

## **Billboards: A Proven and Practical Communication Tool**

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Imagine the first product that was ever sold. Whether it was a clay pot, loincloth, or even a wheel, it probably benefited from the most primitive forms of advertising. Now, put yourself in the shoes of a prehistoric business owner. You've got an in-demand product, loyal employees, and a comfortable location...the only thing missing is a steady flow of eager customers. What would you do? I'd argue that most people would start by getting a large piece of material, writing a brief and clear message about the product, and posting it in front of the facility. In other words, they'd use an outdoor billboard — which has been a staple of commerce for millennia.

### **Billboards through the ages...**

In a sense, **the first billboards were Egyptian stone obelisks**. These monolithic structures, typically made of granite, marked the entrance of ancient tombs and places of worship. While our modern, english language uses letters and numbers, many ancient writing systems were pictographic. Therefore, most Egyptian obelisks featured characters, pictures, and hieroglyphic symbols. But billboards, and the ideas behind them, weren't exclusively an Egyptian concept. By 30 B.C., the Romans had seized control of Egypt — and *they* took billboards and advertising to a whole new level.

At first, Romans carved messages into stone just like the societies before them. While excavating the buried city of Pompeii, archaeologists have discovered over 6,000 stone inscriptions; many of which are believed to be advertisements. (Sage,

1916, p. 206) Later, the Romans began crafting large pieces of cloth material that were to be hung on buildings. These 'bills' were inscribed with advertising messages about 'for rent' living spaces, theatrical performances, and upcoming gladiatorial games. Plus, famous orators (like Cicero) would have used similar tactics to announce their next speech.

While, there *are* some profound differences between Roman and American culture, there are some undeniable similarities as well. In fact, American government has greatly borrowed from Roman ideas. The USA's election season is perhaps the most advertisement-ridden period of each year. And, before the responsibility of its senators was reduced by emperors, the same could be said about Rome. Their ancient elections would have featured a heavy dosage of advertising as well. There is no doubt that Roman politicians would have been on top of the advertising game. Candidates would have carvings made, banners hung, or signs erected in order to ingratiate themselves to the public.

While the Romans and Egyptians were making headway with billboard technology, the principles behind good billboard writing were being encouraged through Scripture. In Daniel chapter 5, God used large letters on a wall (written by a giant hand) to make an announcement. Just 4 simple words communicated that King Belshazzar's reign was soon to be over. Later in Habakkuk, God instructs the prophet to

“write the vision; make it plain...” Clearly, God wanted this information to be emphasized and written down with large, legible writing.

Billboards, banners, and large signs have been staples of communication in just about every culture since. Most civilizations have capitalized on the direct purpose of billboards: clearly spreading a brief message. But over time, some indirect uses began to accompany outdoor signage. In colonial Philadelphia, billboards acted as landmarks to help travelers navigate the city and locate nearby courthouses, parks, or markets. Street-sign advertisements “became indispensable guides that helped residents and visitors maneuver through the city.” (Keyes, 2007)

### **Primitive but practical...**

Obviously, billboards were prevalent in Ancient Egypt, the Roman Republic, and Colonial America. So, featuring a sign at a store location might seem like a historical concept, but **billboards are still being used effectively in the 21st century.**

Surprisingly, “there are between 560,000–780,000 billboards” on American highways as of 2013. (Scenic America, 2014) On top of those large numbers, it’s estimated that \$6.3 Billion was spent on outdoor billboards in 2020 alone. (ibisworld.com) This means that, on average, it costs about \$783 to rent interstate space for four weeks at a time — “the industry standard” for leasing a billboard. (Bhargava & Donthu, 1999, p. 9) These numbers are key to businesses in our analytics-driven society. People feel at ease when playing it smart with their money. In other words, investors want expenses that

are backed up with favorable data. But unlike other forms of marketing communication, there is no real way to measure the ROI (return on investment) of a billboard.

Instead of being a sales device, a billboard acts as a **statement-piece** — they follow McLuhan's idea of the medium being the message. One scholar wrote that "the physical space and location where billboards are erected can be interpreted as a **message in itself**." (Chien, 2011) Billboards don't *always* persuade, they announce. A large outdoor board screams: "Our product is **BIG** news, and now it's **HERE** in your town!" Hopefully, some who read the announcement *will* be immediately persuaded. For instance, fast food restaurants post signs telling people to "take the next exit for a cheeseburger". But other billboards are intended to grab attention and raise brand awareness.

In present times, billboards are getting even more advanced in the art of attention-getting. The medium continues to evolve with new technology. Nowadays, the newest billboards use high-definition LED lights that run on a timer. This allows the owners to sell more time to more advertisers. So, while the concept of a big sign may seem out-of-date, billboards have found their role in an ever-changing society.

