Designing Ads for Digital Displays
Getting the most impact from the medium

It's not CMYK

Digital billboard displays have opened a new realm of possibilities for designers in the outdoor advertising market. The idea of going seamlessly from computer display to any billboard display location almost instantly, might have seemed like science fiction several years ago, but here we are. It's now the fastest growing segment of the outdoor advertising industry.

This fast moving technology may have caught the industry by surprise as it tends to focus our attention on the hardware and technical aspects of this new model. But, as important as a well designed and carefully calibrated display is to the equation, its true power is only realized by the execution of a great design. A design created specifically for an RGB light emitting display, not a CMYK print. A good design approach is to consider luminosity as a key factor in achieving a high impact graphic, taking full advantage of your computer screen as a very accurate preview of how the design will look on the digital display. The good news is that RGB offers a far greater range of colors so you are no longer limited by the CMYK color pallet.

Contrast is King

Well defined contrast has always been a challenge in print mediums, since the ability to achieve a true black is reliant on a mixed color model. The ink reduces the light that would otherwise be reflected. Such a model is called subtractive because inks "subtract" brightness from white. In additive color models such as RGB, white is the "additive" combination of all primary colored lights, while black is the absence of light. The digital version of black is "off" or no color, no light. This has distinct advantages, since there is no variation of true black, it is simply defined as no image on the display.

The true ability of the digital display to produce black becomes reliant on the design and materials which make up the face plate, along with the configuration of the LEDs. Realizing this, some manufactures have placed an emphasis on developing anti-reflective surfaces thereby reducing glare from the display face. For a good indication of a display's contrast, look at the display when it's off to determine if it's truly black or just very dark grey. Try working in black and white, and you begin to appreciate the importance of good contrast, since it creates definition in the image. In a full color image, contrast defines shapes and actually helps improve overall image quality on a digital display, so it becomes a very important aspect of the design.

A truly black display face equals great contrast.

Black is created when pixels are"off". The design of the faceplate and anti-reflective properties of the display are what determine how well black is rendered.

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Size Does Matter

There is a tendency to use outdoor advertising as an extension of a current print campaign, designed for a magazine or a newspaper by simply re-purposing the same design. This is nothing new and is certainly the wrong approach when creating for any outdoor medium, but especially for digital. The first flaw with this is usually copy size. It is crucial to use large, bold, simple copy. This is billboard design 101, since the viewer sees the billboard for such a short duration, usually about seven seconds. It becomes more of an issue on digital displays due to resolution constraints. It's not that the newest electronic displays don't have great resolution, they're just not designed to render 6" characters. More to the point, 6" characters aren't easily read at 70 mph. Keep the copy big and bold.

Keep it Simple and Bold
The best outdoor ads deliver the message with a concise and vibrant design

This is true for images as well. The best designs convey the intended message using larger than life imagery that can be interpreted quickly (remember, 7 seconds!). When you combine this with high contrast and a luminous graphic you can achieve great results. It's more important to grab attention, visually, then to try delivering a complete menu of concepts.

This is difficult to convey to an advertiser who is paying for 672 sq. ft. on a bulletin display. In an effort to get the most "bang for the buck" they want to tell the entire story of their product from price to performance advantages along with far too many details. The ad ends up being cluttered and unreadable, since so many elements have to compete for attention.

In the following example an RV Dealer attempts to deliver an overly complicated message which would not be easily interpreted on a highway bulletin. In the improved design, the same message is conveyed in a simpler design which can be read and more importantly, remembered! The real objective for this ad was to drive customers to the web site, which was nearly lost in the first design.

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Original Concept

Improved Design

Keep it Real....Simple

Ask about the purpose of the ad. Is the client looking to drive traffic to a retail location or is it a simple branding promotion? As a designer you should educate your client on the effectiveness of outdoor advertising when it is properly executed. Incorporate larger-than-life images and bold statements that grab attention. Don't settle for a modified version of a newspaper ad. This will certainly improve the result of the campaign and ultimately prove the true value of outdoor advertising.

Digital displays bring a vibrancy and market presence to the outdoor advertising arena that is hard to ignore. When ad designs are optimized for this powerful medium the results can be stunning.

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