

# Research examines what makes signs hard to read

September 20 2013, by Judy Ashton

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On-premises signage is an important form of communication for bricks-and-mortar businesses. Signs identify businesses, draw traffic, convey important information and signal the quality of stores.

Research conducted at the University of Cincinnati's Carl H. Lindner College of Business with industry partner BrandSpark International shows that a significant portion of consumers have driven by and failed to find a business due to [signage](#) being too small or otherwise unclear. [See top 10 list of what makes signs difficult to read.](#)

"The research is trying to get to the roots of the drive-by [communication failure](#) that frustrate customers and hurt businesses, and it's getting worse over time," says James Kellaris, the James S. Womack / Gemini Corporation Professor of Signage and Visual Marketing.

Kellaris will present new research findings at the fifth annual National Signage Research and Education Conference (NSREC) on Oct. 10 at the Kingsgate Marriott Conference Center on UC's campus. The two-day annual conference (Oct. 9 and 10), jointly sponsored by the Sign Foundation, the Lindner College of Business and UC's College of Design, Architecture, Art, and Planning (DAAP), attracts planners and sign industry professionals from across the country. New findings provide evidence regarding consumers' preferences for signage communication and aesthetics, as well as what makes signs difficult to read.

Whereas planners and regulators often restrict the size of commercial signage and encourage uniformity for the sake of community aesthetics, research evidence shows that consumers do not think that small size or uniformity of design are desirable.

In fact, a national survey of American shoppers revealed that the No. 1 reason signs are hard to read is that the letters are simply too small. Placement of signs is also a contributing factor, as are insufficient lighting, insufficient contrast between letters and background color, and – in the case of digital signage – the message simply changes too fast.

At first glance Kellaris suspected the difficulty shoppers have reading signs might be related to aging Americans. His analysis of national survey data, however, shows that the problem is common to young and old shoppers alike.

Signage is an emerging hot topic at the University of Cincinnati, in part because it is at the intersection of free speech rights and regulation.

The 2013 NSREC will focus on the theme of Signage as Advertising and will address topical research on four key areas that impact signage: Science, Technology, Art/Advertising and Regulation (S.T.A.R. initiative).

**More information:** [www.thesignagefoundation.org/](http://www.thesignagefoundation.org/)

Provided by University of Cincinnati

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