



Commercial Sign Guidelines

“Signage is the least expensive, yet most effective, form of advertising for independent and national retail businesses. You pay for the sign once and it works for you 24 hours a day, 7 days a week for years.” – Small Business Administration

Commercial signs are a vital component for a business district. Poor signage can actually contribute to an area’s decline by creating a negative image. A sign should not be viewed as an expense, but as an investment in marketing and branding your business.

HDCMS can help you develop and fund an effective sign – one that increases your business’s income and success, and contributes to the success of the entire business district. We offer pro-bono design assistance to facilitate Historic Preservation Review Board review required for all businesses in the Dupont Circle Historic District and information on a sign grant.

Signs should typically cover no more than 65% of the signboard or upper façade. Lettering, graphics, and logos used for the sign should be a minimum of 8” and a maximum of 18” high. If raised letters are used, they should project no more than 12” from the face of the signboard or upper façade. Internally illuminated, vacuum-formed signs and box signs are inappropriate for historic commercial buildings. Awning signs may be silk-screened onto the awning fabric or sewn into the awning. Signs on awnings may be located on the valance. Signs located on canopies may be mounted above or applied to the sign band. If a top mounted sign is used, the height of the lettering should be in proportion with the height of the sign band. By code, signs on awnings and canopies must consist of individual, freestanding letters without background and may not exceed 12” in height.



Signs hung inside display windows that are made of solid or opaque materials should be hung so that the view into a store is not obstructed. Opaque interior signs should not cover more than 15% of the display window. Signs hung inside display windows that are made of transparent/translucent material should be limited to no more than 20% coverage. Gold leaf and paint are appropriate materials for permanent signs applied to the inside of display windows. Signs applied to display windows should not cover more than 10% of the total glass area of the window.

Projecting signs are typically located above the storefront entry; a projecting sign is limited by code to one line of freestanding lettering not to exceed 12” in height. Projecting signs should be made of wood or metal. They should have a minimum clearance of 8’ above the sidewalk, and should project no more than 3’6” from the face of the storefront, and be a minimum of 1’ behind the plane of the curb.

Quality

Design

- Professional design assistance is strongly encouraged to create a better look. Hire a designer to create your logo, sign, website, newsletter, etc. for a professional look.
- Signs should definitively relate to a building's façade in their shape, scale, and location.
- Shape, lettering size, font, style, content, quality of fabrication, materials, installation and lighting all contribute to a successful sign.
- Logos may require modifications of standard sizes and colors to sensitively fit into the context of the historic commercial district.

Fabrication

- Good quality materials and professional fabrication is encouraged.

Content

- Sign text should be as simple as possible. Studies show four words or less increase a sign's effectiveness. Don't include your phone number or website; that is what Google does.

Installation

- Signs should be professionally installed. Installation should not damage or require removal of historic materials, and should be done in a manner that it can be removed without harm to masonry or any architectural detailing.
- Individual letter signs should be blind mounted on the front of a building, so that mounting hardware is not visible.
- On masonry buildings, signs should be anchored through the mortar rather than directly into the brick or stone. In certain cases, adhesives may work better than mortar anchoring and may be less harmful to the building surface.

Context

Size

- The size of sign should be determined primarily by the architecture and the scale of the building, and should not be as large as the maximum allowed under the building code or Zoning Ordinance.

Placement

- To limit visual clutter, all signs must be directly related to businesses within the premises.
- The architecture of the building should dictate the sign placement, i.e., if a sign band exists, such as a recess in the brick, it should be used.
- Positioning signs on or near the first level is highly encouraged for first-floor retail to increase visibility and maintain the character of the historic district.
- Window signs should not obscure the view into a retail establishment.
- Windows should not be tinted or otherwise made opaque to accommodate a sign.

- Signs should complement, not crowd, obscure, or alter the appearance of windows, doors, or the architectural features of the building.

Quantity

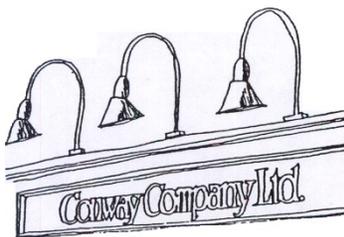
- In general, no more than one sign per business is appropriate.
- Multi-tenant buildings are encouraged to develop a coordinated signage program for different floors and entrances.

