

## Extracts from *The Art & Science of Billboard Improvement*

*A comprehensive guide to the alteration of outdoor advertising*

### ● Billboard Liberation Front

The procedures outlined here are based on our 20 years' experience executing billboard improvements professionally, safely, and (touch 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.

#### 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. On other boards, the addition of a cartoon "thought bubble" or "speech balloon" for one of the characters might be all that is needed.

#### 2) Planning the improvement action

Though the sudden urge to just climb right up to 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.

#### 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?

#### 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 do not recommend this method unless you have some climbing and rigging experience. When hanging in one position your work area is very limited laterally – as is your ability to leave the scene quickly.

#### C) Security

Be sure to inspect your board both during the day and at night. Take

note of all activities in the area. Check your escape routes prior to the action.

During the action, if you are spotted by passers-by, it may pay to have your ground crew approach them rather than just hoping they do not call the police. Do not let them associate you with a vehicle.



"Abort, retry, fail", one of a series of BLF improvements to dotcom adverts, November 2000. PHOTO: BLF

#### D) Illumination

Most boards are brightly lit by floodlights of some type. Most large boards' lights are shut off some time between 23:00 and 02:00 by a timer control somewhere on, or near, the board. Smaller boards are frequently controlled by photo-electric cells or conventional time clocks, 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 torch directly into the cell's "eye."

On larger boards time clocks can be found in the control panels at the base of the support structure and/or behind the board itself. Unless you are familiar with energised electrical circuitry and devices of this type we caution you to wait until the clock shuts itself off. Many of these boards run 220/240 volts and could fry you to a crisp.

#### 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.

#### 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 have access to commercial sign-printing equipment, you can go for industry-standard vinyl. If you have access to the facilities of a commercial printer you may be able to output your overlays on a large-format colour printer or plotter. The bigger your printer's output, the fewer pieces you will have to tile back together to create a finished overlay.

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 graphics software can perform this function automatically, by selecting the "Tiling" option from the print menu.

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.

#### B) Scale

If you are changing only a small area you can probably take measurements or tracings directly off the board. If you intend to create large overlays, you should plan on more elaborate preparation. If possible photograph the board head on and make a tracing from a large print of the photo. Using measurements you have taken from the board, you can create a scale drawing of your intended alteration.

#### C) Colour matching

There are two basic ways to match the colours of the lettering or image area:

- On painted or paper boards you can usually carve a small 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 colours 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 colours can be matched precisely, professional-looking graphical elements can be added to your text message, and scale and spacing become much easier to calculate. Many graphics packages are suitable for producing overlays.

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. Start in one corner, adhering the first tile with spray adhesive to the backing material. Trim off unprinted margin space as required and laying the tiles down one at a time, making sure all the edges are well secured. Reinforce the edges with clear packing tape. Consider weatherproofing your overlay with a coat of clear lacquer.

### F) Tiling with a photocopier

You can duplicate the procedure described above using a photocopier'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. Cut the original into pieces along the pencilled 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 colour with lacquer paints or permanent markers.

### 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 cutout 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



The BLF improve Apple's "think different" campaign, April 1998.

PHOTO: JACK NAPIER, BLF

1"x4" (2.5 x 10cm) 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 be important if you are apprehended and the authorities and owners try to assess property damage. Application of rubber cement on large overlays is tricky. You need to evenly coat both the back 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.

If you have a canvas or paper

overlay, you can either tie the four corners and middle (top and bottom) very securely, or, if you can reach the face of the board, attach the panel by screwing the 1"x4" (2.5 x 10cm) boards to the billboard. A good battery powered drill is needed for this. We recommend hex-head sheet metal screws.

**Note:** The BLF, now in its 25th year, is an independent prankster organisation with no political affiliations or agenda whatsoever. Their website is at <http://www.billboardliberation.com> where you can find the whole of this guide.

**These extracts** from *The Art & Science of Billboard Improvement* were compiled by Amy Hall.

© Copyright 1990, 1999 by Billboard Liberation Front. Reprint permission granted to non-profit, anti-authoritarian websites and periodicals. Commercial websites and publishers may not reproduce this manual or any portion of it except for review purposes.

### Other billboard actions



Recently improved US navy billboard in Duluth, USA.

PHOTO: MALI AND LAURIE

One of the "liberators" writes... "This was our first billboard alteration and our first covert political action; our previous acts of civil disobedience have been the sort where we have taken full ownership of our actions. Part of me is still uncomfortable about sneaking around in order to make this statement.

"The billboard is very near the ground and its meaning very easily twisted. The blank eyes leave it open to the viewer to interpret what exactly the 'forever change' is, but it certainly doesn't look desirable! The paint over the eyes was scratched off after a few days. If we get a chance, I would like to alter it again."

For more examples, see <http://www.subvertise.org>, an online gallery of radical art by various groups. Or visit the more glossy Adbusters <http://www.adbusters.org>

[www.subvertise.org](http://www.subvertise.org)

S  
I  
O  
T  
S