



# Times Square: A Compass for Sign Growth

High-definition LEDs and grand-format graphics mark this year's Times Square updates.

Louis M. Brill

Photo credit: Tom McCavera

**N**YC never sleeps, and Times Square's signs never stop changing. New sign projects pop up daily as leases expire and new clients move in with billboard change-outs and neon-to-LED replacements. Older LED displays become higher-resolution models.

The "Crossroads of America" is beginning its second century as the outdoor advertising capital of the world. Barry Winston of Winston & Co. (Teaneck, NJ) has probably spearheaded project management of more Times Square signs over the last several decades than most of his predecessors. In 2007, he was involved with Budweiser, Chevrolet, M&M's® and Empire News sign projects, to name a few.

Winston noted Times Square's original neon look has all but disappeared.

Dave Ramirez, Daktronic's New York project-development executive, said the new Daktronics (Brookings, SD) video signage completely contrasts with the old Times Square. The iconic neon signs – the former Coca-Cola, Fuji, Cannon and Samsung signs – have disappeared.

Winston noted, "Even the glowing and blinking neon spectacles still had a 'static presence,' with a simple, sign branding. Now, we're in the digital age, with LED video signage, where sign messages are closer in look and feel to television commercials."

In this report, *ST* presents midtown Manhattan's latest spectacles, including Chevrolet (returning), M&M's (new), Budweiser (second generation), Ripley's Believe It Or Not (new), NBC (second generation) and other Times Square sign projects.

## **Chevrolet**

One Times Square's popular signs, such as the steaming Nissin Cup O' Noodles and the tilting Budweiser bottle, have given way to new, digital displays. The location, which hosted the first electric zipper in 1928 and has continued the New Year's Eve Time Ball ritual ongoing for 75 years, has been one of NYC's most photographed buildings.



Photo credit: Multimedia LED



**Chevrolet's Multimedia LED eVidia display has four different clock faces. Each face changes every 15 minutes.**

Cup O' Noodles, which had hung since 1996, has been replaced by the Chevrolet spectacular. Landmark Signs (NYC) dismantled the cup and is installing the huge, new Chevrolet spectacular in two phases.

The spectacular incorporates an LED display, a vinyl panel and several, Phase II surprises that can only be discussed when that section goes "live." The new design, created by Campbell-Ewald, mimics a giant Glockenspiel clock, complete with side chains (fabricated as vinyl faces). Campbell-Ewald has been Chevrolet's advertising agency for 95 years.

The giant Chevrolet clock is a clever sign strategy. "Times Square has hundreds and hundreds of signs, but no large, easily viewable clock," Winston said.

The clock face, a high-resolution LED display provided by Multimedia LED (Rancho Cordova, CA), is designed with the eVidia display format. A 2-ft. aluminum bezel hides the eVidia LED modules' stepped edges; a 12mm pitch (384 x 384 pixels) encircles the clock face's

15-ft.-viewable diameter.

The four, different clock faces, which switch out every 15 minutes, prevent LED degradation inherent if the LED sign always "locked" onto one clock face. Steve Bumstead of Bellevue, WA-based Pixel Fire Productions, designed and operates the clock faces.

The spectacular, fabricated in Fall 2006, was installed during the winter holidays, when a moratorium on cranes and street closures begins roughly a week before Thanksgiving, when the "official" holiday-shopping period begins.

Frank Barnes, Multimedia's executive sales manager, said Multimedia's engineers, Matt Sanders and Rick Van Rensselaer, giped the moratorium with manufacturing. "Because the Chevrolet LED components couldn't be craned into position on the front of the building, all the related LED cabinet components were designed and built to fit into the building's freight elevator and then moved out the building windows for final installation," Barnes explained.

Landmark Signs installed the Chevrolet sign and cabinets, using the building davits, before they bolted/welded them in place.

Chevrolet's Phase I finished in time for the 2006 New Year's Eve celebration, when it began a countdown to midnight as a snow globe. At midnight, it became a clock face.

Winston expects Phase II will be ready by summer's end.