### **It's hard to escape the reach of a billboard**

Getting and keeping attention is always a crucial part of effective communication — now more than ever. Since the dawn of commercialism, and

perhaps even before then, **consumers have been finding ways to dodge corporate messages**. This is partially due to the intrusive nature of advertisements. People don't want to give their limited attention span to something that they deem irrelevant. People want to read, watch, and listen to the content that they *choose*; and often times, promotional messages from sponsors *seem* to deter this fantasy. Frankly, some audiences will never get over having to put up with ads. In fact, most consumers have developed two main practices that help them avoid unwanted programming: **zipping** and **zapping**. These are the technical terms for changing the station, turning the page, or fast-forwarding through unwanted portions of broadcasts, magazines, and videos. In response to this, professional communicators must be skilled in 1) the art of **producing messages that people won't skip**, or (at the very least) 2) **escaping the viewer's tendency to zip or zap**. TV, internet, and printed messages are easily susceptible to avoidance. Thankfully, outdoor billboards are a mode of communication that **"can't be muted, turned off, flipped over, crumpled up, or tossed away."** (Brown, 2015)

Not only are billboards unavoidable, but they don't usually interrupt anything. "Billboards have a special advantage in that they are usually seen in a setting where there is **less competition for people's attention**." (Taylor et al, 2006, p.23) While millions of Americans are focused and headed to work via the highway, a billboard greets them with a fun and simple brand message. There's really no harm in that. No

segment is cut short and no playlist is interrupted. Instead, drivers naturally read the sign and invest as much attention as they wish.

Conducting a successful advertising campaign is a challenge as audience are getting tougher to please. It has rightly been said that “ad-bashing long has been a popular sport”. (Beard, 2017, p. 243) However, **billboards communicate in a less invasive manner and spare themselves from confrontation**. The everyday commuter has no reason to be angry or disappointed with a billboard ad. In fact, as mentioned earlier, they can be informative about nearby attractions, food, lodging, and directions. Instead of criticism, like TV ads receive, **billboard ads are perceived as being genuinely helpful** or lighthearted entertainment.

### **Billboards just make sense.**

Professor Jef I. Edwards once said, “**Advertising is totally unnecessary. Unless you hope to make money.**” The statistics show that most executives have figured this out. Each year, an astronomical amount of money is spent on spreading corporate messages. Businesses, non-profits, and political groups do themselves no favors by failing to communicate. What good is your product, service, or campaign if no one is talking? If a company themselves isn’t talking about their newest service, who will?! Knowing this, many up-and-coming brands purchase TV and social media space. And while the outdoor billboard is a more traditional (or old-school) communication disseminator, it can still be *highly* effective today.

Billboards regularly accomplish 3 things: “**communicate information affordably, attract new customers, and increase sales.**” In the age of fast-paced finger scrolling, companies are often forced to communicate their message in a blink. Video ads typically receive 5 seconds of un-skippable time; making it very hard for new products to explain themselves. In this case, marketers can turn to billboards. These giant mediums can display a product to heaps of commuters for more than 5 seconds. There’s usually enough space to communicate your brand name, include an image of the product (often times being used by the ideal purchaser — *a technique called **user imagery***), and finish with a call to action. Although, cars zoom past billboards at highway speeds, there is still ample time for viewers to comprehend the messages. Also, the fact that billboards are stable must not be overlooked. They don’t appear on screen and go away after a while. Instead, drivers could read the same sign every day for weeks at a time — enabling communicators to stay fresh in the mind of a wide audience.

It’s inevitable that American society will continue its trend toward all things digital. Internet capability and influence will likely grow and grow. It makes perfect sense for companies to focus on their web-presence. But having said all of that...not all business is conducted online. Culture isn’t *truly* found on a screen. So, going forward, it is hard to foresee any social media-based replacement for billboards. Because billboards can become part of the culture. They display information about nearby



restaurants, music scenes, tourist attractions, and even give a sense for the local humor. This is perhaps **the best advantage to spreading a message with a big outdoor sign — the geographical element**. Brands can come in contact with everyone in Nashville, or Hollywood, or Hampton Roads. While McDonald's could labor over making the perfect Instagram banner ad that tries to appeal to people from each of those cities, they could just make 3 billboard designs that are unique to each. For this reason, billboards aren't going anywhere, no matter how advanced technology gets.

### **Final Thoughts**

Billboards have been around for ages. After all, for those who have a *big* announcement, a *big* sign makes a lot of sense. Billboards can affordably grab attention over and over again — perhaps on a daily basis. They can speak to the culture. They are not rude or overly intrusive to the daily lives of consumers. Billboards can help citizens navigate a boardwalk, highway, or city square. Because of these benefits, along with their historical longevity and ability to adapt to new technology, brands and individuals will be using outdoor billboards for centuries to come.

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