

The science behind campaign signs



By Rachel Bunn and Lindsey Erdody

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It's not campaign season until campaign signs start lining the roads.

The tactic has been used for many years to reach voters, hoping that the signs will give even the greenest candidate name recognition — and that voters will remember that name when they reach the polls.

Some candidates swear by campaign signs, though others find them old-fashioned or unnecessary, said Andy Downs, director of the Mike Downs Center for Indiana Politics at Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne.

"The reality is, in recent years, you actually have to have some signs for people to think your campaign is real," Downs said.

Some campaign signs are better than others,

and each candidate takes a different approach.

Republican Ken Todd's name dominates his sign, while the words "judge" and "re-elect" are much smaller. His opponent, Democrat Alphonso Manns, has his last name and the word "judge" in large letters, adding "Please vote" in a smaller font on top.

Some candidates use bright colors, like Democrat Brad Swain, who opted for yellow signs. Others stick with party tradition, like Steve Hale, who used Republican red.

And then there are others who buck tradition: Democrat Chris Gaal's signs are red, while his Republican opponent, Jacob Moore, has blue signs.

Yard signs also can come in multiple sizes. Libertarian Dave Nakarado placed larger signs around town; his opponents, Democrat Patrick Stoffers and Republican Bob LaGarde, use the more commonly seen size.

For the most part, candidates are shying away from declaring party affiliation; Downs suggested three reasons for this.

One, the party affiliation may not provide any benefit, unless there's a dominant party

presence in an area.

Ninth District congressional candidate Mike Frey, who is a Libertarian, said he left out a party label because Republican is the only significant party in the 9th District.

Two, at a national level, partisan politics is seen as divisive and dysfunctional — candidates want to be seen as more moderate and reasonable.

“I think right now when it’s hyper partisan, I think people are staying away from it,” said Trevor Foughty, campaign manager for incumbent 9th District U.S. Rep. Todd Young, R-Bloomington.

The last — and the least important of the reasons, Downs said — is it can be difficult to work party affiliation into a design.

Kathy Stolz, campaign manager for Bill Bailey, said party affiliation wasn’t included in Bailey’s signs so the Democratic congressional candidate could appeal to independent voters. It also would have forced his name and office sought to be in smaller letters.

One item that is important but sometimes forgotten is the office the candidate is running for.

“You may have been an office holder for 16 years, but you’ve held two different offices,” Downs said. “Some voters will get to the voting booth and wonder where someone’s name is on the ballot.”

Generally speaking, the simpler campaign signs are, the better.

“You’ve got to be able to take in the full sign in three seconds,” Downs said.

Steve Layton, graphic design lecturer for the Indiana University Media School, said signs need to avoid clutter but be eye-catching.

“You want to have something memorable in the sign,” Layton said. “You have to find the balance.”

Young’s yard sign is part of a logo overhaul to create a design that would look good in any medium from TV to print to mobile, Foughty said.

“Ultimately, this is about advertising and brand management,” Foughty said. “That’s what you’re doing when you run a campaign.”

Layton agreed that the signs should be similar so voters quickly relate the different advertisements for the same candidate.

“It’s just like you would do with a product,” Layton said. “Graphic design is all about communicating a message.”

Bailey’s yard signs are also a version of his logo. Green is used throughout his entire campaign, so that’s the background color on the signs, Stolz said. The faded star behind Bailey’s name, which is in the logo, was dropped from the signs for cheaper printing reasons and to make the name more prominent.

So, are signs effective?

“Yard signs don’t vote — that’s the joke,” Foughty said, but added: “I think there is something to be said on the impression that’s created.”

Longtime politicians Charlotte Zietlow and Steve Hogan agreed at a recent Bloomington Press Club meeting that yard signs are not the best campaign tool.

“They’re not very effective of getting votes or moving votes,” Zietlow said.

Bloomington City Council member and graphic designer Tim Mayer said the signs are not an inexpensive way to earn votes, whether it’s paying for the signs or getting the volunteer time to put them out and take them down.