### **Budweiser**

Also on One Times Square, Anheuser-Busch installed a newer, high-definition LED video spectacular. The original Daktronics LED display (Bud 1), installed in 1996, included a large-scale, dimensional, beer bottle that mechanically tilted against a background of hundreds of colored-plastic, LED-illuminated, equilateral triangles. A small Panasonic LED videoscreen graced the side of the sign face.

Landmark removed everything to prepare for Budweiser's new video spectacular (Bud 2), which Daktronics also manufactured. This display, which hugs One Times Square, measures 70 x 40 ft. and displays a 20mm pitch, with a 1,072 x 608-pixel resolution. The vertical sides are 4.5 x 70 ft. (64 x 1,072 pixels). An LED edge surrounds the main-face perimeter on three sides (left, right and bottom) and displays Budweiser branding.

Ramirez noted Bud 2 impressively anchors Times Square's entire

**The 70 x 40-ft. Budweiser Daktronics Prostar LED video display now dominates the entire south side of Times Square.**

south side with its screen size and high-resolution image clarity. Spark Agency (St. Louis) created B 2's sign content, and Daktronics' Keyframe division manages it.

### **Minskoff Theatre on Broadway**

The Minskoff Theatre, at Broadway and 45th, inherited a new show for its stage and a new sign package – a marquee, a blade sign and a block-wide window sign – to dress up its lobby and street-side display. The show, Disney's *Lion King*, had already been a smash at the New Amsterdam, also on Broadway. Before *Lion King* moved across Times Square into its new venue, the Minskoff's existing blade/marquee paled compared to the hit show's stature.

Spectrum Signs (Farmingdale, NY), a full-service sign company, took charge of giving *Lion King* a new sign glow. Tom Morra, director of the company's NYC projects, described the project's components:

- The blade sign comprises a double-sided, flexible-face sign cabinet, with a translucent vinyl signface, backlit with fluorescent lighting. The sign cabinet's custom-fabricated, anodized aluminum cladding sports edged, decorative, crown-molding elements that outline its vertical presence.
- The marquee, fabricated with anodized, dark-bronze aluminum, has a three-sided sign face that measures 62 x 9 ft.; the marquee side, which faces Broadway, spans two-thirds (40 ft.) of the length to create maximum sign exposure. Translucent vinyl, with backlit fluorescent lighting, illuminates the faces. Above the marquee, closed-faced, aluminum, channel letters spell out the theater's name.
- The light-cabinet sign package, on the building's Broadway side, totals more than 2,700 sq. ft., which makes it reportedly the largest in Times



Photo credit: Daktronics

Square. The east-building elevation comprises 45, 10 x 15-ft., glass-window bays that face Broadway. In the second-floor lobby, a series of double-faced, interior-lit sign cabinets were placed in 18 window bays, and two other cabinets were mounted into the window bays that face north and south. Each aluminum, double-faced sign cabinet has a translucent-vinyl-placement system, internally lit with 8-ft. fluorescent lamps.

The light cabinet's design allows full access from the rear (the lobby side) to service front and rear graphics, interior lamps and ballasts, and to clean cabinets and windows. A custom retainer/extrusion, graphic-support system aids the lightbox graphics' insertion and removal.

The exterior Broadway sign face displayed the familiar *Lion King* graphics. Inside, a beautiful, custom graphic was designed by Mariuca Brancoveanu. All signage graphics

were printed on translucent, roll-fed, flexible-face vinyl with a specially adapted VUTEk printer.

Spectrum, which usually installs its own sign packages, had scheduled myriad other sign projects, so it contracted Service Sign Erectors (NYC) for assistance.

Each light cabinet attached to the window bay by connecting to a matching, vertical, building column positioned between each window bay. To reach the columns, Spectrum workers cut into the building's interior aluminum cladding and exposed the vertical-column steel. Each cabinet was installed against welded connection plates on each vertical column.

Such positioning required an elaborate, custom-designed scaffold with a unique rigging system to lift each cabinet to a bay, where it was secured. After each cabinet was installed and tested, the vinyl sign faces were installed.



(Above) Double-faced, aluminum, internally lit sign cabinets advertise the show with translucent-vinyl graphics from the theatre's second-floor lobby.

