

# THE CASE FOR GREEN ADA COMPLIANT SIGNAGE

EVALUATING THE LIFECYCLE  
OF BUILDING MATERIALS

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*Switching to eco-friendly ADA compliant signage would keep 250 grams of plastic per sign out of the environment.*

As part of their commitment to producing eco-friendly signage, the founders of Green Dot Sign® sought an objective evaluation of their innovative approach. A third-party environmental scientist, Daniel Tessier of Chem-Intel Consulting, LLC, was hired to evaluate the development and standard practices of the U.S. ADA compliant signage industry, and assess signs' lifecycle and environmental impact. A comparison of signs made by Green Dot Sign® to traditional ADA compliant signs determined that green signage is better for the planet based on material inputs, manufacturing waste and long-term environmental impacts.



Since the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was enacted, the U.S. signage industry has almost exclusively used plastic for ADA compliant signs. Most plastic signs use acrylic, which is cost-effective and durable, but also derived from fossil fuels and not biodegradable. Even though clean acrylic is recyclable under stream 7 plastics, very few municipalities offer recycling. Additionally, acrylic signs are generally painted and have adhesive or vinyl, which makes them ineligible for recycling.

The quantity and impact of acrylic ADA compliant signs quickly adds up. In U.S. commercial buildings alone, at least 243 million pounds of acrylic ADA compliant signs are in use today. As existing buildings are renovated these signs will be tossed into a landfill for future generations to deal with.

Switching to eco-friendly ADA compliant signage would keep 250 grams of plastic per sign out of the environment. While plastic is only part of our climate crisis, there is no denying that it is one of the root causes we must confront. An industry shift to responsibly sourced, bio-degradable signs could further green building objectives and contribute to a healthier planet.

# ADA COMPLIANT SIGNAGE

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), signed into law in 1990 by President George H.W. Bush, guarantees equal opportunities to persons with disabilities. Under the ADA, persons with physical or cognitive impairments are protected from unfair limitations to their conduct of daily life.





A significant part of the ADA governs the physical environment in the public sphere, for example in accessibility to transportation, public spaces and commercial spaces. ADA compliant signage is a requirement for all government, public accommodation and commercial buildings to provide basic information such as room numbers and the locations of exits, elevators and restrooms.<sup>1</sup> ADA complaint signage features tactile lettering and pictograms as well as Braille, making it functional for blind persons or those with limited vision.

Given the increasing ubiquity of ADA compliant signage, these elements of the built environment are ideal candidates for consideration in sustainable design, that is, architectural, interior design and construction decisions that minimize harmful effects on the environment and human health by using environmentally friendly materials and building practices.



# TRADITIONAL VERSUS SUSTAINABLE SIGNAGE COMPARISON

ADA compliant signs are manufactured as a subspecialty of sign-making enterprises, whether by large national companies or local small businesses. A variety of materials are used in ADA compliant signage, based on considerations of durability, aesthetics and cost. The overwhelming majority of ADA compliant signs are made of plastic, and while these are often the most cost-effective option, they entail production methods and life cycle characteristics that are not environmentally-friendly.

The manufacture of plastic sign components depends on toxic starting materials that are derived from fossil fuels, produced on an industrial scale, and that present occupational and environmental hazards in their production.

Production of plastic signs involves significant waste and associated landfill inputs. At the end of their useful life, plastic signs become persistent waste in the environment, take up valuable landfill space and contribute to plastic and microplastic pollution that is harmful to wildlife and the environment.

Green Dot Sign introduces sustainably-designed signage that dramatically reduces the environmental footprint of ADA compliant signage. Their signs are based on renewable, sustainably-sourced wood as the sign blank and a minimal input of environmentally-friendly additive manufacturing material to accomplish tactile lettering, pictograms and the Braille features of ADA compliant signs. They are aesthetically pleasing, functional, and 99% biodegradable, thus reducing landfill and environmental impacts when their useful life has ended.





