

Industry **AUGUST 2019** TRENDS



Two success stories—in the most challenging situations—provide insight into winning strategies that can be used in communities throughout the U.S. and Canada.



THE INTERNATIONAL SIGN ASSOCIATION

Sign Code Success Stories Inspire to Keep Working

Sign codes can mean the difference in doing the best work and providing the best solution for customers. But city leaders who don't understand the importance of flexible and reasonable sign codes can create a challenge—and sometimes make it feel like it's a hopeless fight.

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Read on to see how they did it.

Chicago Story

When it comes to cities with a reputation for rough-and-tumble politics, few outpace Chicago. Sign permitting in America's third-largest city can be incredibly difficult.

A lengthy process for getting signs permitted in Chicago has drawn the focus of ISA and the Illinois Sign Association. Two years ago, ISA and the Illinois Sign Association formed a coalition as part of the Small Business Advisory Council (SBAC) to advance the sign industry. The SBAC includes several local chambers of commerce in Chicago. Initially, the sign coalition was successful in streamlining the permitting process somewhat by removing the public comment period. But the pace of progress was slow.

"Reform efforts knocked off 30-45 days," said Alex Perry of Right Way Signs of Chicago. "There are so many businesses that open up without thinking of their signage until the end."

While that was a step in the right direction, the sign coalition determined to make the city's sign code and permitting process—and their impact on small businesses—an issue in the recent mayor's race. To set the stage a bit: Chicago has only had two mayors in the last 30 years.

"When either of these administrations would get any hint that anything bad was going on with the permitting process, everyone at city hall would go into defense mode," Perry said. "They'd point fingers. We'd meet and leave with a positive feeling and three or four months later, it was back at the beginning, ground zero." With 20 candidates running, the sign coalition zeroed in on "the five people who we thought could become mayor. We started sending

them the same message: ‘The sign code is a serious issue. To a lot of people, it’s just sign permitting, but it completely kills businesses.’”

One candidate, Lori Lightfoot, responded. Lightfoot, a political outsider, ended up in a runoff with another candidate, who had spent her career at city hall. ISA, Illinois Sign Association and the SBAC hosted a candidate forum for the two finalists – but only Lightfoot showed up. Lightfoot ended up winning the runoff election decisively, garnering almost three fourths of the votes cast in the runoff. Once in office, Perry was able to meet with her deputy mayor, a former small business owner of a manufacturing company. The SBAC also earned a role on the mayor’s transition team focusing on business concerns. Within hours of being sworn in, Mayor Lightfoot signed an executive order limiting the power that aldermen have over permitting issues – including those involving signs. Mayor Lightfoot noted that the order would end “the unilateral, unchecked power that aldermen have to control virtually every aspect of business in community life that interacts with the city.”

While it was an important step forward, “headaches still remain,” Perry said. Change comes slowly, and not just in Chicago. For Perry, staying in the fray is important, if not for Right Way and the sign industry, then for his customers.

“I do not have a tolerance for nonsense, and I think our sign permitting is complete nonsense,” he said. “It’s impacting my bottom line and our clients’ bottom line. Someone needs to be held accountable. No one in city hall gets in trouble for failing to do their job in issuing permits in timely fashion.”

The sign coalition and Perry proved that working on an issue for the long haul can pay dividends.

The Right Resource

In the world of sign codes, sometimes there are winners and sometimes there are losers. But when the sign and graphics industry works with regulators, the result might just be like what happened in Cochrane, Alberta.

“It is a win all around, for the businesses, for the town, for the sign industry,” said Cy Atkinson of Five Star Permits, which offers permitting services throughout Canada. “It’s not often you can say that.”

So what is the secret to the win for all involved? Collaboration and science.

The first ingredient—collaboration—came as the town grew. Businesses in the area wanted illuminated signage so they could effectively advertise at night. So often, when a community bans a specific type of signs—which Cochrane did with illuminated signs—“nobody applies, so they don’t know it’s a problem,” Atkinson said. “We had been encouraging people to apply, knowing they would be turned down, but wanting the city to understand the business need for this type of signs.”

As more and more requests for illuminated signs came in, one of the city’s planners reached out to Atkinson to see if she knew of “any information or resources to that would help staff deal with the issue.”

- Let your local officials know about the many resources ISA offers specifically for them. Start at www.signs.org/local
- The Sign Research Foundation (signresearch.org) provides a number of specific research reports to help local communities understand more about temporary signs, EMCs, the economic value of signs and best practices.

And that’s where the science comes in. Atkinson had heard about some of the Sign Research Foundation’s research through the International Sign Association and the Sign Association of Canada. Five Star is a member of both organizations.

She gathered several research projects, highlighted a few key points and shipped them off. In the packet: Illuminated Sign Conspicuity – What Factors Make a Sign Noticeable and Legible?; Economic Value of On-Premise Signage, and Illuminated vs. Non-Illuminated Signage – Economic Impact of Illumination.

The latter research puts a dollar amount on the value of an illuminated sign compared to a sign that is not lit at night. “I find that planners tend to minimize the economic benefit of signage to the business and they tend to think of streetscape,” Atkinson said. “We emphasize employment. A successful business has employees and has higher property values. If a business goes under in the same spot, it’s got to have a negative value on property values. Everybody wants a vibrant neighborhood.”

The SRF research showed exactly how that vibrant neighborhood could be helped—not harmed—by illuminated signage. It was of particular interest in Cochrane because the town is located near the Canadian Rockies and is a huge tourist draw. Tourists need all the help they can get navigating unfamiliar areas—and dropping serious economic impact behind.

“That’s something that baffles me,” Atkinson said. “We have several tourist-dedicated towns who want non-illuminated signage as a policy. You have people coming from out of town, not familiar with buildings, streets, business that are available. Why are we hiding them and make it harder for strangers to come?” The research was able to overcome the feeling that non-illuminated signs made a town feel more “quaint,” Atkinson said. “Anytime that we encounter resistance based on a lack of information, then we try to provide knowledge to fill in the gaps.”

The Sign Research Foundation has proven to be an important source of that information, Atkinson said. What has impressed her the most is the level of expertise in the research authors—which carries weight with the planning community, too. “This is what the sign industry finds intuitive,” she said. “But being able to show a local community that there has been a quantitative, honest-to-goodness look at this situation is invaluable. That’s not research that any one sign company can do on its own. It’s super important and extremely valuable.”

Atkinson proves that research can prove a winning strategy for the sign and graphics industry.