

# Guide to Storefront Signs

Milwaukee Development Center | 809 N. Broadway | PO Box 324 | Milwaukee, WI | 53201-0324 | 414-286-8211



**Too many signs give customers an impression of clutter and disorganization.**

**H**ow do you make sure customers know your business exists? Most businesses answer that question with one word: signs. They know signs promote awareness of their business name, products, hours, and special features that attract an impulse shopper.

But when it comes to signs, “more” isn’t “better.” Research shows signs like those in the picture above don’t attract shoppers. As shoppers search for information among so many competing signs, the message of each one is lost. Based on the impression they receive from the signs, shoppers may conclude the store is disorganized and cluttered.

There’s another reason “more” isn’t “better.” **Milwaukee’s zoning ordinance restricts the amount and type of signs that businesses may display.** Businesses are subject to citations from a building inspector if they have more signs than the code allows, types of signs not allowed by the code, signs installed without permits, and damaged or abandoned signs.

This customer information sheet tells you what kinds of signs you may display, how to get sign permits, and sources of assistance to pay for quality signs for your business.

## What kind of permanent signs may I have for my business?

Permanent signs contain information like the business name, type of services or products available, hours of operation, and so on. Businesses are allowed to display this information on permanent wall signs, projecting signs, lettering painted on clear window glass, neon signs, and lettering on the edge of window awnings.

Several types of wall signs are permitted: a professionally painted board-type sign, a cabinet box-type sign with a lexan or plastic panel insert, or individual letters mounted on the building.

All permanent signs require a permit from the Milwaukee Development Center. If your business is in a locally designated historic district, the Historic Preservation Commission must also approve the sign.

## What kind of permanent signs are not allowed?

Exterior signs made of paper, cardboard, or flexible plastic are not allowed. **Banners are not allowed.**

# Guide to Storefront Signs

## How large can my permanent signs be? How many can I have?

The amount of signage you may display depends on the zoning district in which the property is located.

In the most restrictive zoning districts, businesses are allowed to have a maximum of 18 square feet of wall signage. This can be one sign or multiple signs; however, the total of all the signs added together may not exceed 18 square feet. In the most restrictive zoning districts, businesses may also have one projecting wall sign, no more than 12 square feet in area. If you have a non-lighted awning, you can have 10 square feet of signage on the awning. If you have an internally lighted, translucent awning, you are allowed to have only 5 square feet of signage on the awning.

Any information or graphics relating to your business painted directly on an exterior wall will be treated as signs, and counted in the calculation of how much signage you are allowed to have.

Some zoning districts allow more signage. Call the Milwaukee Development Center at **(414)286-8210** to determine the amount of signage allowed for your building. You must provide the exact address of your building.

## Are temporary signs OK?

Temporary signs are typically paper or plastic signs and displays that advertise special sales or promotions. Temporary signs are allowed under these conditions:

1. The sign must be installed **inside the window**, not on the exterior of the building.
2. The sign must be displayed for **no more than 30 days**.
3. All temporary signs, added together, may cover no more than 25% (one-fourth) of the business's windows.

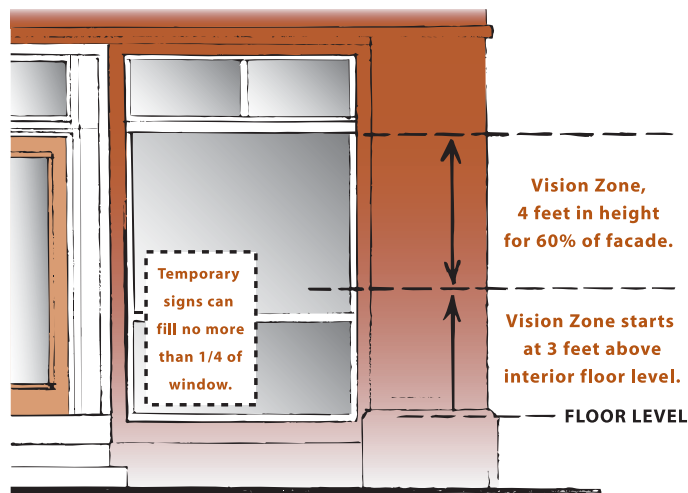
Temporary signs do not require a permit. However, if the temporary signs you install do not meet these three conditions, you are subject to a citation from the building inspector.

**If you currently have temporary signs that are mounted outdoors, have been up for more than 30 days, or cover more than 25% of the window area, you must remove them now.**

## Special rules for store windows

Milwaukee ordinances require windows on retail businesses. At a minimum, windows must exist in a clear vision zone that starts about 3 feet from the floor and extends vertically to the spot 7 feet above the floor.

New buildings must be designed and built to meet these ordinances. For existing buildings, existing windows must be maintained and may be enlarged, but generally may not be reduced in size. Existing windows may not be painted over, blocked or filled in to restrict the view into the business from the street.



The window requirement affects the amount and type of signs that may be displayed in windows. It also affects what fixtures may be placed in front of windows inside the store.

