

Subvertising billboards



A guide to subvertising - altering commercial outdoor poster and billboard advertisements to get your message across.

The Art & Science of Billboard Improvement a comprehensive guide to the alteration of outdoor advertising

Introduction

Look up! Billboards have become as ubiquitous as human suffering, as difficult to ignore as a beggar's outstretched fist. Every time you leave your couch or cubicle, momentarily severing the electronic umbilicus, you enter the realm of their impressions. Larger than life, subtle as war, they assault your senses with a complex coda of commercial instructions, the messenger RNA of capitalism. Every time you get in a car, or ride a bus, or witness a sporting event, you receive their instructions. You can't run and you can't hide, because your getaway route is lined to the horizon with signs, and your hidey-hole has a panoramic view of an 8-sheet poster panel.

There are a million stories in the Big City, and as many reasons to want to hack a billboard. We have our reasons, and we don't presume to judge yours. In this manual, we have made a conscious effort to steer clear of ideology and stick to methodology. The procedures outlined here are based on our 20+ years' experience executing billboard improvements professionally, safely, and (knock wood) without injury or arrest. In most cases, it should not be necessary to follow the elaborate, even obsessive precautions we outline here. A can of spray paint, a blithe spirit, and a balmy night are all you really need.

- Blank DeCoverly
BLF Information Systems

1) Selecting a Billboard

In choosing a sign, keep in mind that the most effective alterations are often the simplest. If you can totally change the meaning of an advertisement by changing one or two letters, you'll save a lot of time and trouble. Some ads lend themselves to parody by the inclusion of a small image or symbol in the appropriate place (a skull, radiation symbol, happy face, swastika, vibrator, etc.). On other boards, the addition of a cartoon "thought bubble" or "speech balloon" for one of the characters might be all that is needed.

Once you have identified a billboard message you wish to improve, you may want to see if there are multiple locations displaying the same advertisement. You should determine which ones give your message optimum visibility. A board on a central freeway will obviously give you more exposure than one on an obscure side street. You must then weigh the location/visibility factor with other crucial variables such as physical accessibility, potential escape routes, volume of foot and vehicular traffic during optimum alteration hours, etc. Of course, if you can improve more than one board in the same campaign, so much the better.

There are several standard sign types in the outdoor advertising industry. Knowing which type of sign you are about to alter may prove useful in planning the operation:

Bulletins are large outdoor sign structures, typically situated alongside federal highways and major urban freeways. They measure 14 x 48 feet and are usually leased in multi-month contracts, meaning that an advertisement will stay in place for at least 60 days.

30-Sheet Poster Panels measure 12 x 25 feet, are situated along primary and secondary roadways, and are usually updated every 30 days.

8-Sheet Poster Panels measure 6 x 12 feet and are usually found in high-density urban neighborhoods and suburban shopping areas. They are designed to reach both pedestrian and vehicular traffic, and are leased in 30-day increments.

Out-of-Home Media is the industry term for advertising targeted at people on the go, including bus shelters, bus exterior s, taxis, subway stations, street furniture (newsstands, benches, kiosks), painted walls, and "indoor out of home" locations like airports and malls.

There are of course many non-standard formats as well, and these frequently make the most intriguing targets. Oversized bulletins, animated signs, painted buildings, and boards with neon all offer unique challenges for advanced operations. Signs featuring large, illuminated text can often be improved simply by turning off a few letters, converting "HILLSDALE" to "LSD," for instance, or "HOTEL ESSEX" to "HOT SEX." The possibilities are limited only by your imagination.

2) Planning the Improvement Action

Though the sudden urge to just climb right up a sign and start hacking can occasionally be overwhelming, in our experience this type of "impulse improvement" tends to deliver unsatisfactory results, at unnecessary personal risk. The guidelines that follow draw on the BLF's proud 20-year history of planning and executing such actions without injury or arrest.

A) Accessibility

How do you get up on the board? Will you need your own ladder to reach the bottom of the board's ladder? Can you climb the support structure? Is the board on a building rooftop, and if so, can it be reached from within the building, from a fire escape, or perhaps from an adjoining building? If you need ladders to work the board, they may occasionally be found on platforms on or behind the board, or on adjacent boards or rooftops.

