“A Sign of the Times”

“A sign of the times” is often a response from underperforming business owners as they comment on business and reflect on the volatile economic climate. As I consult with numerous specialty businesses around the country, I often muse about a “sign of the times” from an entirely different perspective – that is, what sign does your storefront deliver to customers or commuters? First, let’s reframe our thinking to reflect the fact that your storefront/façade is a “large billboard” or a business card on a grand scale. This sign can be one of the most effective, yet least expensive advertising tools that a business owner can use to convey its store brand or message. The storefront (or the real sign) should at a glance communicate to your customers or prospective customers what your store is about – its image, its products, its price range, its mood, etc. This overall sign can dramatically affect the success of a business. It is critical that store owners “grab” the customer’s eye/mind by communicating with a fresh and inviting façade. Think of this façade as a great sign that is your “welcome mat or an initial handshake.” Remember, many people will make a decision to visit a business on their initial impression. The old adage “you don’t often get a second chance to make a great first impression” resonates as we think about what the front of your business is saying. Research tells us that in 2.5 – 5 seconds a “mind’s eye” will assimilate all of the subliminal clues from that initial glance at a storefront to decide if this business is for them.

This sign/signal sets the stage for the entrance (or barrier to entrance) to your business. In Main Street towns across the country, the assistance of the Design Committee, grants for façade improvement opportunities, economic development options, and other resources available locally, etc., can be key resources to aiding any business owner in making a “powerful opening statement.” The ultimate goal of this façade/signage optimization is to create a “visual magnet” that will pull your customers in!

The signs that the business sends are multi-dimensional. When I critique a specialty business, I always walk through this sequence of questioning with the business owner. I’ll title this exercise as “take a close and critical look at your strong and weak signs!”

- Let’s quickly walk through a visual audit of your business and look at the signs/clues that customers are seeing.
- Start by stepping outside and standing at least 15-20 feet back – what does your storefront/billboard really say? Remember, the selling floor starts well outside your store.
• Is your signage easy to read and does it clearly communicate what your business is and does it have a tag line? Is the paint fresh? Are your awnings in good condition? Are the plants alive?

• Walk through the front door of your shop and pretend you are the customer. Ask yourself the following questions regarding the signs your interior is sending:
  o When I entered the business, was there an area where I could “decompress” and get my sense of the store layout?
  o What immediately stands out? What is it? Is it a positive or negative feeling?
  o Do you feel a sense of welcome?
  o What overall store image and personality are being conveyed through merchandise, décor, fixturing, and point-of-sale signage?
  o Is there a “punch of color” to add excitement?
  o Is the layout easy to move through? Are aisles wide enough?
  o Is your store visually easy to understand and shop?
  o Is the store clean? Housekeeping can have a dramatic effect on the total visual presentation.
  o How does your shop smell? How does it sound?
  o What type of customer would enter your store based on what they see and feel initially?
  o Where are the sales associates? Do they reflect the image you seek to create both in style of dress and manner of service?
  o Where’s the cash-wrap counter? What is its condition? Is it neat or cluttered? Since it is often the last “moment of truth,” does this area reflect what you want them to remember?
  o Do you have your shop name in two or three places in the interior of the shop? Remember, branding takes several impressions to make an impression.
  o How effective is your lighting? Does it complement the merchandising? Are there highlighted areas attracting you to specific parts within the shop? Do you leave some key lights on in the evening to better display your “billboard?” Are your interior signs doing a great job as silent sales associates, and are they current?
  o Does your packaging enhance your image? What sign does it send as it goes out the door?

What about your store gives your customer a compelling reason to purchase and to return and to tell others? Based on the answers to these questions, would you return? Remember, the store’s impression will linger long after the sale or visit.
All of these physical and psychological factors can influence your customers’ purchase decision making. The fact that 80% of purchase decisions are made on impulse gives any store owner solid justification to make the “emotional” experience a top priority.

After completing this “critical visual audit,” I urge you to reach out and engage employees and customers to get their impressions! Listen, learn, and launch! Yes, launch into implementing some low budget, yet high impact, ways to capture your customers’ eye and lure them into your business. Remember, the “eyes lead the feet” and the brain tends to judge the book by the cover! I hope the “cover of your novel” is exciting and one that immediately lures the customers in and keeps them engaged! The best “sign of the times” is when your customers continue to “vote with their feet” as they return to your business and urge others to do the same. No media is more powerful than word of mouth advertisement. Start sending a powerful sign by enhancing your storefront, display windows, and your interior.

Meanwhile, just know that a clear visual merchandising and positioning statement can not only improve your image and make your customers happier, but it will have a major impact on your bottom line and that is a wonderful and welcoming sign of the times!

(I am collecting “before and after” façade photographs and would welcome yours.)