



Checking In to LED Lighting

A California motel gets an illuminating makeover thanks to LED lighting.

Sign makers are well aware how one

letter either burning out or missing from a layout can spell certain doom for *any* sign project. That's the predicament that the owner of the Rex Motel along historic Highway 101 in Ventura, California found himself in—and it's a situation that had been going on for far too long.

The owner was in desperate need of a sign makeover. His sixty-year-old, sixty-foot tall combination exposed neon/internal fluorescent pole sign was generating a three-fold problem. Recurring neon outages would sometimes mean the "ex" not illuminating properly (becoming the seedy-sounding "R Motel"), the "R" taking the night off ("Ex Motel", making it sound as if the owner would have to start catering to unfaithful spouses who'd been thrown out of their home), or the "RE" completely failing to illuminate (meaning a whole new clientele for the, gulp, "X Motel").

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There were two possible solutions: Either the owner would have to start marketing to a certain demographic of customers depending on the mood of the sign, or he'd have to invest in a new signage solution. Needless to say, the latter proved the more attractive option.

Frustrated by the local snickering, the motel owner decided he wanted to have the rusting, deteriorating pylon sign removed and instead try something new—in this case, a monument sign mixing LED and neon lighting.

It really wasn't a matter of creating a new pylon sign, since the original sign was only allowed to stand for as long as it had because it had been grandfathered under a city sign code revision. More importantly, the City of Ventura had ideas to convert the district designs so that everything along this stretch of road would reflect a 1940s look.

This nostalgia factor played a major role in the design and fabrication of the new monument sign: It would have to respect the 1940s look of the building and neighborhood, conform to the city's regulations, and present an attractive, eye-catching day-and-night display along a busy boulevard.

Rex Motel turned to Vogue Sign Company, a full-service, fully licensed UL electrical sign manufacturing factory located in nearby Oxnard, California. Vogue Sign Company is the oldest and largest full-service sign shop servicing the California coastlands north of Los Angeles. Its forty-seven-year history building quality signs in the area meant that the company would have plenty of ideal solutions here.

"We design, manufacture, install, and service all types of electrical and non-illuminated signs at our 10,000-square-foot facility," says Ronald A. Wilkinson, sales representative at Vogue Sign Company and the project manager on this particular job. "We employ over a dozen craftsmen and utilize three salesmen to create quality custom pylon, monument, and illuminated wall signs, as well as almost all types of exterior signs of various types for our Gold Coast Communities and their needs."

The Rex Motel had already been a long-time customer of Vogue Sign Company, as they had often been called in to provide service for the exposed neon and fluorescent lighting on the aging, rusting, and crumbling sign cab-



Everyone agreed that the sign should mix classic-look neon with cutting-edge LED lighting. "Since the identification sign would now be closer to the ground, we also thought that LED would offer a safer and more maintenance-free solution," says Ronald A. Wilkinson, sales representative at Vogue Sign Company and the project manager on this job.



inet, unable to be replaced or upgraded because of strict city regulation.

The motel owner was also well aware of the company's pioneering usage of creative materials and LED illumination in many reliable signs, so he decided they would be ideal for the new sign. "Not only did we want to make the old motel look attractive, but we wanted its new sign to be vandal-resistant to eye-

level pedestrian traffic, as well as maintenance-free," says Wilkinson.

When it came to the design, Wilkinson had to really multi-task in the planning stages, as he had to immediately understand the problems and limitations at the site, the customer's needs and desires, and the City of Ventura's concerns and restrictions.

Wilkinson turned to his company's

art department, who initially roughed out five different designs onto paper. These graphic designers, in turn, presented these ideas as a full-color simulated sign on a photograph of the new site—but without detail—for the customer's consideration.

Each of the five designs attempted to convey the name of the motel, the 1940s "style," and the fact [of] whether or not "vacancy" was available. "Furthermore each design attempted to use color and light in a number of contemporary ways to convey both the style and the vital information that needed to be communicated," says Wilkinson, noting that, once the motel owner and city officials agreed on the monument design, the art department went about specifying the materials and details. "We had to make a forty-square-foot monument look like something that kept that sense of the 1940s look but wasn't just a standard rectangle box."

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There are three major components to the new six-foot-tall, forty-square foot, all-aluminum sign: The top Rex Motel crown, the middle larger cabinet, and the "vacancy" status on the bottom. Each component is illuminated in a different manner.

The top fabricated "crown" features 3/4-inch thick white acrylic letters spelling out "Rex" and projecting through the routed aluminum face. These were backlit with Great White 3™ SloanLED modules. "The thick, white letters are more readable by day, and they have an ambient glow around them on the red background at night," says Wilkinson.

The large center aluminum cabinet surrounds transparent glass blocks. The "Motel" letters are flat, cut-out aluminum placed on the glass, but at night, illumination comes from red neon hidden inside the glass blocks. The neon produces a red glow behind the copy, which increases its visibility. "Around the perimeter of this center cabinet are two blue bands of about forty feet of SloanLED FlexiBRITE™ LEDs grooved into their own channel for stability and protection," says Wilkinson. "The glowing blue LEDs outline the center cabinet at night and are ideal to emulate a neon stripe without the vulnerability of the glass tubes."

Vogue Sign Company attached a channel to the faces of the cabinet, which created a bit of projection on each side that was just big enough to hold the FlexiBRITE. "If we didn't do this, the FlexiBRITE would sag a little along the horizontal edges," says Wilkinson. "Now this holds it nice and straight and makes the curve even. It also gives the lighting a

little bit of protection from prying hands."

Finally Vogue Sign Company placed the two-color neon "No Vacancy" sign inside its own aluminum base cabinet. "We decided to protect it by using its own box and a clear Lexan® cover," says Wilkinson.

Vogue Sign Company built the three sections of the sign in their own factory before delivering it via its crane truck to the motel entrance.

The customer trenched electrical power out to the new sign site. "We hooked up the power pack for the LEDs inside the 'Rex' cabinet and then placed the transformers for the neon inside the glass box of the middle cabinet, as well," says Wilkinson.

At the site, Vogue Sign Company removed the original pylon sign first by cutting the pole at the base and capping the electrical at the base. They then installed each section over two stout vertical steel poles. The poles had been planted in new concrete footings placed in a new planter created by the motel owner. "It took a day to do the footing and the pole. Then the city came out and performed the inspection," says Wilkinson.

Vogue Sign Company then ventured back out to the job site and quickly performed the installation. "Since everything had been pre-assembled at our facility, it didn't take long to install," says Wilkerson.

The end-result is a sign that incorporates the different uses of light and lighting methods in creative, but functional ways. But there's more to it than just that. "It's designed to be able to last as long as the original," says Wilkinson.

Speaking of the original pylon sign, it now "rusts" happily ever after in the City Public Works yard, awaiting its home in a new museum, according to Wilkinson.

The motel owner, though, couldn't be happier. The new monument-type sign currently conforms to the city's size and height restrictions—all the while still maintaining the motel's visibility along a busy boulevard.

"The bright, new 'Rex Motel' sign draws more customers and the occasional curiosity of people passing by— attracted by its looks, its bright use of color and light, and its unusual style," says Wilkinson. ☐

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