

Keep two things in mind:
simplicity and legibility.

Color Panels for

Real Estate Signs

If you want to make those quick, knockout vinyl real estate signs into attention grabbers, try using color panels and shapes in your layout. Real estate 4'x8's are probably one of the best examples of the need to come up with an eye-catching design that is easily executed. The key words here are "easily executed." Labor is far and away the factor that most influences your cost in producing a sign. It takes far less time to perk up your signs by painting color shapes on the background or trimming the outline of a panel than it does to produce drop shades, shadows, etc., on the lettering.

Before I progress further with this topic, I wanted it to be known that while real estate people use a lot of signs, they are also famous for not wanting to spend a lot of money. I'm not advocating that you need to be cheap on this kind of work. Instead, you need to get a fair price for your effort, all the while making sure you give the customer a good-looking product. Unless you have a very special arrangement with your customer, I would also recommend that you receive a substantial deposit at the time of the order.

Experts say the first thing the human eye is attracted to is movement. There was a proliferation of animated signs a few years back, but they are no longer legal in most places. It seems they worked a little too well. Good-intentioned city planners will tell you they distracted motorists and were a safety hazard. I'm



Trimming the sign to the shape of the panels adds impact to your design.



Use color and shapes to direct attention.

not sure I buy that theory, but one thing we all have to agree on is that they were expensive to produce.

Close behind movement in attracting attention is color and shape. You can use this to your advantage in coming up with an effective sign design with very little extra effort. Keep two things in mind: simplicity and legibility. Sometimes this is a hard sell on your part since real estate agents are also famous for wanting to put every detail of the property on the listing sign. As sign experts, we know that “less is better.” Five or six words on a 4'x8' are much more effective than something that reads like a tabloid. The main message on a sign of this type needs to be able to be read in about three seconds. A simple portfolio with a few pictures of both good and bad signs is an excellent sales tool.

In the past, using color panels often meant having to do “cut-in” lettering. That was the term used to describe painting the background around the letters. It was more time consuming than brush painting the letters on the background. It

also usually had to be double-coated. Light-colored lettering on a dark background meant a more expensive sign. I think that is why we saw a lot of red and black lettering on a white background in years past. With the advent of computer cut lettering, this all changed. There is no excuse for putting out that kind of sign anymore, even if your customer is on a budget. Yellow letters on a green background are no longer any more of a problem than black letters on a white background. In this day of computer-generated lettering, the ability to come up with an eye-catching design and layout is what is going to determine



PVC “J” Bar used in the drywall trade makes a great raw cap.

Filly, fancy lettering isn't going to have the impact of plain, bold lettering.

whether you are just a “vinyl sticker” or a sign builder.

Let's work through a simple project. When you start your layout, break your lettering down into groups and see if you can place each group on a different panel of your sign. For example, on a real estate sign, “For Lease” might be one group and “Will Build To Suit” another. A phone number might be your third panel. You'll seldom get one this simple, but this sign would work well with three panels. Lay out what you feel are attractive shapes on your sign.

In this case, you would want to add two shaped panels on the sign blank, with the background being your third panel. Remember that there are other shapes besides squares and circles.

Prioritize your groups of lettering and decide which group will work the best on each panel. You may decide to change the size or shape of the panel at this point. Remember to keep the lettering as simple and legible as possible. I like to do this part of the design with a pencil and paper and have at least a rough idea of what the sign is going to look like before I ever go to the computer. I don't advocate that you copy other sign writers' works, but thumbing through back issues of sign trade magazines such as SBI may give you some inspiration to come up with your own unique designs. A lot of my work is influenced by the designs of the late Chester Cunningham, a master at using color and shape.

Remember, frilly, fancy lettering isn't going to have the impact of plain, bold lettering. It's also not as legible, but nothing says you have to use the font exactly as it comes from the computer, either. There are a lot of little things you can do to customize an alphabet such as making the dot on the “i” into a triangle and a different color. A good rule to remember is not to use more than one display font in your layout. Either make the whole sign in one font, or use a display font or script in conjunction with plain-block lettering. A display font such as “Eurostyle” doesn't go well with



Shapes and color attract attention



Try to use only one display font.



The color panels make the simple lettering jump right out.

Use swatches of scrap vinyl to preview your color choices

This would have been a very boring sign on an all-white background.

something like “Times Roman.” “Frutiger Black” is one of my favorite plain-block “work horse” alphabets.

A quick rule to use in determining the minimum letter size you can use for calculating maximum legibility is to use one-inch of letter height for every ten feet of viewing distance. (i.e., six-inch letter viewed from sixty feet). These are ideal sizes, but, unfortunately, we don’t live in an ideal world. Sometimes you just have to do the best you can with letter sizes. Don’t make all the letters the same size as that makes for a boring sign. Try to emphasize the key words in your copy. A very legible phone number is an important part of an effective real estate sign. There is also no valid reason for using the words “phone” or “call” since most everybody can recognize a seven-digit phone number.