(Left) The refurbished Minskoff Theatre incorporates a new blade and marquee sign package. The custom-fabricated, blade-sign cabinet features a double-sided, flexible-face, translucent vinyl face that's backlit with fluorescent lighting. The marquee's Broadway-facing side measures two-thirds as long as the rest of the marquee. Atop the marquee, a closed-face, internally illuminated, aluminum channel letter bears the theatre name.

**NBC**

NBC commissioned the Van Wagner outdoor company (headquartered in NYC) for a new, multi-faceted sign on the side of 5 Times Square (the Ernst & Young Building). Irwin Sheftel, VP of creative development, said the 38-story office tower now hosts a 42 x 75-ft. (10-story) spectacular, a fanciful flourish of stainless steel, vinyl and LEDs. Spectrum Signs assisted with the design and fabricated the sign.

The elaborate display was divided into five major components: the crown, the base sign structure, the upper sign cabinet, an LED Panasonic videoscreen (with surround) and the lower sign cabinet.

Shaaban Engineering provided structural analysis. Dr. Shaaban, the company's principal, described the NBC sign project as an "atypical" structural-steel-tube truss that supports a large, 90,000-lb., radial sign with a 10-ft. overhang. Van Wagner Sign Erectors fabricated and installed all supporting structural steel.

Spectrum's big challenge, said its president, Harvey Brooks, was rounding Ernst & Young's 10-story corner. To do this, Spectrum created a cantilevered, rounded curve and clamped the structural steel onto the building corner. This extended the NBC sign sightline to increase its pedestrian visibility

from Times Square's bowtie (where 7th Ave. crosses over Broadway) and the 42nd St. areas. (The NBC sign package replaces the Jack and the Beanstalk spectacular (see ST, *January 2004, page 66*), and its

installation process mimics the steps described in that article.)

The NBC sign package integrates several, different sign formats into a singular display. A steel background structure mounted on the



NBC's multi-faceted sign emerges as a spectacular steel and vinyl flourish and an LED videoscreen. The spectacular comprises the corporate-ID header, the base sign structure, the upper sign cabinet, an LED Panasonic videoscreen and a lower sign cabinet.

**Detail of Red Kong as a take-off on King Kong's Empire State Building's demise. Vinyl graphics on metal sections build up the image of Kong's climactic skyscraper moment. Neon outlines the bi-plane clutched in Kong's hand. An HID lamp below mimics a searchlight.**

building anchors the sign elements.

Dave O'Connell, Spectrum's project manager, described the sign package. At the top, LED-illuminated, reverse channel letters spell out NBC Universal. Directly below is a 17 x 37-ft. sign cabinet, backlit with 38, 400W, France HID fixtures. Below that, a full-color, LED Panasonic videoscreen appears as an upcoming Sharp Aquos television product. Underneath the videoscreen, another, identical sign cabinet promotes upcoming, NBC television shows.

### M&M's

M&M's, a long-established confectionary brand, has established a retail store at 1600 Broadway and incorporated enough iconic spectacles that even King Kong couldn't miss it.

The sign package includes two, large, full-color, LED videoscreens and a mechanically controlled blade sign filled with giant M&M's, of which two M&M's shells rotate. And finally, a giant light cabinet introduces Red Kong®.

D3 (Dynamic Digital Displays), NYC, fabricated the LED screens, and Landmark Signs installed them. One, 32 x 32-ft., 12mm-pitch, LED videoscreen sits on the corner of 48th St. and Broadway, and the other, 50 x 60-ft. LED cabinet was mounted on the corner of 48th St. and 7th Ave.

As a further, M&M's-brand enhancement, Chute Gerdeman Retail (Columbus, OH) designed a blade sign and a vinyl-graphic sign cabinet. Spectrum Signs fabricated and Service Sign Erectors installed both spectacles.

ST will cover the elaborate inte-



*Photo credit: Chute & Gerdeman*

rior and exterior signage detail that was lavished upon this store in the October issue, but here's a brief overview of the store's exterior signage.