B) Practicality

How big are the letters and/or images you would like to change? How close to the platform at the bottom of the board is your work area? On larger boards you can rig from above and hang over the face to reach points that are too high to reach from below. We don't recommend this method unless you have some climbing and rigging experience. When hanging in one position your work area is very limited laterally. Your ability to leave the scene quickly diminishes proportionately to how convoluted your position has become. Placing huge words or images is much more difficult.

C) Security After choosing your board, be sure to inspect it, both during the day and at night. Take note of all activities in the area. Who is about at 2:00 a.m.? How visible will you be while scaling the support structure? Keep in mind you will make noise; are there any apartment or office windows nearby? Is anyone home? Walk lightly if you're on a rooftop-who knows who you're walking over.

What is the visibility to passing cars on surface streets and freeways? What can you see from your work position on the board? Even though it is very difficult to see a figure on a dark board at night, it is

not impossible. Any point you have line-of-sight vision to is a point from which you can be observed. How close is your board to the nearest police station or Highway Patrol headquarters? What is their patrol pattern in the area? Average response time to Joe Citizen's call? You can get an idea by staking out the area and observing. Is it quiet at night or is there a lot of foot traffic? When the bars let out, will this provide cover-i.e., drunks keeping the cops busy-or will it increase the likelihood of detection by passersby? Do they care? If you are definitely spotted, it may pay to have your ground crew approach them rather than just hoping they don't call the cops. Do not let them connect you with a vehicle. Have your ground crew pretend to be chance passersby and find out what the observer thinks. We've been spotted at work a number of times and most people were amused. You'll find that most people, including officials, don't look up unless given a reason to do so.

Go up on the board prior to your hit. Get a feeling for being there and moving around on the structure at night. Bring a camera-it's a good cover for doing anything you're not supposed to: "Gee, officer, I'm a night photographer, and there's a great shot of the bridge from up here . . . " Check your escape routes. Can you cross over rooftops and leave by a fire escape across the block? etc., etc.

D) Illumination

Most boards are brightly lit by floodlights of some type. Most large boards are shut off some time between 11:00 p.m. and 2:00 am by a time clock control somewhere on or near the board. Smaller boards frequently are controlled by photo-electric cells or conventional timeclocks, also somewhere on the board. If you find the photo-electric cell, you can turn the lights on the board off by taping a small flashlight directly into the cell's "eye." This fools the unit into thinking it's daytime and shutting the lights off.

As noted, most larger boards are controlled by timeclocks. These can be found in the control panels at the base of the support structure and/or behind the board itself. These panels are often locked (particularly those at the structure's base). Unless you are familiar with energized electrical circuitry and devices of this type we caution you to wait until the clock shuts itself off at midnight or so. Many of these boards run 220 volts and could fry you to a crisp.

E) Daytime Hits

We don't recommend this method for most high boards on or near freeways and major roads. It works well for doing smaller boards lower to the ground where the alteration is relatively quick and simple. If you do choose to work in the light, wear coveralls (company name on the back?) and painters' hats, and work quickly. Keep an eye out for parked or passing vehicles bearing the billboard company's or advertiser's name. Each board has the company emblem at its bottom center. If you're on a Sleaze Co. board and a Sleaze Co. truck pulls up, you're probably in trouble. It is unlikely that the workers will try to physically detain you (try bribery if necessary), but they will probably call the cops.

3) Producing Graphical Overlays

Though powerful improvements are occasionally executed with nothing more than a spray can and a sharp wit, most actions require the production of some type of graphical overlay to alter the board's message. The more professional-looking these overlays, the greater impact your modified ad is likely to have on the public. This is not to say that every hit needs to look exactly like an original - this would be prohibitively expensive for most groups, and in these days of computer-assisted photo enhancement, could arguably lead to the accusation that your hit was a binary illusion, crafted on a Macintosh rather than on the urban landscape. While technical competence is a worthy goal to pursue (and a major motivator for the BLF), the success or failure of your alteration will ultimately depend more on the quality of your thinking and the power of your altered message than on how well you can match a font.

