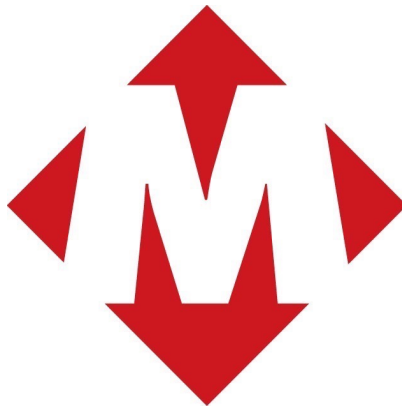


Sign Hustle

How I Created a Five Figure Side Hustle
in the Directional Sign Business

Pierce Marrs



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Introduction

Have you considered creating your own ‘Side Hustle’? You may have imagined how a few hundred dollars per month would improve your financial outlook. You may want to speed up the process of getting out of debt or have a child heading off to college. You may like the idea of an additional stream of income so you don’t have all of your eggs in your employers basket. Maybe you have always wanted to dip your toe into the entrepreneur pool but you’re not ready to dive into the deep end. Regardless of your reasons, there has never been a better time to make something happen and develop a solid stream of income on the side.

I am always looking at new ideas and opportunities. Shortly after my oldest son went to college, I was asked if I knew of anyone looking for a part time gig putting out directional signs for real estate developers. I quickly realized that you could make a few hundred dollars per month working a few hours on the weekend. I seized the opportunity immediately. Now, several years later, that opportunity has turned into a real business that brings in several thousand dollars per month.

This business is not complicated and you can set up shop right out of your house. For a long period of time, I stored signs in my garage and placed them myself out of the back of a pickup truck. If your client provides the signs and stands, your only investment to get started is time and a hammer. When I started, I was spending about three hours on the weekend and deliberately selecting hours that would not interfere with family time.

As the business has grown, I have been able to pass on the same opportunity I was given by connecting with my church and community to provide additional income for people that could use a financial boost. Both of my boys have been involved in this business over the years and my oldest son, Nick, remains a partner with me today.

I am looking forward to sharing with you what I have learned over the years and hopefully minimize the stumbling blocks you may face on your way to developing your own “Sign Hustle”.

Why Signs?

You may be asking, “Why would anyone choose directional signs when we live in a technological world?” Great question!

The internet provides many valuable tools to aid a consumer in real estate. Not only can you see pictures of perspective properties but you can take interactive tours that make you feel like you are walking through the home. This can help you narrow down the list of homes you would consider along with all of the stats of being in the right neighborhood with the right amenities. However, most people would not buy a home without physically visiting the property in person. In order to do that, they have to drive there.

That’s where you come in. As the perspective home buyer travels to see a list of homes they can’t help but see your signs directing them to properties and new developments they may not have found in their online search.

Think about your own experiences choosing a place to live. Didn’t you go there not only to see perspective properties but to see the neighborhood and how close you are to shopping and schools? My wife Lesa and I drove through the neighborhood we live in now numerous times before we settled on our current home.

Bottom line; signs work. It is the most effective way for a builder, developer or real estate agent to draw traffic to their properties. When our clients conducted a survey of visitors to their Model Home, they asked, “How did you hear about us?” They found that over eighty plus percent of visitors found them via the signs. Wow! Over eighty percent!

It is a great investment for your client and an excellent way for you to build a nice income on the side. Definitely a win-win.

First Step

We have made our case that directional signs are a good investment but what should you do next?

Your first reaction may be to start getting clients onboard and making money but you need to do some housekeeping first.

It is important that you check with the local government in the geographical area you will be focusing your effort and become acquainted with their sign ordinance regulations. Type in your city along with "sign ordinance" online and it should pull up a link to give you all the information you need. If the ordinance regulates against the placement of directional signs, go by their office and speak with them directly to clarify the rules and let them know what you would like to do.

In my area, we place the signs after seven pm on Friday evening and pick them up before seven am on Monday morning. Leaving the signs out anytime besides the designated time will result in the signs being removed and disposed of and a possible fine. This can be very costly to you and your client. It could also cost you the ability to continue your sign business.

I do not say this to cause you to hesitate in moving forward. I am only saying it is imperative you know the rules and adhere to them closely to maintain your business and protect your client. Besides, it is their name on the sign.

For over twelve years I have been placing signs in my area and respecting the rules of the local government . Otherwise I would not have been able to sustain my business and the relationships.

It is possible that someone may be placing signs in your area now and you have not been aware of it merely because you were not looking for them. You may be surprised how many you see now that creating this business is on your radar.

Getting Clients

Now that you know the rules, the next step is to develop paying customers. The first question to ask yourself, "Who is my market?"

Over the years we have placed signs for several different types of customers including a Fireworks Stand for the Fourth of July and a gentleman who wanted to create awareness of his residential painting business. We were glad to help these clients and you may find many viable candidates in your area. However, the consistency required to sustain our business has come from residential home builders and developers.

Independent real estate agents can benefit from sign placement but once again we have seen a lack of consistency due to these agents representing individual properties spread out over a large geographical area. Directing the signs to a specific home can be done but may not be cost effective for the agent.

