

# Designing logos for optimal distance legibility

by Dan Antonelli

One of the things that makes logo design for vehicle and sign advertising different from print advertising

is the role of distance legibility in the design process. Quite simply, this means that the average



Figure 1. Here, the use of Bodoni Poster fails to provide good distance legibility. The double outline helps its legibility somewhat, but from a distance, the design is still hard to read.



Figure 2. The main copy has great distance legibility, while the sub-copy fails to be legible at a distance. A beefier sans serif would have greatly improved this design's distance legibility.

viewing distance for the observer who is looking at a sign is obviously much greater than one who is reading something in his hand. And, the time that the viewer has to absorb the image, read it—and hopefully make a connection—is far less than in print mediums. A successful logo design must account for this distance and design accordingly.

It's interesting to note that nearly every logo designed for vehicle advertising will work fine in print, as well. However, certain design characteristics of logos originally designed for print often make them less desirable when used for signage and vehicle lettering.

## Design recognition

One of the obvious reasons for a business to have a logo is to create an image that is memorable for the viewer, and leaves them (hopefully) with a lasting and memorable impression. And over time, its consistent usage by the business across different mediums will create an identity that lasts in consumers' minds. The image needs to be clear, concise, and have some elements that make it unique for that business. Therefore, your designs should address the elements of logo design that achieve these goals.

## Font selection

When choosing fonts for your logos, you must try to imagine what that face will look like at a distance. Some typefaces, while appropriate for print, are illegible at an expanded viewing distance. Avoid typefaces that have large variances in stroke widths. Typefaces like Bodoni Poster (Figure 1 and 2), or scripts with exaggerated thick and thin strokes are often difficult to read. You can try to increase the legibility of some of these typefaces by adding heavier outlines and/or shading. You can even manually increase stroke widths.

Whenever possible, try to avoid using typefaces straight from the computer. Alter or modify the originating font, and it will add to the uniqueness of the design.

Block sans serif faces work best at most distances. You can use a serif face, but make sure it is bold

enough and its stroke weights are fairly consistent throughout.

### Icon usage

Icon usage in logos is another way to help create an identifiable element in the design (Figures 3 through 6). The important thing to remember is that the added viewing distance in vehicle or sign advertising necessitates that your icon design be simple and easily recognized.

You don't want a design with a lot of minute, intricate details. A simple, no-nonsense approach to icon development will increase the recognition level. It will also make it easier for the viewer to associate the icon with the business type. I want the viewer to connect the graphic at a glance with the words, for a quick, memorable impression.

### Lettering effects

While I'm a big admirer of custom airbrushing and intricate pictorials, it does your client no good if all those neat details can't be seen at a distance. In general, keep your lettering effects to a minimum and you'll help keep the legibility of your design intact. Begin by trying to design a logo that does not require any effects (Figure 7). Later, you can add effects if you wish to enhance the design. You need to be careful when designing something that only becomes legible with the addition of an effect. However, when you're designing logos with layers and varying levels, you'll sometimes need an effect to help the legibility.

**Airbrushing:** Unless a client specifically requests an airbrushed look, I avoid it. I tend to think that an airbrushed logo gives the impression that the business it represents is a small one. Most of my clients want to appear larger, or more corporate. However, airbrushing is more acceptable in different business types, such as landscapers or in the automotive sector.

I like to use airbrushed colors that have fades from a light color to white (yellow faded to white, process blue faded to white). When used on dark backgrounds, you can get away without an outline. However, when used on



Figure 3. The use of a simple icon provides the viewer with an easily identifiable element.



Figure 4. Again, a simple icon aids in recognition. Although this was designed for print, the block lettering would make it legible at most distances.



Figure 5. Your graphic or icon need not overwhelm the design, either. Notice how the use of a subtle graphic adds to the logo, and gives the viewer a clue to the business type.



Figure 6. You can also make the lettering itself into an icon, or recognizable element of the design. Here, a playful approach to crossing the 'x' makes for a solid, established look for this corporate client.

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white backgrounds, airbrushed colors generally need a heavier, dark outline to “hold” the colors together.

**Shades and outlines:** Shades and outlines are great tools to enhance a good design. But again, be careful relying on them to solidify a design’s legibility. If the design

legibility is suspect prior to the addition of a shade or outline, it’s not apt to vastly improve once the effect is added. It may even detract or distract the viewer if used incorrectly.

Proper shading should only serve to enhance a design which functions well without it. Certain color choices, however, will necessitate an outline or shade, or both, to hold the lettering together. Generally, I’d rather make the color of the main copy in contrast to its background, but sometimes you can’t design that way. For example, lighter colors, such as yellow, on a white background, will need something to hold the letters together, especially at a distance. In these instances, an outline is needed to achieve the desired legibility.

Figure 7. With or without the prismatic effect, the design still holds together well. Remember to design first without any special effects and see if the design works.



Figure 8. The use of prismatic lettering adds an element of uniqueness to this common design. Note that the sub-copy is very legible at a distance. The integration of main and sub-copy create a cohesive design.

**Prismatic effects:** I have always been a big fan of this lettering effect. It’s an effect that was popular a decade ago, then seemed to be out of favor and now has seen a rebirth. Most hand letterers were familiar with the effect, but a lot of newcomers, who dealt primarily in vinyl, did not use it. My love of this effect led me to create a few typefaces that allow prismatic effects to be applied with layers of vinyl (available through SignDNA; 530-795-1637).

Because of its relative obscurity as a lettering effect, the addition of prismatic effects add a unique element to the logo design (Figure 8). Generally for a two-shade prism, I recommend using colors in the same family (i.e., pale yellow and yellow, light blue and powder blue). This keeps the effect not in the forefront of the viewer’s perception, but rather enhances the overall appearance of the lettering. You want the effect to be noticed, but not to be the primary center of attention.

These effects also work well in strictly black and white usage. You



Figure 9. Here’s a simple and common approach to design, with very little in the way of special effects. But the design works very well, maintaining great distance legibility for both main and sub-copy.

can either use shades of black to achieve a prismatic effect, or just have straight line art to achieve a more dramatic effect.

### **Where should you use lettering effects?**

In general, most lettering effects should be saved for the main copy only. Your main copy should be the appropriate size to have an effect without hindering its distance legibility. You'll want to limit the number of effects used in any one design. For maximum impact, it's best to use just one effect per design. As mentioned previously, it's critical that your design functions well without any lettering effects (Figure 9). If you rely too heavily on effects to increase your legibility, your design probably is lacking in some of the fundamentals of good design. □

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