A) Choosing a Production Method

Before you get too deep into the design process, you need to decide how the overlays will be produced. If you're lucky enough to have access to commercial sign-printing equipment, you can go the professional route and opt for industry-standard vinyl. Vinyl overlays are strong, light, easy to transport, and easy to apply, but unless you have an industry insider on your team, they will probably be too expensive to produce. If you or a collaborator have late-night access to the facilities of a commercial printer, neighborhood copy shop, or advertising bureau, you may be able to output your overlays on a large-format color printer or plotter. The venerable LaserMaster, with its sturdy coated paper and 36-inch track, is a BLF favorite, but there are many other models in the field.

Printing on paper nearly always requires a process known as "tiling" - cutting the image up into smaller pieces that are then reassembled into a whole. Popular computer programs like Quark Xpress and Adobe PageMaker can perform this function automatically, by selecting the "Tiling" option from the Print menu. If you don't have access to a wide-track printer, try to locate a machine that can handle 11x17 tabloid-sized paper - the bigger your printer's output, the fewer pieces you'll have to tile back together to create a finished overlay. Most neighborhood copy shops and many corporate offices now have color printers/copiers with 11x17 output.

For low cost and maximum durability, consider canvas. When impregnated with oil-based lacquer paint, a canvas overlay has the potential to last longer than the sign surface it's affixed to. It's heavier to carrier and more difficult to secure to the sign, but it's a reliable, low-tech alternative that can be implemented inexpensively.

We don't recommend using overlays much larger than 4'x3'. If your message is larger, you should section it and butt the sections together for the finished image. It gets very windy on boards, and large paste-overs are difficult to apply.

B) Scale

If you are changing only a small area (one letter, a small symbol, etc.) you probably do not need to go to any elaborate lengths to match or design your "overlay" (we'll use this term to describe the finished image/lettering you'll be applying to the board). Just take actual measurements or tracings directly off the board. If, however, you intend to create overlays of great size and/or number of letters and you want the finished image to look as much as possible like the advertisers themselves had made it, you should plan on more elaborate preparation. Find a position roughly level with the board and looking at it square on (200 to 1000 or so feet away). Photograph the board from this position and make a tracing from a large print of the photo. Using measurements you have taken on the board (height, width, letter height, etc.), you can create a scale drawing of your intended alteration. From this, it is possible to determine how large your overlays will need to be and what spacing will be required between letters.

C) Color Matching

There are two basic ways to match the background and/or colors of the lettering or image area:

On painted or paper boards you can usually carve a small (1"x1") sample directly off the board. This does not always work on older painted boards which have many thick layers of paint.

Most large paint stores carry small paint sampler books. It is possible to get a pretty close match from these samplers. We suggest sticking to solid colors and relatively simple designs for maximum visual impact.

D) Letter Style

If you wish to match a letter style exactly, pick up a book of fonts from a graphic arts store or borrow one from a self-serve print shop. Use this in conjunction with tracings of existing letters to create the complete range of lettering needed for your alteration. You can convincingly fake letters that aren't on the board by finding a closely matching letter style in the book and using tracings of letters from your photo of the board as a guide for drawing the new letters.

E) Producing Overlays From Computer Output

Computers with desktop publishing software offer many advantages to the modern billboard liberator. Fonts and colors can be matched precisely, professional-looking graphical elements can be added to your text message, and scale and spacing become much easier to calculate. There are many software packages suitable for producing overlays, including PageMaker, Quark Xpress, Illustrator, Freehand, CorelDraw, and various CAD programs. Adobe Photoshop gives you the additional flexibility of being able to preview your hit - just scan in a photograph of the original board and apply your modification over it as an independent layer.