“They are an unfortunate necessity for candidates to get their name out,” Mayer said.

To Mayer, the most effective signs are placed strategically. For example, you wouldn’t want to put signs in yards in a cul-de-sac. On the other hand, if you have a handful of signs in prominent places, people could get the impression that your signs are all over town.

“I think one of the things that makes yard signs effective is repetition,” Mayer said.

Downs said having five signs in a row, particularly leading up to an intersection, can be more eye-catching than having five signs in an intersection.

But the most powerful place for a sign is in a person’s yard, according to Downs.

“It shows that somebody actually wanted it,” he said. “When the sign’s in someone’s yard, it’s basically saying ‘Ask me about why I support this person.’”

Having signs is a time-consuming process that requires picking a design, placing them around town and maintaining them throughout the campaign season. But it’s a necessary one, Downs said.

“Every candidate who comes to me who wants to run for office, I always tell them they have to have yard signs,” Downs said.



YARD SIGN SCIENCE

The Herald-Times talked to graphic designer and Bloomington City Council member Tim Mayer and Indiana University Media School design lecturer Steve Layton about what makes an effective campaign sign whether it's the right fonts, colors or word size. Both design experts evaluated the three 9th District congressional candidate signs as examples.

Colors

Getting the right color combination can make a big difference in how noticeable a sign is. Red, blue and white are commonly used colors, but straying away from that can be a good thing.

"If you go with red, white and blue, you're in line with many, many others," Mayer said.

But, if a majority of candidates decided to use colors other than red, white and blue, Layton said it would look "like a bag of Skittles" and none would stick out.

"That's only really going to work if nobody else thinks like that," Layton said.

Using more than two colors — one for background and one for text — can make it look more professional.

"A multicolor look will gather more attention," Mayer said. "But again you have to consider costs."

Bailey: Green helps it stick out and suggests he supports the environment, but the white on green isn't a big contrast.

Frey: The red contrasts on the white background, but initially would suggest Republican.

Young: Dark blue against white gives it a strong contrast and makes it easy to read. The three-color scheme makes it look more professional.

Fonts

Choosing the right font is important for a good sign.

Signs must be easily readable, which is why thicker, bigger fonts can work well. The type can also suggest traits of the candidate.

"Font kind of conveys something about the person to some extent," Mayer said. Using a variety of weights and sizes can be more effective, giving the sign a professional touch.

Bailey: Times New Roman, which is seen as more traditional or default and not as striking from a distance. The italic version helps distinguish the sign slightly, but isn't recommended for signs because it can be hard to read.

Frey: Slab serif, which was originally created with the purpose of being seen from a distance.

Young: Sans serif, which is considered more modern and could suggest Young is forward-thinking. name.

Words and sizing

The name of the candidate must be prominent, and shorter names are better. The fewer letters in a name, the bigger it can be on a yard sign.

The next most important words to get on a sign — the office the candidate is running for.

"It really is meant to get the candidates' name and office they're seeking," Mayer said.

Bailey: Last name could have been larger, as it's not the clearly dominant part of the sign.

Frey: Takes advantage of his short last name and makes it as large as possible.

Young: Largely displays his first and last name, given that "Young" is a common last name.

Extras

Adding some extra graphics to a sign isn't always a bad thing or a good thing.

"They all do a good job of not trying to say too much here," Layton said.

All three signs display a "paid for by" disclaimer at the bottom, which is legally required, regardless of how large it is shown.

"As long as it's there, it's there," Mayer said.

Bailey: Nothing extra, except for the funding disclaimer.

Frey: The check mark box reminds people to check the box next to his name without cluttering the sign.

Young: Almost has a 3-D element to it with the tapering lines underneath "Young."

What's missing?

All three signs are missing a handful of items that are commonly associated with campaigns — party affiliation, slogans and "vote for me" or "elect."

Mayer said it's common lately to forgo the party label, and the lack of a slogan or qualifier like "integrity" or "working for you" is becoming more routine.

He also suspects that the trend is moving away from a direct appeal to vote for that candidate.