



A comprehensive overview of channel letters that will empower you to select the best style and materials for the main identifier of your business.

# Channel Letters

*Demystified*

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## Channel Letters De-Mystified

Sign industry jargon can make things seem so mysterious. The mysterious term, "channel letters," doesn't quite offer up the riddle of a missing Amelia Earhart, or the location of Jimmy Hoffa's grave, but it's a mystery nonetheless. So let's take a moment to de-mystify channel letters.



### I. Channel Letters Defined

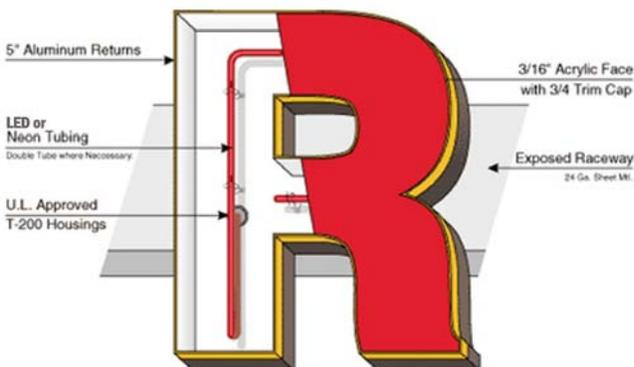
Channel letters are one of the most effective marketing and brand recognition commercial signage tools available. These custom signs are seen indoors and outdoors, at shopping malls and strip centers, and are considered by many to be the best way to identify your business location and "invite" people into your space.

In the category of "dimensional signs," channel letters are named for a 3-dimensional channel, commonly known as a "can", which is formed from fabricated sheet metal, most often aluminum. This channel has two functions.

1. It provides a place in which to house a light source, such as neon tubes or LED (light-emitting diode) modules.
2. It gives the sign a 3-dimensional look, bringing the letters out from the surface on which they are mounted.

### II. Anatomy of Channel Letters

Aluminum is rust free, so it is most often used to create the channels of a channel letter sign. It starts with a flat sheet of aluminum that is cut in various letter shapes to form the back of the "channel." The sides, or "returns," are made by bending strips of aluminum around the letter-shaped back. These "returns" are usually 3 to 6 inches wide and are secured in place by rivets or welds.



With the back and sides of each letter in place, a "can" is now formed, and this can is then painted and fitted with the chosen light sources. The next step is to fit the open face of the can with translucent plastic (except with "reverse lit" or "open face" signs, discussed below). This plastic is either acrylic or polycarbonate and once affixed, will become the illuminated face of the letter. The final step is to apply

a trim cap border to the edges in order to give a finished appearance and to provide a surface on which to attach the plastic face to the letter can.

### III. Neon versus LED

Neon has a long history as an excellent light source for channel letters. It allows for a wide spectrum of colors and emits light in 360 degrees. For this reason, it is a very attractive option for back lit signs and for "open face" signs, when no plastic face is attached and the neon is left exposed.

In more recent years, LED lighting has become a popular choice for a number of reasons:

1. It is less fragile than neon. Neon tubes are often broken during transit and installation.
2. LED is more environmentally friendly, containing none of the mercury found in neon.
3. It consumes as much as 50% less power than neon. Some municipalities are encouraging the use of LED lighting by allowing additional square footage in commercial signage using LED.
4. LED offers very good performance in cold weather, when neon has a tendency to dim.
5. LED modules are easier to service than neon

The Samsung LED modules, used by Apex Signs & Graphics, are rated for approximately 100,000 hours before beginning to dim. That translates to 11 years, or nearly 3 presidential terms, IF you leave the signage on 24 hours/day, 365 days/year.

### IV. Other Lighting Options

As noted above, there are some creative possibilities with regard to construction of the "can" that translate into very different ways the channel letters will look when lit at night.

1. Front Lit. This option uses a translucent face, lit by neon or LED from inside the can. Consequently, the letters glow bright in the dark of night.



2. Back Lit. The idea with back lit signs is to create negative space for the lettering. If the face is not translucent, but opaque, and the neon in the can is designed to illuminate the wall behind the sign instead of the letters themselves, the letters appear as darker shapes against a field of light, a very interesting look.



3. Open Face. By removing the translucent or opaque face of the letters from the can, the light source is exposed. This method may also involve the use of a clear or entirely transparent face.

Because of the light-emitting properties of neon, this is the preferred lighting for this type of sign.

As you can see, the complexity of choices makes it advisable to take advantage of expert assistance in choosing the right lighting for your sign. Not to make matters more complicated, but there are additional things to consider:

#### **V. Font Style**

Just as you choose a font style on your word processor to write letters, you'll need to choose a readable font style for your signage. If your branded communications rely heavily on scripted fonts and you want your signage to be the same, be aware that what looks readable on paper may not be as readable on an illuminated sign.

Choosing a block style font is a safer bet to ensure maximum readability. But, of course, if your brand requires a scripted font, it will be necessary to make sure all other elements are optimal (colors, lighting options, letter size, background, etc.) for good readability. Again, it is very important to take advantage of expert assistance in making these decisions.

#### **VI. Color Selection**

Acrylic is pigmented with an array of colors. Some of those colors are a bit stingy in letting light through. The use of dark green or darker blue acrylic will often result in channel letters that are too dim. The solution is to use a white acrylic covered with a colored translucent vinyl film. This method allows you to stay with your color scheme while maintaining readability.

#### **VII. Letter Height**

If you've ever been on a highway in front of a strip mall and struggled to read the stores' signage, you'll recognize the need to implement industry standards for letter heights. What is the range of distances from which your customers will see your signs? Determine these distances, and then review the chart below:

| Letter Height<br>(in inches) | Maximum<br>Readable Distance<br>(in Feet) | Distance for<br>Maximum Impact<br>(in Feet) |
|------------------------------|---|---|
| 2"                           | 50'                                       | 20'   |
| 3"                           | 100'                                      | 30'   |
| 4"                           | 150'                                      | 40'   |
| 6"                           | 200'                                      | 60'   |
| 8"                           | 350'                                      | 80'   |
| 9"                           | 400'                                      | 90'   |
| 10"                          | 450'                                      | 100'  |
| 12"                          | 525'                                      | 120'  |

Of course, it is critical to know the local sign ordinances with regards to sign dimensions. Check with your city zoning and compliance department for guidance in this area. Get a copy of the written ordinance; don't just rely on a verbal consultation with city officials.

#### VIII. Attachment Methods

Channel letters can be either flush-mounted or raceway mounted. Flush-mounted letters are attached individually and directly to a building, with all electrical mechanisms are behind the mounting surface (pulled through the wall). Raceway mounted channel letters are attached to a box channel, which contains the electrical mechanisms. The raceway is then attached to the wall.



Why would you choose one over the other? Many landlords require one method or another. Most leases contain a sign addendum that will contain the general specifications for the allowed signage, including the attachment method. Other considerations include the surface of the wall, the look you are trying to achieve, and the access available to the rear of the wall

It's really no great mystery when you understand the pros and cons - the various options available for channel letter signs. At the end of the process, you want to sign with maximum readability, that lets customers know where you are located and why they should want to visit you. It's about business visibility and brand building.

But to really feel like you're making the best decisions, let us consult with you on your signage needs. Apex Signs & Graphics is in the business of graphic communication, and our products sell YOUR

MESSAGE. It is this message that creates top of mind awareness and causes your customer to **BUY** . . . to buy from **YOU** . . . and to buy from you **REPEATEDLY!**

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