



So, What is the ADA? *By Mike Santos*

Understanding the codes and looking into what sign companies need to know.

Since the early 1990s, the sign industry has been profoundly affected by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). While there have been many articles and seminars that touch on ADA regulations, many fall short in clarifying how the process works so that the average sign fabricator or designer can understand how to comply with the ADA. This article will review the different guidelines and laws governing the ADA and clear up many of the misconceptions about the codes surrounding ADA signage.

Americans with Disabilities Act
 The Americans with Disabilities Act was signed into law in July 1990 by former President George H.W. Bush; in July 1991 the

ADA legislation and supporting guidelines were published in the Department of Justice Federal Register. The ADA protects the civil rights of people with disabilities in employment and access to good and services. The ADA is broken into sections (Title II, Title III) and enforced by the Department of Justice (DOJ) and the Department of Transportation (DOT).

Title III of the ADA applies to places of public accommodation and commercial facility open to public access and is enforced by the DOJ. The most prevalent area of signage affected under Title III is room identification and wayfinding.

There are two groups of people the ADA focuses on relating to signage: the blind and the visually impaired. The functionally blind

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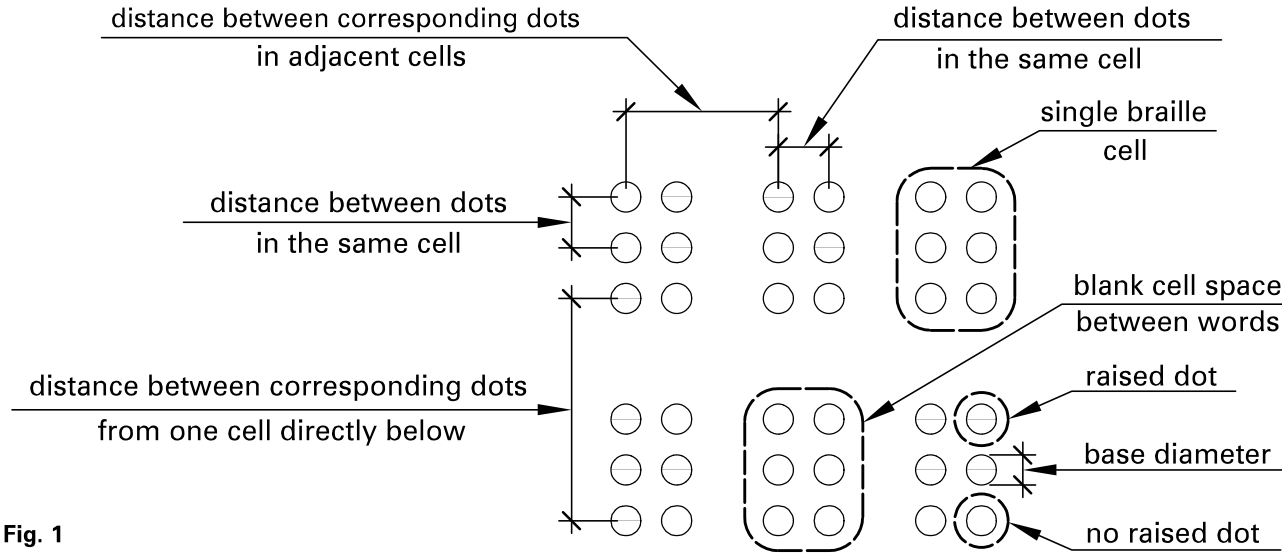


Fig. 1

IMAGE COURTESY OF U.S. ACCESS BOARD

make up 2 to 3 percent of the population and cannot see signs, interior changes, color, or type. Visually impaired individuals make up at least 25 percent of the population and can distinguish type and color but with an increased level of difficulty, thus requiring different means of accessibility.

Under the ADA, any person may file a federal lawsuit—either for individual discrimination or as a class action—and any person may request the DOJ to investigate and act upon an ADA discrimination claim. The Attorney General may also file a civil action suit in cases of general public importance.

Although the ADA covers all public facilities, the court can order any facility ADA-accessible. The court can also award monetary damages of up to \$55,000 for the first ADA violation and up to \$110,000 for each subsequent violation, emphasizing the importance of understanding how to comply with ADA laws.

ADA Accessibility Guideline

The United States Access Board is charged with developing the technical specification on facility accessibility (or ADAAG). These guidelines serve as the baseline for standards used to enforce the ADA by the DOJ and DOT. (*Note:* ADAAG derives from the earlier Uniform Federal Accessibility Standards.)

The original DOJ-issued 1991 ADAAG is still being enforced on the federal level. There have only been a couple of changes to the original ADAAG that included detectable warnings in ADAAG 4.29 and revisions for ATM specification in ADAAG 4.34. The Board has issued supplements to the ADAAG, but they are not yet part of the standard and are not enforceable at this time.

In July 2004, the Access Board published new design guidelines in the 2004 ADAAG, which resulted in guidelines “more consistent with model building codes, such as the

International Building Code (IBC), and industry standards.” Although these guidelines have not been adopted on the federal level, they have been adopted by several states across the country.

ICC/ANSI A117.1

The ICC/ANSI A117.1 primarily provides the basis of the accessibility sections of the IBC and is the basis for the Federal ADAAG published by the Access Board. The A117.1 Standard is available for adoption by local and state governments and jurisdictions internationally. The ANSI A117.1-2003 Standard was approved on November 26, 2003 and was used to develop the 2004 ADAAG from the U.S. Access Board. The committee is currently in the process of concluding the 2008 cycle (which may be seen in a future version of the ADAAG).