## Material Inputs

"Plastic" is a generic term for synthetic, polymeric material. Acrylic and modified acrylics are the types of plastic used to make most ADA compliant signage. Acrylics feature high clarity, a smooth surface and scratch resistance. The chemical name of acrylic is polymethyl methacrylate (PMMA), formed by the polymerization of methylacrylate monomers. The monomer starting material for the chemical synthesis of PMMA is called methyl methacrylate (MMA). Global annual production of PMMA is close to 3 million metric tons, while close to 5 million metric tons of the MMA monomer is produced globally every year.<sup>2</sup> Acrylic is used in an incredible variety of products and applications, from display cases, windows, vehicle parts and paint additives to exterior and interior building signage.

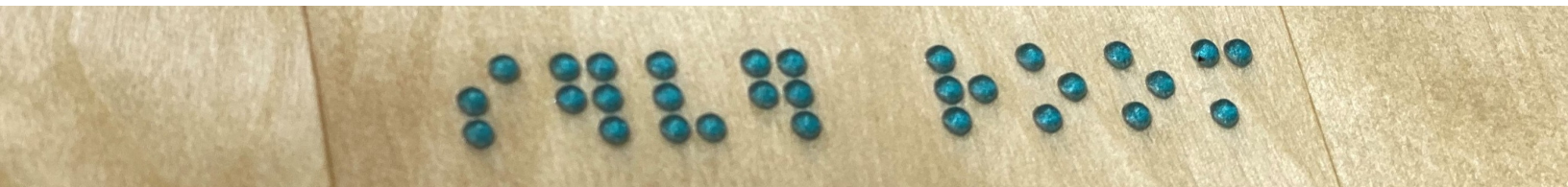
The manufacture of MMA is based on fossil fuel inputs.<sup>3</sup> One of two chemical processes are commonly used to synthesize MMA. One involves the industrial scale reaction of acetone with hydrogen cyanide, followed by reaction of the resulting intermediate product with concentrated sulfuric acid. The other synthetic process is based on the reaction of ethane, carbon monoxide and methanol. A principal concern with acrylic based signage is therefore its provenance in toxic starting materials that 1) are derived from non-renewable fossil fuels and 2) depend on industrial processes that are inherently hazardous to workers and the environment.

Green Dot Sign® ADA compliant signs are made from sustainable, responsibly-sourced wood. The use of recycled, site-significant wood is also an option. Once cut and milled to the appropriate size and shape, ADA compliant lettering, pictograms and Braille components are additive manufactured with proprietary non-toxic materials.<sup>4</sup> Roughly 1% of the total weight of a Green Dot Sign ADA compliant sign is the additive manufacturing material, so their signs are 99% renewable material.

## Production Waste

Production of acrylic ADA compliant signs generates significant waste. Acrylic-based signs are made from acrylic blanks cut from sourced panels that leave roughly 10% waste material from cutting the blanks to size. A polymeric, acrylic-based appliqué with the intended text and pictogram is adhered to the blanks and cut with a router, leaving up to 90% of the appliqué material as waste for text applications and up to 50% waste for pictograms. Therefore, the production of a typical 6" by 9" acrylic sign yields up to 100 grams of environmentally persistent waste material.

Green Dot Sign ADA compliant signs are created by additive manufacturing of text, pictogram and Braille on wood blanks. The additive manufacturing process is highly efficient, with less than 0.02% material waste during the manufacturing process. Cutting wood blanks leaves sawdust and wood scrap as waste, both of which are biodegradable and compostable. It is also common for sawdust in production wood shops to be processed into wood pellets for heating purposes.




# Environmental Persistence

Like buildings themselves, ADA compliant signs will have a useful life followed by a need for disposal, whether due to interior remodeling, building redesign, or demolition. The qualities of acrylic that make it a useful signage material also make it difficult to dispose of without environmental impacts that persist for generations.

