

ADA Compliancy

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In 1991 the Americans with Disabilities Act was passed into law. This had a profound affect on the sign industry requiring permanent identification signs to have Braille and tactile characters. This left many in the sign industry scrambling around trying to find new ways and methods to design and fabricate signage that was compliant with the new ADA laws.

Since 1991 the industry has overcome these initial obstacles. There is however, still a great deal of misunderstanding and confusion when it comes to the governing laws and guidelines on both the Federal and local levels. The amended guidelines in the Signage section have grown from approximately two pages to nearly eight pages since the original ADA was written, thus contributing to this confusion.

This is particularly relevant as it relates to signs that require Braille. The common issues that frequently surface are related to “rounded or domed” Braille, color contrast and the cell spacing of Braille dots.

“Rounded or Domed” Braille

The questions surrounding “rounded or domed” Braille seem to be the most common among people the industry. The common misconception is that this wording is a “new” change in the guidelines that will limit the materials allowed to fabricate compliant signage.

In chapter 7 of the ADA Accessibility Guideline, section 703.1 states that “Braille dots shall have a domed or rounded shape and shall comply with Table 703.3.1.” It goes on to give guidelines for Braille cell spacing, dot diameter, tactile letter requirement and so on.

The description requiring Braille to be “rounded or domed” was written to allow for the widest variety of fabrication methods and to encourage participation and willing compliance. “Rounded or domed” refers to the result of whatever means of manufacturing you choose.

Most of the concern regarding Braille dates back to the early days before the industry understood how to make photopolymer etched Braille dots. It was quickly discovered that the Braille translation software that was being used for Raster Braille did not work

for photopolymer. This error was corrected with software modifications and improved fabrication techniques.

Today, ADA compliance is easily achieved using photopolymer by following the manufacturers processing guidelines*. With the combination of the technology used in the Braille translation software and the use of proper fabrication equipment and processing techniques, photopolymer signs comply with current the ADA and the new proposed guidelines.

There is nothing published that restricts the use of photopolymer or any other materials relating to ADA compliant signage. The ADA law and ADA Accessibility Guideline set minimum requirements that all signage must meet.

ADA Guidelines

It is difficult and confusing trying to keep up with the proposed guideline changes and the agencies that govern them. It is important to know how this system works as there is simply a good deal of misleading information available on the subject.

The Access Board develops guidelines that support the Federal Civil Rights Laws guaranteeing accessibility for people with disabilities to buildings and facilities.

The Access Board publishes Final Rules on the guideline in the Federal Register. These Rules are minimum guidelines that are not enforceable until the Department of Justice issues its rule of enforcement. The DOJ enforces ADA Standards related to private sector facilities and state and local government facilities.

In July 2004, the Access Board approved the latest revision to the guidelines. It should be noted that these guidelines issued by the Access Board are not enforceable until they have been adopted by the specific Federal agencies that maintain them. To date the Department of Justice has not released any updates to the original ADA Standard issued in 1991. For more information on the Access Board, ADAAG and the DOJ visit their websites at www.access-board.com or www.usdoj.gov.

It should also be noted that the newer ANSI Standards include many of the changes in the new ADA and have already been made part of the building code in many states. Follow this link on the Access Board's website for specific information on state accessibility codes, including contacts at the local level: www.access-board.gov/links/statecodes.htm

As of today, there is nothing published that restricts the use of any material or fabrication methods for making ADA compliant signage, including photopolymer. The guidelines that are written are designed around making buildings and facilities

accessible for people with disabilities. There is no intent on restricting any materials or methods but rather to set universal standards with minimum requirements.

The International Sign Association and the Society for Environmental Graphic Designers both are actively involved with the current ADA and the updates to the current guidelines. Both organizations currently have a seat on the ANSI A117.1 Committee to represent the interests of the sign industry as a whole. The SEGD has published an ADA White Paper which is a great source of information regarding ADA and how it applies to the sign industry.

*For more information on photopolymer materials and manufacturing procedures follow the links the manufactures websites:

Nova Polymers, Inc. - www.novapolymers.com

Matthews Paint Company - www.ppg.com

Duxbury Braille Translation Software - www.duxburysystems.com

Other Helpful Links:

Access Board - www.access-board.com

ADA Home Page – www.ada.gov

International Sign Association - www.signs.org

Society of Environmental Graphic Designers - www.segd.org

ICC/ANSI A117.1 – www.iccsafe.org/cs/standards/a117