



Should I advertise on the interstate?

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Abstract The highway logo signing program has existed for over 20 years. Since its inception, most motorists have become accustomed to relying on these blue signs to provide information on services available at each highway exit. However, there is little, if any, literature that examines the program as an advertising source, and no formal literature that addresses the signing program from the perspective of the independent business owner. This paper provides service business owners with information about the highway logo signing program, and is directed toward independent owners who are considering the signing program as an advertising source. A five step process is described that owners can follow to first determine if the venue is viable, and then if the investment is value-added for them.

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1. Advertising on the interstate

We have all seen them: the bright blue signs at highway exits informing motorists of available lodging, food, fuel, and camping options. Many consider these signs to be a public service. They are an efficient use of space, and help travelers quickly determine the desirability of exiting at a particular location. National chains such as McDonalds have advertised via these signs since the inception of the highway logo signing program. However, should locally owned businesses with smaller advertising budgets advertise on the interstate? As is the case with many other issues, the answer is: “It depends.”

2. Background

The highway logo signing program has been used by a majority of states for approximately 34 years. The 1971 Motorist Information Act, developed subsequent to the Highway Beautification Act of 1965, enabled states to provide these logo signs for businesses that offer services essential for safe inter-state travel. States are given the latitude to set their own regulations and fees, although these cannot contradict the general format stated in the Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD) (United States, 2003). The guidelines in the MUTCD allow tourists to recognize, and expect consistency of, signing throughout the country. This consistency is a critical element in the success of the program.

There are three different types of signs available through the highway logo signing program. Specific information signs (mainline signs) display the type

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Figure 1 Example of mainline lodging sign.

of business and corresponding interstate exit number. Figures 1 and 2 are examples of mainline signs.

The second type of signs, ramp signs, may be placed on the exit ramp itself and display a directional arrow and mileage to the business. The third type of signs are called trailblazer signs, and are more common than ramp signs. Trailblazer signs are often placed at intersections and provide directional arrows.

States design their own programs. While more than half manage the program internally, 23 states have chosen to contract out to private entities. Twenty of those 23 have contracted with a company that is specific to this line of work, Interstate Logos, L.L.C. States, along with contracted companies when the program is privatized, determine eligibility requirements (e.g., distance from highway, hours of operation, services offered) and fee structure (e.g., registration, sign construction, maintenance).

3. Alternative mediums

Advertising effectiveness is a critical element in the success of all businesses. There are many mediums available for advertisement: billboard, radio, newspaper, television, internet, etc. If a large percentage of the customer base of a business consists of travelers, the mediums that will most likely be effective include billboards, logo signs, and on-premise signs. It is, of course, important that the advertising medium relied on be seen by the potential customer. The costs and effectiveness of the current method of advertising should be analyzed to determine if an alternative medium, such as the highway logo sign, should be considered. Local businesses generally have smaller advertising budgets and

might not be able to afford both a billboard and highway logo sign. Therefore, it is likely a decision between the two will have to be made. Although billboards pre-date logo signs, they have to be carefully designed to catch a driver's attention, provide needed information that can be processed quickly, and be placed in a proximity to the exit that allows enough time to exit, but not too much that the information imparted is forgotten. Logo signs are consistent across states, which allows motorists to both expect and depend on them for the information they need. To measure advertising effectiveness, Interstate Logos, Inc. conducted a national survey in 2000 comparing logo signs, billboards, and on-premise signs. When travelers were asked which method they used to locate businesses, 86% said they used the logo signs, whereas only 12% used billboards and 2% used on-premise signs (Interstate Logos, Inc., 2000). Based on these data and all other things being equal, a local business should use the logo program if they utilize only one advertising source. National chains, such as McDonalds, can support many forms of advertising, and usually choose to use logo signs in addition to billboards and on-premise signage. In fact, when the logo program was being developed, a well known chain offered to underwrite the cost of construction in at least one state so that signs could be constructed more quickly. Management indicated that the increase in business would, in less than one year, more than offset the cost of construction. Although the state ultimately declined, this illustrates the fact that logo signs are a valued form of advertising. As a local business, however, they still might not be the best form for you.



Figure 2 Example of mainline restaurant sign.

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