Acrylic is essentially impervious to degradation by common environmental mechanisms – heat, water, sunlight and microbial degradation. Acrylic is also very difficult to recycle and is therefore not collected in recycling streams.<sup>5</sup> The available recycling process is cost-prohibitive and involves the use of lead – a highly toxic metal – to depolymerize acrylic. When deposited in landfills, acrylic signs add significant volume and due to their chemical, heat and oxidative stability they will persist for thousands of years.<sup>6</sup> Acrylic signs that are not properly land-filled will persist in the environment for generations. Even worse, exposure to environmental conditions can result in physical wearing that is a source of plastic particles (i.e., microplastics) that end up in waterways and eventually the ocean,<sup>7</sup> negatively impacting sea life.<sup>8</sup>

Green Dot Sign offers an environmentally friendly solution to disposal issues. Whereas an acrylic sign is permanent environmental waste, Green Dot Sign ADA compliant signs can be naturally recycled in a matter of months, because wood is biodegradable and their wood-based signs can even be chipped for compost or mulch<sup>9</sup>. The non-toxic material used to create the lettering, pictograms and Braille represent only 1% or less of the sign weight and therefore substantially reduces the environmental impact of sign disposal.

## QUANTIFIED IMPACT



In the U.S., the median commercial building size is 5,000 square feet (i.e. half of all U.S. commercial buildings are less than 5,000 and half are greater than 5,000 sq ft). The average commercial building size is 15,700 square feet as of 2012 (the last year for which data are available).<sup>10</sup> Using a conservative value of 200 sq ft as an average room size<sup>11</sup> (office, reception area, restroom, break room, conference room, etc.), the median commercial building contains approximately 25 rooms and the average building approximately 75 rooms.

Considering hall space, elevator and exit signage, we calculate signage requirements of 50 to 100 signs on average, recognizing that larger buildings might require hundreds of ADA compliant signs. Assuming a conservative sign weight of 250 grams and production of 75 signs, this means an average building uses close to 20 kg of acrylic-based material for ADA compliant signage.



There are upwards of 6 million commercial buildings in the U.S., containing over 87 billion square feet of workspace. This figure does not include government buildings or schools, hospitals and other public buildings requiring ADA compliant signage. Therefore, the national market for ADA compliant signage is in the hundreds of millions of sign units. Using the conservative estimates of 200 sq ft per room and 250 grams per sign, this equates to nearly 110 million kg or 243 million pounds of acrylic signage in the U.S. alone. This amount does not even take into account the substantial number of non-commercial buildings that require ADA compliant signage.