The Spectrum-fabricated blade sign comprises five of the most popular M&M's colors. Two M&M's characters rotate within it. All polycarbonate M&M's shells were back painted with individual, M&M's colors and mounted within the blade sign. The trademark M was formed from a white vinyl cutout and applied to each M&M's shell.

The second spectacular, a 33-ft. high x 15-ft.-wide sign cabinet, with a printed-graphic vinyl face,

introduces Red Kong, a whimsical takeoff on King Kong's Empire State Building demise. The image depicts a gigantic, Red M&M climbing up the building, clutching a bi-plane in one hand and desperately hanging on with the other.

Steve Boreman, senior designer at Chute Gerdeman, noted, in a wink to NYC, "We thought a humorous reference to a great NYC myth would be a perfect acknowledgement for the store's presence in Times Square."

Spectrum fabricated the sign cabinet as a series of modular aluminum, sheetmetal sections that outline a dimensional Empire State



Reminiscent of an old-time circus wagon, Ripley's Believe It or Not! Odditorium's three-sided marquee incorporates flashing lights, carved moldings, mechanically rotating signs, neon embellishments and D3's (NYC) LED screens.

marquee surfaces.

Embedded within each marquee panel is a D3 full-color, LED video display. The main, 120 x 400-pixel, 10mm-pitch LED screen measures 45 x 120 in. The two, 60 x 45-in., 200 x 160-pixel side screens promote the enormous collection of Ripley oddities.

Having noted Times Square's never-ending traffic, Spectrum pre-assembled most sign components at its Farmingdale, NY shop. Finished sign components were then placed on a wide-load trailer and brought to 42nd St., where the final sign components were fitted together above the building's entrance.

The marquee pulls its various components into an integrated presence that acts as a carnie barker to call out to pedestrians, challenging them to "believe it or not."

#### A sign compass

As Times Square continues evolving, the influence and importance of its evocative signage can't be underestimated. As Times Square, and its signscape, grow in size, it becomes a compass for the rest of the sign community. Ultimately, it poses a chicken-and-egg puzzle: Does new business spawn more signage? Or does spectacular signage help businesses connect with their customers and their markets to bring more sales into their stores? It's a little of both. Times Square's successes are an open textbook for the sign community to learn from, and that's always a good sign. ■

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Building. A printed vinyl graphic applied to each section builds up to Kong's climatic skyscraper moment. Cove lighting enhances nighttime viewing. For added drama, one light scans the scene like a searchlight to highlight Kong's final adventure.

#### Ripley's Believe It or Not

With a gilded and glittering display bright enough to capture everyone's attention, Ripley's Believe It or Not Odditorium opened on 42nd St. (between 7th and 8th avenues). Reminiscent of an old-time circus wagon, the 16 x 35-ft., three-sided marquee houses a cornucopia of sign formats, including flashing lights, carved moldings, mechanically rotating signs, neon embellishments and LED screens, all melded into a spectacular of de-lightful viewing.

Neon outlines the exposed edges of the marquee crown, which is a decorative aluminum cornice. Directly below the crown, the marquee perimeter and sides are edged by fiberglass scroll work, created by Seal Fiberglass and rendered by Minds Eye Studios. A

carving of Mr. Ripley and Ripley oddities – a two-headed calf and "Geiger" are among them – is embedded within the top molding at the center of each marquee component. As a fanciful flourish, 23k goldleaf covers all the fiberglass molding, which, according to Spectrum's Harvey Brooks, "lends it a distinct, circus look."

Extensive incandescent and neon lighting serves as edge and facade lighting, Brooks said. Twinkling, 11W incandescent bulbs (5,324) cover the marquee, front and each side façade. Chasing lights run back and forth across the marquee edges. Ripley's cursive logo is mounted several times along the marquee, as open-faced, neon-lit, channel letters.

A three-sided, mechanically rotating sign component joins the corner edge of each marquee side. Each sign-face side includes an open-faced, neon-illuminated channel letter set that spells the trademark name. The Ripley's paint scheme combines bright red with a brilliant gold satin finish and completely covers all exposed

Photo credit: Spectrum Signs