

Outdoor Billboards

Yes, you are probably saying to yourself, “I know what billboards look like and I’m sure they will not give me any free space, that’s how the outdoor billboard companies make their living.”

Let’s change your way of thinking to, “I’ll read on and see if I can get an idea or two, then make up my mind about adding billboards to this year’s water safety campaign.”

First, you can obtain free billboard space if you try hard. Granted, not every billboard advertiser will provide you free space, but with the correct approach and attitude you may very well hear that melodious sound, “Sure, my company will be happy to put up some 30-sheeters to save lives on the lake. Where and when do you want them up?” The term “30-sheeter” is the nickname for billboard paper posters.

“How do I move from my chair to hearing that sweet ‘yes’ melody?” Here goes.

Grab the telephone directory’s yellow pages and check out outdoor billboards or outdoor advertising companies. Jot down the names, addresses and telephone numbers.

Next, with pen and paper in hand, hop into the Corps vehicle and drive. Do not make a special trip to accomplish this task, simply add this to your list of jobs to do when you are making your normal rounds. Here’s what you’re looking for:

1. Obtain names of billboard companies. They have a company nameplate in the middle of the bottom portion of each board.

2. Check the billboard to see:

- A. Is it empty?
- B. Is the 30-sheeter torn?
- C. Does it have an election message?
- D. Is the 30-sheeter donated?

- E. Does the billboard have an old, out-dated message?
- F. Does the 30-sheeter have Christmas greetings?
- G. Is the board lit or unlit?
- H. If there is another billboard next to it, what does the message say?
- I. Is the board in a good location or a poor one?

Let’s say you have completed your billboard survey all the way around the lake, and then some. Have you checked out the interstate highway billboards near the lake? You should. Did you check out every board, on every road leading to and from the lake?

Now you are ready to put this info into the computer or on a data sheet. Then, you will be “armed,” but not ready. Do you have the 30-sheeters in hand? If not, do you know who has them? Check before going any further, as someone else may have beaten you to the supply. Also, check to see how many different type 30-sheeters are available and if by chance there are some smaller posters like 12-sheeters or sixsheeters. Let’s say you have them in your storeroom.

Now are you ready to “attack?” No, not yet. Get your long list of billboards and prioritize them by company and where you want the water safety posters to go up. These talking points are extremely important to helping you convince the billboard company representative you really and truly want to save lives on the lake with the help of billboards. Here’s what your survey should show:

- A. Where the company’s empty billboards are located. Outdoor advertisers hate to leave boards empty. It shows the world they are not doing well. You will help THEM by filling the empty space.
- B. Where there are torn or ripped posters, needing attention, or maybe taken down?

Again, your water safety 30-sheeters might help THEM. No outdoor billboard company wants everyone to see they do not take care of the boards.

- ❑ C. Where the election boards are. If the election is over the outdoor billboard companies know they are dated and want to be current They do not mind leaving up the “winner boards,” but not the “loser boards.”
- ❑ D. Where the donated boards are located. Most outdoor companies donate so much space or so many boards to charities or good causes, like your water safety campaign. Have on your list all the donated boards to organizations like the American Cancer Society, American Red Cross, Drinking and Driving Coalition, and the Just Say No To Drugs. One way to tell if they are free boards is the small Ad Council symbol will be displayed somewhere on the have the Ad Council logo and neither will others.
- ❑ E. Where the old, outdated boards are. If a sign has been up three or four months and/or is outdated, list them. You never know when this tidbit of-information will help you get free billboards. A board with a date on it is a natural winner for you. For example, let’s say the University of Arkansas football team is playing Texas A&M on such-and-such a date. Once the game is over, the posters should be removed soon. Keep these locations handy, too.
- ❑ F. Where the holiday message boards are. Billboard companies put up many boards with Christmas, New Years, Valentine, Halloween and Thanksgiving messages. After the holiday they need to come down as soon as possible. An example is the Christmas liquor boards. The billboard folks want to have them removed in mid-January at least The Christmas gift giving season is over.
- ❑ G. Where are the lit and unlit boards located? You want to have your message seen as often as possible in the very best locations. A lit board will provide you 24-hours of visibility, whereas the unlit board is visible from dawn to dusk. The lit signs are more expensive, but you need to have this knowledge just in case you have the opportunity to choose

the signs.

