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May 3, 2009

Signs of Tough Times

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Attracting customers is a challenge for any business at any time, but during a recession, place-based businesses should pay extra attention to the outdoor signs they use to draw customers in.

An outdoor sign is akin to a silent salesperson; it's how a business communicates its presence and its image to customers and the surrounding community. Research has shown that on-premise signs drum up between 20 and 50 percent of business traffic, regardless of whether the business is a family-based enterprise, a familiar franchise or a large corporation. That means a large part of a business's success or failure can be attributed to a sign's ability — or inability — to communicate with potential customers.

Professional-looking signage benefits an entire neighborhood's economy. Having no signs or signs that are run-down or covered with graffiti, conversely, reflects poorly on a business and its surroundings. Businesses should consider the following points when planning outdoor signs:

Follow the rules: The size and placement of outdoor signs must comply with local ordinances. If the sign will be illuminated at night, the business must obey lighting regulations.

Look like a pro: A sign's design and appearance say a lot about the tone and image of the organization it advertises. Poorly made signs create negative impressions of a business, while a professionally made sign conveys a sense of pride, permanence and seriousness.

Solid choices: A sign built with sturdy materials can retain its appearance for many years despite exposure to wind, cold and sun. Once built, it should be maintained and repaired as needed.

Location, location, location: Outdoor signs should be placed for maximum visibility to foot and automobile traffic. A business owner should consider the speed of passing cars and gauge how much time drivers will have to read a sign and safely turn into a business's parking lot before deciding where to place the sign and how to design it.

Message and medium: A sign should describe a business as concisely as possible so the public knows immediately what product or service it offers. Internal consistency of all its elements — a memorable logo, color, font and business name — should carry over from the sign to business cards, letterheads and other marketing materials. (Some businesses go so far as to make their buildings reflect the business's theme, with exterior landscaping and architecture that mirror

indoor product and service displays and other promotional material.) A mix of uppercase and lowercase letters in a readable font is more attractive than a busy sign cluttered with words and gaudy images.

Innovate and assimilate: A sign should be innovative enough to stand out from other signs — but not so far out that it seems alien to the community in which it's located — in our case, the tricultural, desert Southwest.

The New Mexico Small Business Development Centers offer workshops that can help your business survive and thrive during a slow economy. Find the center nearest you at www.nmsbdc.org.

Finance New Mexico is an initiative of the New Mexico Small Business Investment Corporation (NMSBIC) and its partners to assist individuals and businesses in obtaining skills and funding resources for their business or idea. To learn more about resources available to New Mexicans, go to www.FinanceNewMexico.org.