After you have designed the overlay and printed out your tiles, you'll need to assemble the individual printouts jigsaw-style and glue them onto some sort of backing material. Heavy pattern paper works best for this, but you can also use 1/8-inch foamcore for smaller overlays, i.e. those less than 30 inches on a side. Start in one corner, adhering the first tile with spray adhesive to the backing material. Carefully assemble the rest of the tiles, trimming off unprinted margin space as required and laying them down one at a time, making sure all the edges are well-secured. If you get a little off-kilter at some point in the process and the pieces don't line up with absolute precision, don't worry - large-scale work is more forgiving since people will be viewing it at a distance. When all the tiles are secured, reinforce the edges with clear packing tape. If it's going to be a wet night, or if there's a chance your work may stay up for a few days or more, consider weather-proofing your overlay with a coat of clear lacquer.

F) Tiling With a Photocopier

If you don't have access to a computer with desktop publishing software, but do have access to a good copy machine, you can duplicate the procedure described above using the copier's "enlarge" function. First, create a scale original of your overlay on a single sheet of paper, using stencils or rub-off lettering. Next, pencil a grid over your drawing, with each square being equivalent to the largest size of paper the copier can accommodate (letter, legal, tabloid, etc.). Cut the original into pieces along the penciled lines, then enlarge each piece on the copier, going through as many generations as necessary until each piece fills its own sheet of paper. Assemble the pieces as described above, adding color with lacquer paints or permanent markers. Weatherproof if desired.

G) Producing Overlays by Hand

We recommend using heavy pattern paper and high-gloss, oil-based lacquer paints. The lacquer paint suffuses the paper, making it super-tough, water resistant, and difficult to tear. For making overlays, roller coat the background and spray paint the lettering through cardboard cut-out templates of the letters. For extremely large images or panels, use large pieces of painted canvas. The canvas should be fairly heavy to avoid being ripped to shreds by the winds that buffet most billboards. Glue and staple 1"x4" pine boards the entire horizontal lengths of the top and bottom of the canvas. The canvas will then roll up like a carpet for transportation and can be unrolled over the top of the board and lowered into place by ropes.

H) Methods of Application

Although there are many types of adhesive that can be used, we recommend rubber cement. Rubber

cement is easily removable (but if properly applied will stay up indefinitely) and does not damage or permanently mark the board's surface. This may become important if you're apprehended and the authorities and owners attempt to assess property damage. Application of rubber cement on large overlays is tricky. You need to evenly coat both the back-side of the overlay and the surface of the board that is to be covered. Allow one to two minutes drying time before applying the paper to the board. To apply the cement, use full sized (10") house paint rollers and a five-gallon plastic bucket. Have one person coat the back of the overlays while another coats the board's surface. Both people will be needed to affix the coated overlay to the finished board surface. On cool nights there may be condensation on the board, in which case the area to be covered needs to be wiped down first - use shop towels or a chamois for this.

To level overlay panels on the board, measure up from the bottom (or down from the top) of the board to the bottom line of where it needs to be in order to cover the existing copy. Make small marks at the outermost left and right-hand points. Using a chalk snap line with two people, snap a horizontal line between these two points. This line is your marker for placing your overlay(s).

If you have a canvas or paper overlay as described in (F) above, you can either tie the four corners and middle (top and bottom) very securely, or, if you can reach the face of the board by ladder or rope, attach the panel by screwing the 1"x4" boards to the billboard. A good battery powered drill is needed for this. We recommend hex-head "Tek" sheet metal screws, #8 or #10 size. Use a hex head driver bit for your drill. These screws work well on either wood backboards or sheet metal.

4) Executing the Hit

Once you've completed your preparations and are ready for the actual hit, there are many things which can be done to minimize the risk of apprehension and/or injury:

A) Personnel

Have the smallest number of people possible on the board. Three is about optimum-two for the actual work and one lookout/communications person. Depending on your location, you may require additional spotting personnel on the ground (see below).

B) Communications

For work on larger boards where you're exposed for longer periods of time, we recommend compact CB units or FM-band walkie-talkies. Low cost CB walkie-talkies are available from Radio Shack and elsewhere, and can be fitted with headsets and microphones for ease of use.