## Here are the rules:

1. Only two kinds of permanent signs are allowed in windows: individual letters painted on clear window glass, and neon signs consisting of individual letters. The permanent sign in the window may not obscure the view into the store in the vision zone. Permanent signs in the window may cover up to 25% (one-fourth) of the window area.
2. Display racks, point of purchase displays, and other items that significantly obscure the view in and out of the store may not be placed in front of windows in the vision zone.
3. Temporary signs may cover no more than 25% (one-fourth) of the store's window area.

## What is an illegal sign?

Any permanent sign that was hung or mounted on a building or in a window without a sign permit is an illegal sign. Any temporary sign that doesn't meet the conditions listed on the previous page is an illegal sign. This is true even if a previous operator of the business put up the sign.

**Anything put up for more than 30 days that displays the name of the business, services or products offered, special promotions, or even graphics depicting products is a sign and needs a permit.** There are some small exceptions, such as small, neatly applied emblems relating to credit cards accepted, business associations, and hours of operation.

# Guide to Storefront Signs

## What should I do if I have an illegal sign at my business?

If no permits exist, you may either remove the sign, or apply for a permit for the sign. The permit will be granted if the size and other factors are allowed by City ordinances. If the existing sign does not meet the ordinances, you'll be required to remove it or alter it to meet the law. If you fail to take action to correct or remove illegal signs, you will receive a citation from the building inspector.

## How can I find out if any of my existing signs are illegal?

The existing signs on your business may remain if they were installed with permits. If you cannot find permits in your files for each of the signs on your building, you can check the city files at the Milwaukee Development Center to verify that you or the previous operator took out permits. Permit files are available for public inspection from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday. The Development Center is located at 809 N. Broadway, first floor.

## What are the penalties for illegal signs?

If a building inspector orders removal of illegal signs, and the property owner does not remove them, the owner faces significant financial penalties. The owner is subject to reinspection fees that range from \$50 to \$300 per reinspection. An owner who failed to remove illegal signs for a year would be charged reinspection fees of nearly \$3,000. The owner also is subject to citations that carry a fine of up to \$320 a day, and a municipal court fine of up to \$150 per day.

## When I close or move my business, what should I do about the signs?

When a business leaves a location, the signs pertinent to that business must be removed. If you are a tenant, talk to your landlord to decide whether you or the landlord will remove the signs.

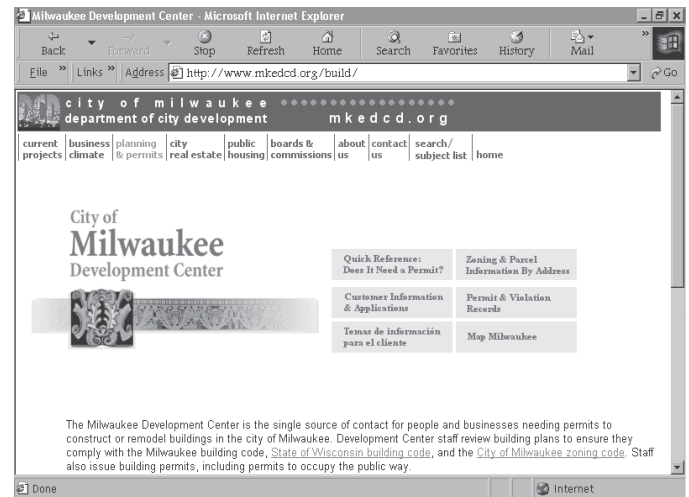
If a new business will be moving in immediately, a box-type sign cabinet may be re-used by the new business operator by inserting a new "face" in the sign. A permit is required to put this new face in. If a new business is not moving in within 90 days of the former leaving, a blank panel may be inserted temporarily until a new business rents the space. In no case can a sign box be left with a broken or missing sign panel for any length of time.

In cases where totally new signs or awnings are being put up for a business, the old signs they replace must be completely removed.

**If signs belonging to a former business are not removed, the property owner will receive a citation from the building inspector.**

## Where do I apply for sign permits?

To apply for a permit, you need to present drawings and measurements of the proposed signs, photos of your business, and a permit fee to the Milwaukee Development Center, located on the 1st floor at 809 N. Broadway. The Development Center is open from 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday. Call **(414)286-8210** for information about how many and what types of signs you may install. Information about the permit process is available on the Development Center's web site, [www.mkedcd.org/build](http://www.mkedcd.org/build). Click "customer information and applications" and consult the article titled "Signs."



## How can I improve the signs on my business?

Following these guidelines will help you achieve signage that conveys a positive image of your business.

1. Many buildings were designed with sign bands. These are areas above the front door with space for signage. If your building has a sign band, install your sign in the band rather than at some other spot.
2. If you want signage on a building awning, choose an unlighted cloth style, rather than a lighted plastic model. You'll be allowed to devote a larger portion of the awning to your message, and your building will have a more distinctive look than would be achieved with a "pre-fab" plastic awning.
3. If the windows of your business have been blocked in or painted over, open them up! Remove the paint! Install clear glass that allows your customers to see inside your business.
4. Avoid painting sign information directly on the wall. Painted wall signs are vulnerable to graffiti, and they're hard to maintain.
5. If you've got a broken sign at your business, repair or remove it. Broken signs are illegal, and they send a negative message about your business and your neighborhood.