



# SHOPTALK

By Margie Johnson



## A SIGN OF THE TIMES

Shop Talk is a continuing series of consumer-oriented retail articles by Margie Johnson, president of Shop Talk, a retail consulting firm that specializes in showing organizations how to become leaders in their marketplaces and industries through customer-centered training. Over the past 15 years, Margie has worked in many Main Street towns throughout the nation. She is passionate about helping small business owners become more successful.

“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

*A store’s façade is the business’s billboard. At a glance, it should tell customers what the store is about.*

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 the store brand or message. The storefront (or the real *sign*) should at a glance tell customers or prospective customers what a store is about – its image, its products, its price range, its mood.

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 serves as a “welcome mat or an initial handshake.” Remember, many people decide to visit a business based 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 a business is saying. Research tells us that within two-and-a-half to five seconds, a “mind’s eye” will assimilate all of the subliminal clues from that initial glance at a storefront.

### Setting the Stage

This *sign*, or signal, sets the stage for the customer to enter or turn away from a business. In Main Street towns across the country, the assistance of the Main

Street design committee, grants for façade improvements, economic development options, and other local resources can be key resources in helping a business owner make a “powerful opening statement.” The ultimate goal of this façade/signage optimization is to create a “visual magnet” that will pull customers in!

The *signs* that a business sends are multi-dimensional. When I critique a specialty business, I always walk through this sequence of questions 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*, or 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.
- Are your *signs* easy to read? Do they clearly communicate what your business is? 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 about the *signs* the store interior is sending:
  - ▶ When I entered the business, was there an area where I could “decompress” and get a sense of the store layout?



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- ▶ What immediately stands out? Do you get a positive or negative feeling?
- ▶ Do you feel a sense of welcome?
- ▶ What store image and personality are being conveyed through merchandise, décor, fixtures, and point-of-sale signage?
- ▶ Is there a punch of color to add excitement?
- ▶ Is the layout easy to move through? Are aisles wide enough?
- ▶ Is the store visually easy to understand and shop?
- ▶ Is the store clean? Housekeeping can have a dramatic effect on the total visual presentation.
- ▶ How does the shop smell? How does it sound?
- ▶ What type of customer would enter the store based on what they see and feel initially?
- ▶ Where are the sales associates? Do they reflect the image you're trying to create both in style of dress and manner of service?
- ▶ 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 customers to remember?
- ▶ Is the shop name displayed in two or three places inside the shop? Remember, branding takes several *impressions* to make *an impression*.



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Leaving lights on in display windows and the inside of the store in the evening can better display your "billboard" and attract the attention of potential customers as they walk or drive by.

- ▶ How effective is the store's lighting? Does it complement the merchandising? Are there highlighted areas that attract customers to different areas of the shop? Do you leave some key lights on in the evening to better display your "billboard"? Are interior signs doing a great job as silent sales associates, and are they current?
- ▶ Does your packaging enhance the store's image? What *sign* does it send as it goes out the door?

What aspects of your store give customers a compelling reason to make purchases, to come back and shop again, and to tell others about your business? Based on the

answers to these questions, would you return? Remember, the impression the store makes will linger long after the sale or visit.

### Listen, Learn, and Launch

All of these physical and psychological factors can influence customers' purchase decisions. The fact that 80 percent of purchases are made on impulse gives store owners solid justification to make the "emotional" experience a top priority.

After completing this "critical visual audit," 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 grab the attention of shoppers 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 shop is exciting and that it immediately lures customers in and keeps them engaged! The best "*sign of the times*" is when customers "vote with their feet" by returning to your business and urging others to do the same. No media is more powerful than word-of-mouth advertising. Start sending a powerful *sign* by enhancing your storefront, display windows, and store interior.

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

Margie Johnson can be reached at 757-491-1411, by e-mail at [shoptalk@shoptalk.org](mailto:shoptalk@shoptalk.org), or by visiting her website, [www.shoptalk.org](http://www.shoptalk.org).



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Above: Signs should be easy to read and, if possible, have a "tag line," such as Cakelove's "cakes from scratch."

Left: Store layouts should be easy to navigate and merchandise displays, easy to understand.



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