

# Neon: Green Again

Choose lightsources  
for your customers  
based on your expertise.

By Loren Hudson

As with everything trendy, eventually “what’s old is new again.” This even holds true with sign-illumination components and the newly established UL Energy Verified Program. With the program re-establishing neon and cold cathode as Green Energy Verified lighting sources, perhaps they will become more politically correct again.

Neon’s energy efficiency probably doesn’t surprise sign professionals, but, possibly, that an outside entity, Underwriters Laboratories, has finally recognized the product, does. This certification is listed in UL’s publication titled “Certification Service To California Energy Commission Title 24 Technical Requirements and Audit Instructions (ENVS).”

While this program’s primary consideration is electrical-consumption issues, other factors – such as longevity, sustainability and available replacements – must also be considered when evaluating long-term “green” applications.

Although neon has remained primarily the same type of operating system since its inception nearly 100 years ago, this lighting system has also evolved with current customers’ environmental concerns. The introduction of electronic power supplies, lead-free tubing, longer-lasting phosphors, controlled mercury-dispersing electrodes, and a product that can be 100% closed-loop recycled, exemplify how earth-friendly neon can be.

Because of neon’s longevity and



consistent performance, most people don’t realize how much neon is out there quietly doing its job until it needs servicing or is replaced with another product that doesn’t perform as well or last as long as the original neon. On your next drive home, see if you can remember how long those neon signs you pass have been burning.

Neon has been a primary signage lightsource for decades. For example, the neon on the famous Citgo sign at Fenway Park in Boston burned for about 40 years with an annual cost of operation (initial product cost plus electrical usage) of \$8,100. In 2004, the sign’s first LED retrofit was installed and

lasted five years at an annual operational cost of \$282,000. That hardly seems green compared to neon. The verdict on the 2010 retrofit of the retrofit is still out.

A recent *Los Angeles Times* article touted a neon tube that was covered by a wall during a renovation (see ST, July 2012, p. 10). The building owner’s records indicated the tube had been operating behind the wall for more than 70 years. Not only was it working, but the replacement parts would still be available today, had it needed servicing. Such hands-off longevity proves neon as a long-term lighting solution.

Brightway Signs (New Orleans)





recently restored the Joy Theatre signage on a building that had been declared an historical landmark. The original signage, built by Pelican Signs in 1947, featured a tower that used neon to “paint” the 8-ft.-tall letters from top to bottom. Then they’d constantly burn together while the letters stayed continuously halo lit with green neon.

Simultaneously, the sign would chase Novial Gold II bull-nose neon units up and down the sign’s edge. Frank Gray Jr., president of Brightway Signs and S1 Gaming, said he began the project by researching the building and signage in local archives, and even purchased old photos of the sign in its original state.

Next, his crews disassembled the sign and brought it to his facility to make shop drawings. They then began rebuilding the sign a piece at a time to ensure accuracy.

The parish where the sign is located has a green initiative similar to other cities, counties and townships across the country. Because neon has been declared energy-efficient by UL, Brightway has been allowed to keep all sides happy by restoring it with original product and meeting the green initiative as well.

Frank said, “We have all this new green technology, fluorescent lighting, compact fluorescent lighting and LED lighting, with a lot being imported from China. We now know that we have been manufacturing a green alternative in the U.S. for more than 100 years.”

Another sign company, Coast Graphics and Signs (Stafford, TX), made its customers happy when restoring the Alabama Theater tower sign in Houston. The customer discovered, not only was the sign being restored to its original state, but it was being done with the most effective medium to convey their message, while still allowing them to claim usage of a green product.

This brings up an interesting sales concept. Perhaps in today’s internet-shopping, lowest-price-possible marketplace, the sign industry would benefit by selling

its expertise, rather than getting in a race to the bottom with the lowest-price-possible approach.

Neon, unlike other light sources, requires someone with skill and experience to manufacture, install and service the product. That, in turn, should make the product more expensive, and raise the level of competition to only include qualified sign companies, which should translate into a more stable sign market and increased profits.

To maintain our customer bases, shouldn’t we separate ourselves as dependable, knowledgeable sign professionals, rather than relishing that, with other light sources, it’s so easy that cheap labor off the street

can do it? When lighting-product manufacturers tout their brands as being so easy to use that anyone can do it, they in essence have reduced the sign industry from a skilled set of professionals with unique capabilities to just another group of people who sell commodities as if they’re loaves of bread. And when a group is perceived as commodity sellers, the only way they can differentiate themselves is by lower prices or increased service, both of which cut profits.