Compatibility

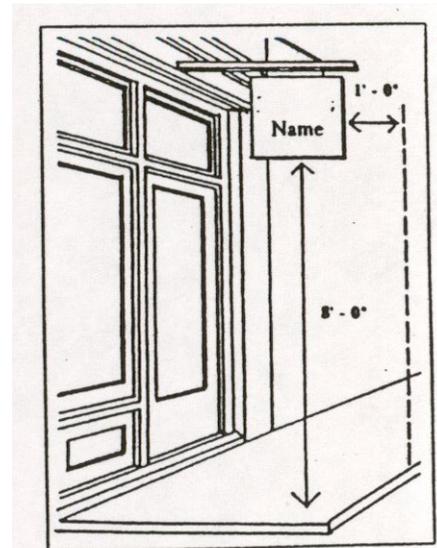
- Signs should be compatible with the architecture of the historic building and the overall visual quality of the Dupont Circle commercial district.
- Signs should not detract from the architectural characteristics of historic structures or their environment by overwhelming or obscuring architectural lines and features.

Encouraged Signs

- Flat signs, mounted flush.
- Painted flat signs and metal cutout letters applied directly to the building face or sign band.
- Free standing, raised lettering applied directly to a wall or signboard.
- Signs etched on glass, painted directly, or gold-leafed on glass.
- Vinyl letters on glass.
- Projecting and blade signs, mounted perpendicular to the face of a building if designed and positioned to complement any other signs at that site. They should be double faced.
- Symbol or icon signs, such as eye glasses and barber poles, for an establishment that specializes in a particular trade or profession.



- Gooseneck and front lighting of signs are encouraged.

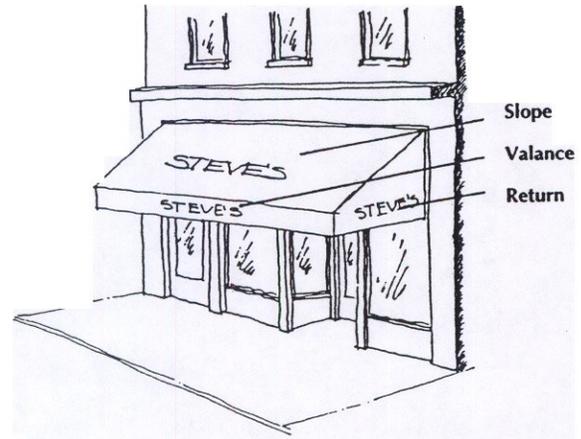


Projecting signs are an effective means of communicating to pedestrians.

Awnings

- Follow the shape and proportions dictated by the architecture of the building, restrict awnings to a reasonable distance on each side of the opening.
- Consider the character and color of the building and others on the block, choose high quality material (fabric is encouraged).

- Consider a retractable awning, realize that signs are limited to the valance of the awning, but may be located elsewhere with historic preservation review.
- Plan and budget for the maintenance necessary to keep an awning or canopy looking fresh.
- Canopies that extend to the curb are not allowed.
- Don't cover architectural features of a building.
- Don't light canopies from within.



Discouraged

- Exterior cloth and flat-mounted plastic banner-type signs and temporary signs.
- Plastic box signs are discouraged.
- Vacuum formed plastic signs are discouraged.
- Internally illuminated signs and electronic message boards send the wrong message.
- Roof signs are not the right scale for Dupont Circle.

Permitting

- Any new sign larger than one square foot on the exterior or within 18" of the interior, or any existing sign that is to be altered in size, shape, content or location needs a permit.
- Signs installed without a permit are subject to penalties averaging \$500, doubling after 15 days and continuing to do so until the business applies for the proper permit.
- City libraries have a copy of the DC Building Codes for public use. For sign regulations, refer to DCMR 10 A, Chapter 25. You can find it on line at www.dcregs.dc.gov.
- Detailed permitting information is available from the DCRA website or office.

*Special thanks to the Office of Planning, Historic Preservation Office for the use of their line drawings, and to Mayor Anthony Williams and his Administration.



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The Historic Dupont Circle Main Streets' Commercial Sign Guidelines are guidelines and are not intended to supersede city codes and ordinances.