

Leveraging Your Identity at Retail

five easy rules to follow



Shikatani Lacroix is a leading branding and design firm located in Toronto, Canada. The company commissions assignments from all around the world, across CPG, retail and service industries, helping clients achieve success within their operating markets. It does this by enabling its clients' brands to better connect with their consumers through a variety of core services including corporate identity and communication, brand experience design, packaging, naming and product design.



About the Author

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Jean-Pierre (JP) Lacroix provides leadership and direction to his firm, which was founded in 1990. He has spent the last 30 years helping organizations better connect their brands with consumers in ways that impact the overall performance of their business. Mr. Lacroix was the first to coin and trademark the statement “The Blink Factor” in 1990, which today is a cornerstone principle to how brands succeed in the marketplace. JP has authored several papers, has been quoted in numerous branding and design articles and, in 2001 he co-authored the book “The Business of Graphic Design” which has sold over 10,000 copies. JP can be reached at jp@shikatani.com and you can follow his blog at: www.belongingexperiences.com & www.belongingexperiences.wordpress.com.

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Background

The art and science of branding is why consumers take notice of some services and not others. Every service, just like every personality, has its distinguishing characteristics that needs to be communicated in a consistent and highly differentiated way. The challenge for the marketer is how to leverage this brand personality in all of the key consumer touch points, without diluting or fragmenting the image. The importance of signing, often forgotten as a critical communication tool and relegated to the end of an implementation program, is becoming more relevant and topical in marketing circles as a key vehicle to leverage a brand's point of difference and its distinguishing characteristics. However, it never ceases to amaze me on how many clients we encounter who have approved a new identity or logo, only to find out that it does not work in the realities of a 3-dimensional environment. The reputation and size of the design firm is also no assurance that identity issues will not arise during implementation across the communication channel. What we have learned over the years working with some of North America's biggest brands is that what works well on a stationary is not a guarantee for success on exterior building signing, resulting in the potential of a fragmented identity.

There are some simple rules or guidelines that designers and clients can follow to avoid this common mistake. These rules should be considered throughout the duration of the design process, and pending the complexity and implementation cost. Taking signing into consideration as part of the identity development stage will avoid surprises during the implementation process.

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Rule One:

Avoid rear-illuminated white backgrounds on your sign.

What appears to be a great idea in a boardroom presentation becomes problematic when applied to rear-illuminated exterior or interior signing. The eye is always attracted to the brightest point of a sign, in this case the white signing background, distracting the viewer's attention from the most important communication element: the new corporate identity. The problem is compounded by the fact that the actual material tends to show dirt more quickly, in addition to turning yellow through exposure to the UV rays of the sun. If your identity standards dictate a wordmark on a white background, such as was the case with the Rogers AT&T logo developed by an international design firm, consider having this background produced in a solid face such as aluminum with push-out letters. This will avoid having the white dominate the sign while allowing strong night time visibility of your identity.

Rule Two:

Typographic spacing needs to coincide with size of letters.

When extending your identity to exterior signing, the space between the individual letters needs to be adjusted. This process is known as kerning, and in the case of exterior signs the space between the letters needs to be narrowed in order to retain the same visual balance found on business card-sized communication vehicles. These standards need to be clearly defined during the exterior signing development process, and guidelines need to be established based on size and distance from the viewer.

Rule Three:

Choose your identity typeface carefully when considering usage on illuminated channel letter signs.

In developing signs, some typefaces do not work for rear-illuminated channel letter signing - the thick and thins of certain fonts may not allow for the ability of the neon tube to form a return. This issue arises with fonts which have significant thick and thins, narrow serifs or when the light version of the font is used. If the design direction has been approved for a new identity which has some of these issues, the execution of the signing program may preclude the use of channel letter signs (developers' and city planners' preferred option) and may force you to use push out face signs with opaque backgrounds (like Royal Bank's new identity) or rear-illuminated sign boxes, which are very reluctantly approved by city planners.

Rule Four:

Bear in mind that blue and green colours vibrate when lit, resulting in a fuzzy image.

When selecting your new identity colours, it is very important to take into account how the wordmark colours will work when rear-illuminated in a night time environment. Colours such as blue and green tend to vibrate when rear-illuminated, making the sign fuzzy and hard to read in low lighting environments. If the colours are a given, a potential solution would be to provide a white rear-illuminated key-line around the letters. The white tends to minimize the vibrancy of the blue and green hues. The shortcoming of this approach, however, is that your new identity will now have a key-line version that may not be consistent with other applications within your communication mix. Darker versions of blues and greens tend to vibrate less, but do not provide the same visibility due to the opacity of the colour.

Since an identity is only as effective as its weakest link, it is important to solicit input from your **signing professional** early in the process.

Rule Five:

Collaborate early with your signing professionals when developing your identity.

Since an identity is only as effective as its weakest link, it is important to solicit input from your signing professional early in the process. When deciding on your new identity, ensure that the branding consultant has sought input from your signing partner, and that examples of signing applications are presented to you before your final recommendation is submitted to the senior management team. Ensuring that your identity works well in the realities of the 3-dimensional world will avoid costly surprises during the signing implementation stage, and ensure that a consistent image is presented to your target group. When TD Canada Trust was developing their new corporate identity, the program was only approved after a new sign standard was created and approved by the marketing and operational teams. The process took into consideration a wide range of tests with the assistance of the signing company and 3M, the customer's colour vinyl supplier, to determine the optimum green background colour, and size and shape of the sign. In verifying that the identity worked within the challenges of a national program, TD Canada Trust management ensured that they had approved a program that worked across all of their branches and in all of their communication vehicles.

Conclusion

The effective application of an identity to exterior signing, especially for brands that need to survive in the retail environment, is critical. A clear understanding of how your identity will work within this environment at the beginning of the design process will ensure that you are making the right design decision from the start, and avoid surprises and cost overruns during implementation at the street level.

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