toward a sign. This is backwards, Brumby says. Instead, the sign should be one of the first parts of a new building or remodel to go up.

"One church put their sign in as soon as the grading was done, three months before they got their C.O. and had dedication Sunday." That kind of proactive approach to ministry, particularly regarding a sign, drew a large crowd the first Sunday the congregation met in their new building, according to Brumby.

"Construction makes people curious," he says. "When you have a sign there, you can capture that curiosity."

Dr. Bill Purvis, senior pastor of Cascade Hills Church of Columbus, Ga., put a sign on the new church property months before the congregation moved into its facilities. The morning of the move, the church had to hold two services in order to accommodate the large crowds.

A sign should be part of the budget from beginning, according to Brumby. But each church is different.

"Every church has its own personality," Steinmetz says. "We are finding that some churches that did not use a sign to communicate messages in the past are now interested in sharing more than the worship times. The Catholic churches are a good example of this. More Catholic churches are ordering signs with message areas to share the activities they sponsor."

"The personality of the church also will affect their choice of payment options," she continued. "Some congregations make a 50 percent deposit and pay the other half after the sign is delivered. We have payment programs with a lease purchase, which is how most churches will order an LED sign, and some churches use a zero interest program that



Photo courtesy of Stewart Church Signs
Attractive signage is an investment in a church's ministry. The right sign, displayed properly, reflects the personality of the church.



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we offer. It is important to look for flexibility with the payment options as many churches have cash flow situations.”

The budget bottom-line for churches, according to Brumby, is to consider their sign an investment in ministry. If you find that your church will need financing, your supplier should provide you with a list of options. This is one indicator that a particular company will be a good match for your congregation's sign needs.

WHERE WILL WE BUY THE SIGN?

Placing your trust, and the offerings of your congregation, with a particular supplier can be easy if you have evaluated the company beforehand. Here are some questions to ask yourself before working with anyone:

Is this company respected in the church market?

Get references from a company you are considering. Look at examples of their signs at other churches in your area. Talk with church leaders and volunteers who may have served on a sign committee and dealt with a particular company.

Are they endorsed by anyone? How long have they been in business?

Look for denominational endorsements, and various and plentiful endorsements in particular. Endorsements should be older than six months, and ideally, decades old, according to Brumby.

What is their warranty?

Does the company stand behind its products? Customers you speak with should have peace of mind about this. In addition, consider the amount of customer care provided by a company.

Your church sign is an important part of your ministry in the community. Consider it as an extension of your mission — a tool to draw passers-by into the church.

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**Donna Steinmetz
Stewart Church Signs**

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A Stewart Church Sign provides the essential means of communication between your church, church members, the community and potential new church members. Stewart Church Signs is the largest company of its kind in America and is endorsed by a growing list of denominations www.stewartsigns.com/endorsement.

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