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Signage for Your Practice

Negotiating the best options to draw attention

By Carrie Rossenfeld

Signage may not be your top priority when reviewing a medical lease, but it is an important element in how your practice is perceived. Signage is usually the first thing people see when approaching your office, so you want it to appropriately represent who you are and what your practice offers, as well as lead people to your door. Nailing down your signage specifications in your lease will assure that these needs are met.

There are generally four types of signage for medical offices, according to Richard Berney and Matthew Weinstein, members of Northeast-based law firm Cozen O'Connor:

1. Pylon or monument.

Both are located near the street to direct people to you and advertise that you're there. Pylon signage consists of a pylon pole topped by a box, whereas a monument sign resembles a tombstone—flush with the ground and rising up from there.

2. On the building.

Depending on the type of building, this is usually in the form of a plaque hanging off the side of the building that states which practices are inside.

3. In the lobby of a medical building.

This type of signage is often in the form of a directory board next to an elevator or, in lobbies with receptionists, in a brightly lit area in the lobby's center. Listings are usually in alphabetical order by doctor and/or practices.

4. On your door or in your suite.

Here's where you can most freely incorporate your practice's design or logo for brand recognition.

"I look at signage as three major buckets: internal, building and directional," says Marty Rosenberg, co-founder and principal of EthosPartners, a healthcare management and consulting firm in Charlotte, N.C. The latter refers to signage that specifically guides patients to the practice's building and/or suite.

Why is signage important?

"Signage provides the medical tenant with exposure to passing traffic—to people who may not be aware of the existence of the medical office," says Jeremy Behar, president of Cirrus Consulting Group in Toronto. It also provides better visibility for elderly and infirm patients. The additional exposure helps build brand recognition, which can increase your patient base. Therefore, signage is good for growing the business, and also for keeping current patients happy. For these reasons, physicians with signage generally have an advantage over those who don't.

Signage rules differ for each type of building, notes Robert Held, president and CEO of Held Properties, which owns and manages large medical office buildings in the Los Angeles area, including the Medical Center of Santa Monica.

Held Properties, for example, does not allow any signage on or in front of its buildings, or on windows and doors unless it approves the signage. Directories may only list the practice name, doctors' names and one line of a specialty—and that's only if space allows. No logos or branding are allowed anywhere but inside the practice's suite.

"It's important for the building owner to maintain a consistent look," says Held, adding that the consistency provides an element of professionalism.

Most landlords will agree that signage is important and has its purpose, but they won't necessarily okay any signage request made by a tenant or potential tenant at the risk of the property looking sloppy or tacky. As a rule, building owners and their approaches to signage vary wildly, so it's smart to find out what your landlord's signage policy is—in writing, if possible—before you sign on the dotted line.

In some parts of the country, such as suburban New Jersey, local lawmakers have become much more stringent about the type of signage allowed on medical buildings that is visible from the road, according to Judith Tell Feldman, vice president and director of the healthcare division of real estate firm Newmark Associates in Whippany, N.J. "They're trying to avoid that shopping-center look, which can be visually intrusive," she says.

In general, retail-based practices use signage more for advertising purposes and brand creation, while destination practices located in traditional medical-office buildings use signage more for directional purposes. "[Medical-office building] practices may just have their name on a sign rather than their practice's logo," says Rosenberg.



Building owners approach signage in various ways. Medical building owner Held Properties, for example, prefers consistency with interior signage and does not allow logos or branding anywhere but inside the practice's suite.

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"Retail-based medical offices will try to negotiate, not only their name but also their logo."

While retail signage may include storefront signs above the front entrance and pylons with panels, office-building signage might be on the exterior of a building and on monument panels, according to Berney and Weinstein.

If you are in a retail center, you may pay a rent premium for additional exposure, says Behar. Therefore, pylon signage rights should be free of rental charge and available to you throughout the term and any extension time.

Tips for negotiating signage

Signage is one of the most highly negotiated elements of the lease, so you shouldn't be shy about asking for the moon. Keep in mind the following elements when going through the negotiation process.

- Negotiate for any type of signage that's permitted by local and state law, say Berney and Weinstein. If the landlord must approve all changes (as doctors join the practice, for example), give him a deadline to prevent unnecessary delays.
- State that your landlord is not allowed to block your signage. This is a major issue in big cities such as New York, where construction and scaffolding are common, say Berney and Weinstein. If this affects your practice, ask for a scaffolding provision that allows for temporary signage on the scaffolding.
- Ask for a clause that allows signage on the building if you are a preeminent tenant. Feldman says this is crucial in locations where building signage is restricted. Check to see if your building has a grandfather clause that will allow monument signage with individual tenants listed; if so, the lease should state that your name will be on it.
- Be as specific as possible about signage size, any limitations and exact placement, and even include an artist's rendering of the signage if you can, Rosenberg comments. You want your signage to be as visible and clear as possible so that it's being used to its fullest potential. A rendering will make it clear to your landlord what you have in mind.
- Ask for first right of refusal on upgrades to premium signage that becomes available, if you want to pay for it, says Rosenberg.
- State that if there are changes in ownership, the landlord may not review salient parts of the lease, including signage. Also, all signage requirement changes should require mutual consent, says Rosenberg.

Remember that signage is not cookie cut, but rather a "soft" element of leases and a place where smart tenants can really get some perks—especially in a buyer's market. Also, business-savvy landlords are willing to grant medical-office tenants reasonable signage requests because they want to see these tenants succeed.

"If a landlord does have issues with signage, they're being shortsighted," says Donna F. Jarmusz, senior vice president at Alter+Care, a healthcare real estate company in Skokie, Ill. "You want to keep that tenant happy so they remain there as a long-term tenant."

The best way to get what you want when negotiating signage issues is to emphasize what you bring to the table as a tenant and how it will help the landlord and other tenants succeed.

"You want to leverage the positive aspects that you're bringing, whether it's your size or the foot traffic you're generating," says Dave Narey, vice president and general manager of Jones Lang LaSalle in Arlington Heights, Ill. "If you're creating synergy and increasing the internal referral system within the building, then that's always a plus."

If another tenant has the signage position you want, find out if the sign can be altered, Narey suggests. Or try negotiating directly with that tenant, offering him something he may want. "With some of the negotiating, you may have to do your own internal political work to make it happen," he says. "Sometimes the landlord can't fulfill your request."

If getting your name in a good position on an existing sign isn't possible, consider negotiating for your landlord's support in adding a pylon or monument. This may require applying for the sign before your local village or municipality government. Keep in mind, too, that if the local laws are getting in your way, you don't necessarily have to accept what they say; you can work to get them changed.

"If zoning doesn't currently allow signage, tenants might say to the landlord, 'If we're willing to go before the planning board and get approval, would you be willing to provide signage as zoning is allowed?'" says Feldman. "It's an opportunity to really look at signage and talk to the landlord. For the landlord, it also makes sense. It's not just medical—signage is an important factor for any business."

Carrie Rossenfeld is a California-based writer.

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