- ❑ H. What’s on the next billboard alongside? This is important, because you surely don’t want a nude dancing tavern board next to your water safety message. Most 30-sheeters have excellent messages, but you want to be as professional as possible and this is one such way.
- ❑ I. Location of the boards you are attempting to obtain. All billboard companies have differently priced boards. The more they are seen the more the cost, naturally. Some companies will be happy to give you a sign or two in the Australian Outback or in the hills of Afghanistan where at least two people a year will see them. While they are okay, they more than likely are not the signs you want. You want the lit signs that are on the most traveled roads to state, try to obtain the ones at the off and on ramps, in all directions.

After all that work, you have a list of billboards you would like to have the water safety message appear on. Bring your smile and handshake to the first meeting. Before you leave the Corps’ vehicle, tell yourself “I’m going to have billboards before I crank up this engine again.” Be sold on yourself, first. You want to save lives and this company can help achieve that goal. It’s a noble cause.

Immediately look around the waiting/reception room and the approving person’s office. If the person has softball trophies and you are a softball buff, use that as an icebreaker, if the person was in the U.S. Army you have something else to open the conversation with, since you are a proud member of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Let’s say this person belongs to the same sorority or fraternity or civic or fraternal organization as you do, well then, you know how to start this meeting. This is a simply good, professional business manner.

Next, take a look at the photographs. If the person is holding a smallmouth bass, or standing beside a good-looking boat, today’s your lucky day. He or she will relate to the water.

You might show this person a recent news clipping were a person drowned, or there was a boating accident or boating fatality. Pause while they are reading. When the person looks up, be ready with what you are planning to do

to reduce the tragedies on the lake this season. Do not start with the billboard, talk about a few other items, but not many. Like the newly created festival, for example. Now -- here's what all the prior planning is for -- you need their help to save lives on the lake. You want them to get involved in the precious life-saving effort. If the person drops his or her head and starts shaking it from side to side (no) continue talking, you must not fail. Show them what type of 30-sheeters you have, maybe use a photograph of one already up in another state.

Now, give the person a chance to say something; yes or no. If it's yes, rejoice. If it's a no, do not give up, but use your survey listing to change his or her mind. Continue talking. Show them you are professional and honestly want to save lives. You never know which area of your survey might flip the "no" switch to "yes."

Next approach, "What's in it for me (the billboard company)?" Even if the person is saying "no," tell him or her you would like to take a photo of them out at the billboard site as the water safety poster is going up. Maybe get the local reporter to come out and "shoot" a photo of the "going up" 30-sheeter and you will bring them a copy. Maybe, tell the person you plan to send it to the District newspaper and hand them a copy of the latest edition.

If you have a radio or television show, tell the person you will highlight it as part of the upcoming water safety campaign. Explain to the billboard rep you will not tell the viewers or listeners to buy space from the billboard company, but talk about the billboard like you will be talking about all the water safety projects and activities.

Let's say the person still will not budge on the "no" answer and tells you how much it is going to cost to even put up the signs. Answer that with, "I believe one of the local organizations might pay the installation fee. How much will the fee be for each billboard?" However, make sure the lake organization(s) will pick up the installation tab before making that commitment of funds. The installation costs vary. The closer to a large city the more the fee usually is.

By this time you should have the coveted answer. Now, you need to know when they go up so you can notify the local

newspaper reporter and take a photo yourself, maybe with a Corps employee looking at the sign with the billboard person discussing the water safety poster; when the signs are going to be; how many signs are you going to get; how long will they stay up (hopefully all summer -- from Memorial Day through Labor Day). Jot down this information and read it back to him or her to make sure the schedule is correct.

There is a possibility the answer still will be "no." Smile and leave. As you know, there are other billboard companies that will help.

What if your lake is authorized to buy billboards? When you are working with the sales person have your list ready and explain you would like to get as many donated as possible. You never know, each company is different. Some will give you one sign extra for every sign you buy. Ask about these "extras" during the negotiation period.

You are planning a special event on a certain day and want to add this to the bottom of the billboard poster. Can this be done? Yes, it sure can be done and these message strips are called "snipes." These cost extra, because they require the company to create, wax and install them. Keep in mind snipes date your sign.

Lastly, if one person says "no," remember too, there are others in the company who can and will say "yes." It may take a little more time ... just attack in another direction.

Incidentally, don't feel you must be limited just to the traditional uses of billboards. For example, one district built inexpensive billboards at their lock and dam sites, and installed the billboard graphics out of the catalog; all government property.

Now you are primed and ready for action. Good luck at the billboard company.