

Encouraging Signs

Innovation is the keyword in today's supermarket signage.

By Bob Ingram



APPLES AND ETHNICITY
Blanc Display Group provides a Signature Series for apples (left) and an Ethnic series (below).



As food shoppers have become more sophisticated and adventurous in their product choices, so have the signs that guide them both outside and on their in-store travels.

According to Didier Blanc, president of Blanc Display Group, in Dover, N.J., “The trend in signage is in providing consumer education as well as ethnic-related merchandise.”

His company has responded to this trend by introducing the Signature Series and World of Produce Buyer's Guide headers and ethnic category signage, inspired by cultural awareness and the consumer's desire to learn and experiment.

“We have also seen a surge in the popularity of our Hispanic-related signage and our ‘Organic’ and ‘Local’ product lines,” Blanc notes. “The spikes correlate to industry trends.”

The company's Marketplace Chalk line is increasingly popular, creating a farmstand feeling within a store.

“We introduced signage inserts with QR codes,” Blanc notes, “that, when scanned via a free app, offer item information like nutrition, selection and storage tips, recipes, and more, in one convenient location.”



Beyond that, the Fresh Food 411 Interactive Kiosk is what he calls “information central” for savvy shoppers, presenting instantaneous product information in a consumer-friendly style.

Blanc believes that signage will become more and more interactive, differentiating brick-and-mortar stores from their online competition.



FABRIC FEATURE
KeithFabry Reprographics' fabric signs can be swapped out quickly.



Information, Please

“Supermarkets are using a lot of fabric” in new store-sign scenarios, because they can be changed relatively quickly and are inexpensive to ship, says Jimmy Keith, president of Richmond, Va.-based KeithFabry Reprographics.

The company's latest innovation is a retractable battery-powered banner system that can be as big as 24 feet by 10 feet. The system allows the changing of large displays monthly rather than yearly, enabling more promotions, which keeps the store more interesting and appealing.

Keith observes that quick signs and stanchion signs, as well as magnet signs, are also trending, but that floor graphics “are not as popular as we thought they would be in this industry.” Window clings are very popular, according to Keith, “because they work” as people walk in and see the special of the day.

Signs have a lot more information on them today, he notes; as a result, signs are getting bigger. “Better signage changes the environment. It's not the same place — customer environment — over and over again,” Keith says. “That makes a big difference.”

The Howard Co., in Brookfield, Wis., of-

fers digital menu boards and digital signage for inside the store and for drive-through or pickup windows outside, and also provides guidance for placement and content.

The content can be changed based on the time of day, with the corporate office having control, says Regional VP Grant Gustke.

“If a small to medium chain is not looking at the digital menu boards or outdoor products, they are falling behind the large chains because they are all doing that already,” he warns. “The technology of touch-screen ordering or ordering on an app is coming, too.”

Customized Experiences

Customers of San Antonio-based Comet Signs LLC, “continue to focus on significant exterior signage packages providing a consistent brand appearance,” says Business Development Manager Mark Ahrens. “We see growth in both exterior and interior store-wayfinding signage designed to help customers find the products they need quickly.”

Ahrens says his company also sees trends to differentiate exterior and interior sign design and messaging, based on microtargeted demographics and research for each location's trade area.

LED sign illumination provides energy savings

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—Jimmy Keith,
KeithFabry
Reprographics



DIGITAL DAYPARTS

The Howard Co.'s digital menu boards change according to dayparts.

and reduces maintenance costs, he says, and customization by store location and unique materials, and design styles that differentiate a brand from competitors, are also growing.

"We find pylon or multitenant signs, channel letter and cabinet signs for buildings, and wayfinding signs are all included in basic sign packages," Ahrens notes.

In addition to "shopping by apps," he sees as another key piece the use of mapping apps that show not only location, but also allow customers to see the store via programs like Google Maps. "This makes quality exterior signage even more important for branding," he says.

"As focus grows on convenience and quick-pickup shopping, the customer experience will continue to be enhanced with more custom signage," Ahrens asserts.



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Measures of Success

Erik McMillan, founder and CEO of Shelfbucks, in Austin, Texas, points out that as many as 50 percent of in-store merchandising materials never leave the back room, or aren't executed in the right way at the right time.

Measuring in-store merchandising, he says, "has historically been costly, inaccurate and otherwise impractical. In-store signage has always been a limited, one-way form of communication."

According to McMillan, Shelfbucks' MEASURE platform addresses these challenges by incorporating sensors into all in-store signage and merchandising, enabling CPGs and retailers to track their campaigns from production through execution by measuring in-store performance with what he calls "unprecedented accuracy."

"Our platform also enables in-store merchandising to engage directly with shoppers' smartphones, delivering product videos, ratings and reviews, coupons, and other relevant content," he says.

The Shelfbucks platform also gauges key factors like shopper traffic and conversion rates. "After all, you can't improve what you can't measure," McMillan says.

The platform is a "pull" model for customer engagement, McMillan explains, meaning that it doesn't send unwanted spam content to shoppers, but enables them to "pull" the information they want by placing their smartphones next to the



sensor-enabled signage and displays.

"In the future," he says, "we believe every in-store campaign will be measurable, adjustable and more effective."

On-the-job Training

Germantown, Md.-based Hughes has been successful in rolling out Breakroom TV and MediaTraining across several large grocery conglomerates, according to Senior Marketing Manager Curtis Campbell, who notes: "I believe digital signage to be in its very infancy when it comes to grocery. Using it for employee communication is just the beginning."

Hughes' cloud-based, cost-effective solutions use SmartTVs to place employee-facing digital signage screens in areas where associates can see and interact with them often.

"Now, grocers can provide key performance indicators to employees, as well as provide real-time and on-demand training at the screen," Campbell says, "versus sticking associates in a training room for hours on end."

The entire digital signage network can be controlled from a central location and managed from any device with an internet connection.

"HR and communications teams no longer need to send stacks of paper fliers to bulletin boards or post endless announcements on an employee portal that no one goes to," Campbell points out.

The Breakroom TV and MediaTraining solutions screens can be integrated with social media so that employees can interact with screens from their personal devices.

"A great example of this, particularly within a grocer," he says, "is employees learning about a recall. Rather than playing the age-old game of telephone, where information is always lost in translation, employees can inform each other via social media, which is then displayed on the screen to drive engagement even higher."

This is yet another encouraging sign of the supermarket times, with even more to come. **PG**