The A117.1 Committee consists of several trade organizations, design associations, disability advo-

cacy organizations, and other experts. The International Sign Association (ISA) and the Society for Environmental Graphic Design (SEGD) have a voting seat on the committee. Both groups advocate for the interests of the signage industry to ensure that the changes made on this level meet the realistic capabilities of the industry, while providing the best accessibility possible for individuals with disabilities.

States and the ADA

The DOJ has jurisdiction over all state and local government facilities. The DOJ is currently enforcing the original ADAAG and has not yet issued their Rule of Enforcement for the 2004 ADAAG. While all projects are subject to the Federal ADA, many states have incorporated the newer accessibility language in their building code or, in the case of California, have their own state regulations. A state can modify its building codes as long as they get DOJ approval (see list at www.signshop.com).

Enforcement of state codes is done by local and state building inspectors (who interpret the codes and guidelines). If there is any conflict between Federal Law and local or state building code, consulting with your local official to get his or her interpretation is highly recommended. In truth, there are only a few key differences in the codes that have an effect on signage; however these differences are important to know when designing, fabricating, and/or installing signage.

California Codes

As noted, states can modify their respective building codes. Title 24 of the California Code of Regulations—known as the California Building Standard Code or simply “Title 24”—contains the regulations that govern the construction of buildings in California. Title 24 has a few important dif-

ferences related to permanent room identification signage. The first deals with Grade II Braille. Grade II Braille incorporates the use of 189 contractions and short-form words and is now the standard Braille used in most applications across the states. Title 24 (which uses Grade II Braille) requires in section 1117B.5.6 that the spacing of the individual Braille cells be further apart than what is required under the original ADA (Figure 1).

The second difference in Title 24 relating to Braille is the placement of Braille on the sign. All codes require Braille to be a minimum of 3/8-inch from tactile characters and raised boards. Title 24 in section 1117B.5.5 however places a maximum distance of 1/2-inch from the raised characters.

The third point of interest is the mounting of permanent identifica-

tion signs. Under Title 24, they are required to be mounted on the wall adjacent to the latch side of the door or on the nearest adjacent wall in the case where there’s no wall space on the latch side (including double leaf doors). These signs also need to be mounted sixty inches above the finished floor to the center of the line of the sign.

Finally it is required that all accessible toilet and bathing facilities have the “International Symbol of Accessibility” mounted on the door leading into the facility. The men’s sanitary facilities are required to be identified by an equilateral triangle 1/4-inch-thick with edges 12 inches long and a vertex pointing upward. The women’s sanitary facilities are required to be identified by a circle 1/4-inch-thick and 12 inches in diameter, while a unisex sanitary facility is required

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to be identified by a circle 1/4-inch-thick and 12 inches in diameter with a 1/4-inch-thick triangle superimposed on the circle and within the 12-inch diameter.

2004 ADAAG

The 2004 ADDAG has incorporated a few updates that differ from the original (as well as Title 24). Many of the changes include things like using ratios related to character size and stroke width. There are however a few important changes to note.

The mounting height of permanent identification signs has changed. Section 703.4.1 states: "Tactile characters on signs shall be located 48 inches (1220 mm) minimum above the finish floor or ground surface, measured from the baseline of the lowest tactile character, and 60 inches (1525 mm)

maximum above the finish floor or ground surface, measured from the baseline of the highest tactile character." (*Note:* Both Title 24 and the original ADAAG require a 60-inch mounting height.)

The 2004 ADAAG has included a new provision for visual characters (the biggest change being the minimum 5/8-inch cap height). This new provision addresses the needs of the blind and the needs of the visually disabled while increasing the level of design in which a sign can be created:

703.5 Visual Characters. Visual characters shall comply with 703.5. *Exception:* Where visual characters comply with 703.2 and are accompanied by Braille complying with 703.3, they shall not be required to comply from 703.5.2 to 703.5.9.

703.5.1 Finish and Contrast. Characters and their background

shall have a non-glare finish. Characters shall contrast with their background with either light characters on a dark background or dark characters on a light background.

703.5.2 Case. Characters shall be uppercase or lowercase or a combination of both.

703.5.3 Style. Characters shall be conventional in form. Characters shall not be italic, oblique, script, highly decorative, or of other unusual forms.

703.5.4 Character Proportions. Characters shall be selected from fonts where the width of the uppercase letter "O" is 55 percent minimum and 110 percent maximum of the height of the uppercase letter "I."

The Future

The ANSI A117.1-2008 standard should be published sometime this year. The new standard has included variable message signs (VMS), which are electronic or dynamic display featuring a message that changes or scrolls and is used as a sign. The new standard primarily focuses on character height and spacing, stroke ratio, and other areas similar to tactile and Braille signage. As noted throughout this article, once the A117.1-2008 Standard is published, the changes identified to VMS will not be enforceable until adopted by a governing agency.

In summary, getting a solid grasp on ADA codes can be daunting. The challenge is to understand how the process works and to evaluate your individual position by asking one simple question: What state is the project I'm working on going to be installed? The answer to this question—along with the knowledge of the codes—will lead you to your answer. Happy ADA hunting! ☒

Mike Santos is director of sales and product development at Nova Polymers (www.novapolymers.com).

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