Once you have the design roughed out, you can start thinking about colors although your customer may already have you locked into their company colors. I guess that’s why I’ve done a lot of red, white, and blue real estate signs. If you have some freedom of choice here, don’t be afraid to experiment with unusual color combinations. I often use color combinations that didn’t sound all that great until I put them together. I have some 3"x5" color swatches that I have cut from scrap vinyl, and I find that laying them out together gives me a good idea how the colors are going to look on my sign.

Real estate 4'x8's are one of the few places

Letter Visibility Chart

Letter height	maximum readable distance	readable distance for maximum impact
3"	100'	30'
4"	150'	40'
6"	200'	60'
8"	350'	80'
9"	400'	90'
10"	450'	100'
12"	525'	120'
15"	630'	150'
18"	750'	180'
24"	1000'	240'
30"	1250'	300'
36"	1500'	360'
42"	1750'	420'
48"	2000'	480'
54"	2250'	540'
60"	2500'	600'

Distance may vary 10% with various color combinations.

Based on Black Letters On White Background.

Based on information provided by the California Institute of Technology.

that I still use MDO plywood. The MDO you get today simply isn't what it was a few years ago, and I no longer feel comfortable using it on permanent signs. It is also becoming rather expensive in a lot of areas. There are too many better substrates now available for permanent signs. It's still my first choice for temporary signs, but who says the panels have to be white and square? Sometimes, adding a panel that sticks out the side or top (or both) adds a whole new dimension to your layout. You might also do the same thing by trimming one end into an arrow or reducing part of the panel to match the shape of your layout. This adds a lot of impact and very little labor to the overall project.

For years, most sign painters insisted on using alkyd oil primer on MDO. Primers have also changed a lot in the last few years because of environmental regulations. Most alkyd oil primers you get today are no longer satisfactory on plywood of any kind. As much as I have fought the whole idea of water-based paint, I have to admit that there are acrylic latex primers on the market today that do a better job. Maybe not as superior as the lead-based primer we used in years past, but at least more useful than the oil-based products available today. You need to make sure you seal the edges extremely well and apply some kind of sealer on the back. Sealing the back is especially important with the poor grade MDO we see on the market today. Unless it's sealed on all sides, plywood often curls up like a potato chip when exposed to the elements.

It's usually best to apply the lightest background color first. When that has dried, add your darker panels. Occasionally, the logical sequence will be a little different so you can paint a couple of colors at one time when you add the panels. My favorite tools for painting the color shapes are foam rollers. I usually buy nine-inch rollers, cut them down to three inches, and use them on a small roller frame to paint the color panels. Masking tape lets me quickly and easily paint the shapes with a roller or large brush. Just be sure your base color is good and dry so you don't "brand" the finish with the tape.

A method that works quite well for getting one-coat coverage is what is

known in the painting trade as “knock down.” Lay the plywood panel flat on sawhorses, so you don’t have to worry about runs. Roll (or brush) on a heavy coat of paint, then take a three-inch or four-inch brush and drag just the tip of the bristles across the painted area flowing the paint out in long, straight strokes. With a little practice, you will be able to eliminate most of the thin spots, brush marks, and air bubbles caused by the roller. Adding a flow enhancer like Penetrol will give you a smoother finish, but it will also slow down the drying time.

For topcoat, my first choice is bulletin enamel. There are other paints on the market that probably will work for this purpose, but I’ve found bulletin enamel to be a top quality finish. It’s very bright and opaque, and it usually covers with one coat, which is important when you are painting color panels on low-budget signs. Bulletin enamel is a little less expensive than lettering enamel and seems to be readily available in larger containers. Almost all the major manufacturers of graphic art paints have a bulletin enamel in their line, and my only suggestion as to brand is to check with your local sign supply and see what is readily available in your area. They are all fairly competitive in price.

Topcoat finish is one area where latex paints don’t seem to be quite up to speed. The darker colors are not very opaque, and they don’t seem to have the same color intensity you can get with alkyd oil enamels. Most paint companies are working hard on developing better latex enamels, and I believe we will see a lot of improvement in what’s available in coming years. It’s probably a good thing for us that they are working on these problems because I’m sure it’s just a matter of time until we won’t be able to get oil-based paint at all.

OK! Your eye-catching panels are all painted and dry. Add simple vinyl lettering, and you’re done. If I think the sign is going to be up for a while, a little extra that I often throw in is a plastic rain cap on the plywood. Most home supply stores carry a PVC molding called “J” bar that is used in the dry-wall trade. It snaps right on the top edge of ½” MDO and gives it a great weather seal. ☐