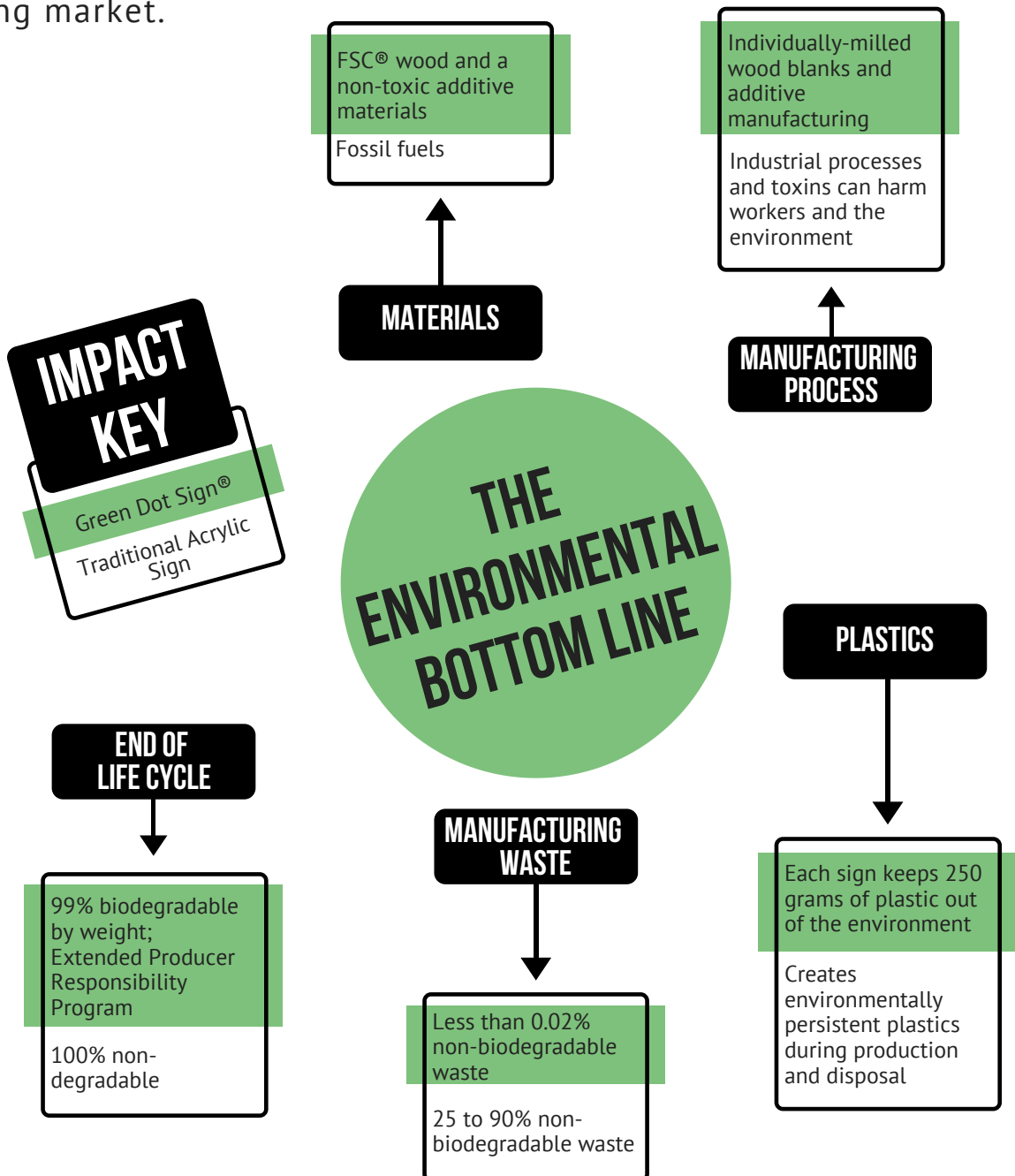


Clearly, acrylic signage requires a significant use of fossil fuel inputs and toxic chemical starting materials and yields persistent plastic waste that negatively impacts our environment, forever.



# CONCLUSION

Utilizing renewable materials and state-of-the-art additive manufacturing technology, signs made by Green Dot Sign® offer distinct advantages to traditional acrylic ADA compliant signs. Environmental benefits of non-toxic material inputs, low material waste, and biodegradability make Green Dot Signs® an attractive, eco-friendly signage option in the ever-expanding signage and green building market.



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# STANDARD COMMERCIAL VS A GREEN DOT SIGN®

## *Thoughts from the sign makers*

Standard commercial sign materials and design can appear utilitarian and outdated. While some plastic signs try to "fight the boring" with faux natural elements such as printed wood patterns, a simple Green Dot Sign® with no design embellishment directly evokes the beauty of nature...at the same price point.



An estimated 80% or more of ADA signs use adhesive to hold two layers of plastic together, so sign features such as pictograms, braille, and lettering are more likely to be worn off by normal use or peeled off by vandalism.

The Green Dot Sign® 3D printing process bonds tactile content directly to the sign base during the 3D build, resulting in vandal resistant and durable features. We stand behind the durability of our signs: outdoor, metal based signage is warranted for life, and our interior aspen base ADA signage for five years.



**Most ADA Signs Rely on Finger Strength Adhesives...**



# ABOUT GREEN DOT SIGN®



Green Dot Sign® is a nationwide provider of sustainable signage. We focus on ADA sign and wayfinding sign systems for projects of all sizes. Each Green Dot ADA sign utilizes a 3D printing process, directly bonding and building tactile content to natural materials. The result is stunningly beautiful signage that brings nature inside and reduces plastic by 99% compared to traditional ADA signage.

Green Dot Signs® can contribute to U.S. Green Building Council LEED® v4 and v4.1 building certification credits. We use Forestry Sustainability Council (FSC®) wood, have a published Health Product Declaration (HDP®) for a primary product line, and offer an Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) recycling program for all of our signs.

Green Dot Sign® is committed to continuously improving manufacturing methods and expanding product lines. Our goal is to make it easy to maximize visual impact while minimizing environmental impact for every brand and building.

There are over 10,000 SKUs of the most common ADA and office signs on our eCommerce website available for purchase with free shipping.

Our sign specialists work closely with brands, designers, qualified wholesalers and AECO professionals to design, manufacture and install signage tailor fit to buildings and thoughtful environments.

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