Have one or two cars positioned at crucial intersections within sight of the board. The ground crew should monitor oncoming traffic and maintain radio contact with the lookout on the board. (Note: Do not use the popular CB or FM channels; there are many other frequencies to choose from. A verbal code is a good idea since the channels you will be using will not be secure.)

It's crucial that the ground crew don't lounge around their vehicle(s) or in any other way make it obvious that they're hanging around in a (likely) desolate area late at night for no apparent reason. A passing patrol car will notice them much sooner than they will notice operatives on the board. Keep a low profile. We've found that lookouts dressed as winos, or as homeless couples, are virtually invisible additions to the urban landscape. Park all vehicles out of sight of the operation.

C) Safety

The risk of apprehension on a board pales in comparison to the risk of falling, and safety concerns should always prevail over security. If you're not an experienced climber, you're better off helping out

on the ground: as a security lookout, graphic designer or publicist. Even if you are an experienced climber, we don't recommend solo actions on any board larger than 8 panels (6x12 feet). Ideally, all field actions should incorporate the buddy system, but particularly those that require any sort of rigging. If you're going to lean over the top of the board to affix any overlays, you should have a secured partner belaying you. It's a long way down, so be careful up there.

D) Clean-up

Billboard structures are notorious trash magnets as it is; don't make matters worse by leaving your empty glue tubes, discarded vinyl backing, cigarette butts and empties on the property. The responsible billboard liberator leaves nothing of his own behind (not even fingerprints), though he may on occasion leave a cold six-pack for the benefit of those hard-working signmen assigned to the unglamorous task of un-altering his alteration.

E) Escape

If you've done your homework, you'll know the terrain surrounding the board quite well. In the event of detection, prepare a number of alternate routes out of the area, and a rendezvous point with the ground support crew. If a patrol is approaching and you are in a difficult spot for quickly ditching and hiding (hanging on a rope in the middle of the board, for instance), it may be better simply to stay still until they pass. Movement is more likely to catch the eye.

Once on the ground, if pursuit is imminent, hiding may be your safest bet. If you've covered the terrain carefully, you'll be aware of any good hiding spots. Keep in mind that if the police do a thorough search (doubtful, but not impossible), they will use high-powered spotlights from cars and flashlights if on foot.

Stashed clothing in your hiding spot may prove useful. A business suit, perhaps, or rumpled and vomit-encrusted leisure wear. Be creative.

4) Publicizing Your Action

Like the advertisements they improve, your actions should aim for the greatest possible reach. Try to time your improvement so it stays up for as long as possible, and generates the greatest possible number of "impressions." Actions executed at the beginning of a holiday weekend tend to stay up longest, since repair crews are less readily available. Yet even if your improvement survives for two or three days on a major urban thoroughfare, it won't attain the kind of reach you can get with media attention.

A) Photographs

Color slides are best for magazine and newspaper submissions, but online publishers prefer high-resolution .jpeg files. Be sure to get a good "before" picture of the board to be altered, ideally taken from the same camera position and at the same time of day (or night) as the "after" photograph. An "after" picture should be taken as soon as possible after the action is completed; if you want a daytime shot as well, come back for it later.

B) Press Releases

May be serious or surreal, according to your motives and whim. Basically a cover letter for your photographs, which comprise the essence of the story. Most libraries carry one of the major PR reference guides, which list contacts for every printed publication and broadcast company in the country (while you're there, research standard AP style for press releases). Better yet, record your manifesto on an audio cassette or CD, then tape it to the bottom of a payphone outside a reporter's

office and call in your "anonymous tip." The more creative you are, the more likely you are to get the desired response.

Postscript

If anyone reading this primer finds it of any use in their own advertising endeavors, we at the BLF will consider it successful. We believe roadside advertising enhancement is a pastime more individuals should engage in. It's not that difficult to do smaller, low-to-the-ground boards. A quick hit-and-run on such a board will not require all of the elaborate preparations and precautions we have detailed. The more "real" messages we have on the freeways and streets, the better.

- R.O. Thornhill
BLF Education Officer

- Blank DeCoverly
BLF Minister of Propaganda

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