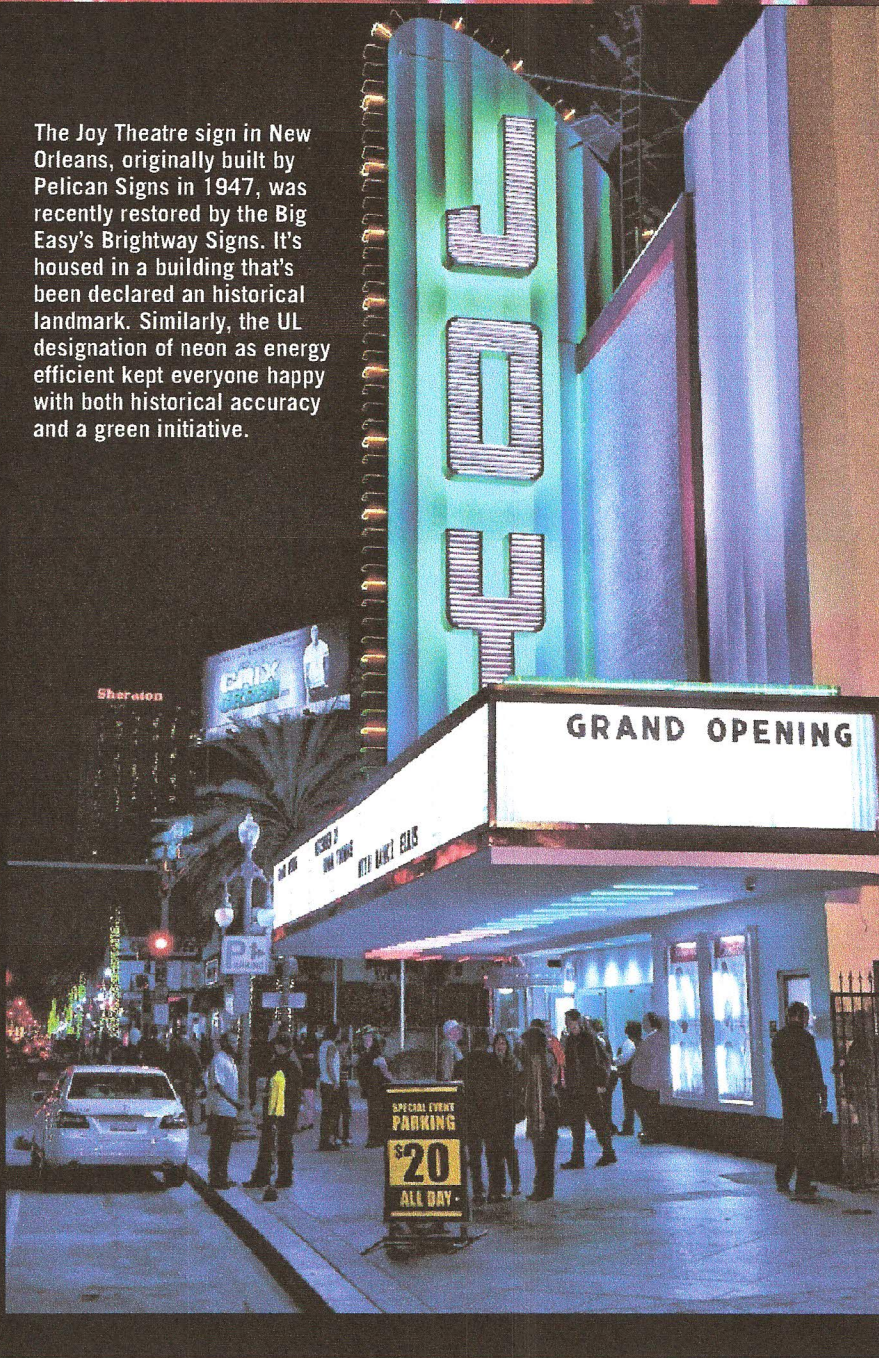
In essence, this completely dismisses the sign industry’s skills in design, fabrication and installation. Remember, if anyone can do it, they probably will. I often wonder



When owners of the Alabama Theater in Houston, TX, were planning to have their tower sign restored, they were doubly happy. Through the use of neon, not only were they able to have the sign restored to its original state, but they would also enjoy the positive benefits of being able to say “green” products were used in the process.



The Joy Theatre sign in New Orleans, originally built by Pelican Signs in 1947, was recently restored by the Big Easy's Brightway Signs. It's housed in a building that's been declared an historical landmark. Similarly, the UL designation of neon as energy efficient kept everyone happy with both historical accuracy and a green initiative.



how long it will be before other light sources are hanging on the shelf at Home Depot, and your customer's maintenance man is putting them in. Oops! That's already happening.

Although neon may be more expensive, and require a little more expertise to install, wouldn't you love to get a referral or a repeat customer because they were satisfied with the last neon job you did for them? And not upset because the actual electrical savings didn't make their house payment, as promised?

For example, a firm marketing Lexus cars wanted to place a set

of illuminated channel letters on a billboard in Houston, TX. It was pitched that operating costs would be lower, and they would be "green," if they used LEDs.

After a short time, the end user wanted the letters redone. The letters had a gold vinyl face, and the brightness factor hadn't been properly evaluated. The sign was redesigned to achieve acceptable brightness. This, in turn, drove up the cost to operate the letters at an acceptable brightness level. After the letters were reloaded with additional LEDs, the cost to operate (initial product plus operating cost) rose to \$10,049.10 per year for a

two-year period.

The same brightness level was tested, and could have been achieved with double-stroke, CL71 neon, with a two-year operating cost of \$2,014 per year. Early in the process, an experienced sign professional should have stepped in to ensure the customer received what was needed, not just what was trendy. Here was a missed opportunity to demonstrate expertise and build a lasting, trusting relationship with the customer. Instead, after repeated failures from the other light source, the option to illuminate was simply terminated by the customer.

Remember, don't undercharge for neon products. The light source has proven value with nearly 100 years of reliability. Simply charging more for additional overhead raises the price by itself, but a premium should be charged on top of that because of the unique skills required.

Proven longevity, obvious brightness, documented energy efficiency, huge color spectrum, environmental sustainability, and readily available universal parts for service, are some benefits of neon fabrication.

Please take a long-term view. Be a knowledgeable sign professional, and present a truly green, win-win situation for both you and your customer. Don't be the low-bid, order taker in a race to the bottom. Sell them a product that is not only green, but an excellent attention-getting advertising medium. Help them become long-term, repeat customers for your company. Sell them neon; they get a more truly "green" long-term value, with a long-lasting, serviceable, energy-efficient, sustainable, properly illuminated sign, and you get to be the better-paid expert.

For additional information about the benefits of neon, visit [www.theneongroup.org](http://www.theneongroup.org). ■



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