The sweet spot for us has been working directly with the developers and builders. Our area has a steady stream of new subdivisions being developed with multiple homes being built on the property. Many of these homes are being constructed as spec houses that have not been sold yet and the builder is motivated to find owners for these properties as soon as possible.

A real estate agent has been assigned to the Model Home to greet the visitors and review the different floor plans, pricing and upgrade options that are available. The agent can also represent the buyer and help them with facilitating financing options for their new home.

It is a well developed system that only works if they have a steady stream of new prospects coming through the door. That's where you come in.

Now that you are equipped with the knowledge that sign replacement is responsible for eight out of ten prospects coming through their door, you can pitch your services with confidence.

First you need to make a list of potential prospects in your area. You can find these easily with an online search.

Also, drive around your local area and make note of any new developments. Do not exclude town homes and apartment complexes that are looking to gain exposure.

Next, obtain the name of the decision maker through the same methods. I

would not hesitate to drop by the Model Home and talk directly with the agent representing the development. They will be the decision maker or they will know who is.

Make sure you are prepared for the questions that will come up. We will discuss those specifics in the next chapter.

In the meantime, getting that first client will be a huge boost to your future success. We have people stop and talk to us all the time about providing our services to them. We are constantly being referred to new clients. Our business has grown by consistently providing a dependable and valuable service and the same is possible for you.

Counting the Costs

You are now prepared to make a confident pitch on the merits of directional sign placement but you must be prepared for the questions.

How much do your services cost? This will be their first concern since they likely have a specific budget for marketing. In order to know your price, you have to know your costs.

We have always used a price per sign model. Meaning we charge them for each sign placed and picked up on a given weekend. We place an average of thirty signs directing traffic to a specific property. We will not place less than fifteen and prefer twenty or more.

You can choose other pay options such as a flat fee for your service but we have found that pricing per sign is the traditional method. This gives the client a measurable means of their costs.

In most cases, we only provide the service of placing and picking up the signs. The client will provide the signs and stands for their property. If necessary, we will provide them at an extra charge per sign or flat one time fee. We have a local printer who can make them. You will still need to depend on the client to give you the logo, wording and design they want to have printed on the sign.

Some advice for creating the artwork for the sign; keep it simple! Some people want to put too much information on the sign and it becomes too hard to read. Remember, you have people driving by and they need to be able to read it quickly.

We have found a 24" x 24" sign is the best size. Smaller than this makes it difficult to be seen and read.

The color of the print is important. We find that a white sign with a one color print is very visual. A dark blue background with white lettering is very effective as well. Having a two color scheme makes the most sense visually and economically. Remember less is more.

Stay away from light colored ink like orange or yellow. They may look great on your computer or indoors but they will be difficult to read in the sun on the side of the road.

Another important decision is the type of stand you will use. If it is up to the client, they will pick the most economical option. They are trying to hold down costs.



One option I would stay away from is the "H" Stand. (*See left hand sign in photo) As the name states, it is a wire stand in the shape of an H. They are very affordable and are good sign placement of a temporary nature. They lack the durability to stand up over a long period of time and will have to be replaced regularly since they bend and break easily. Especially if they have to be placed in hard, rocky ground. They can be very frustrating and time consuming.

Some clients have chosen to use wooden stakes. (*See center sign in photo) We nail the sign to these wooden stakes with roofing nails that have a plastic washer included. Once again, this is not the best option. You have to hammer these stakes in the ground and after a few weekends the stake deteriorates and has to be replaced. They also do not hold up well under certain weather conditions such as wind and rain.

The best solution is a metal "T" Stand. (*See right hand sign in photo) These stands are constructed with steel angle in the shape of a T. You attach the sign to the horizontal cross member and vertical angle with a nut, washer and bolt. They also have a short horizontal piece welded a few inches from the ground providing a means for you to use your foot to sink the stand in the ground.

The “T” Stand may cost more on the front end but will last many times longer than the other choice I mentioned. I have had “T” Stands last for years and even if they break, they can be repaired and reused. The “H” and wooden stands are irreparable and must be thrown away.

You have a choice to create signs that include directional arrows or buy the arrows separately and apply them to each sign. We choose to apply the arrows separately. By applying the arrows separately, we only have to create one style sign printed with a blank area or circle to apply the arrow. This method reduces the cost by printing larger quantities of one sign in lieu of smaller quantities of different styles.

Plus, applying the arrows separately allows you to include a different color to the sign at no extra printing costs. We have used a white arrow on a maroon background. A red arrow with a blue and white sign. A “gold arrow on a blue background. The color contrast makes the arrow stand out and grab people’s attention.

Besides the cost of the actual signs, arrows and stands, some other expenses include a hammer and a vehicle to place the signs. I use a three pound sledge. Any hammer will do but I found that the heavier duty sledge will get the job done quickly and with less effort if you can handle that size hammer. I have used different sizes and I even used a rock when I accidentally left my hammer at one of my stops and couldn’t find it. Whatever it takes!

What type of vehicle do you need to place the signs? It depends on how many signs you are placing. If you are starting small, a car or SUV will work for the time being but as your business grows you will need to upgrade to a vehicle that will hold more signs in one trip to make your sign placement efficient. Otherwise you may have to make additional trips that time consuming. If you are getting paid by the sign, you want to complete the job in the quickest time possible to maximize your profit.

I used a pickup truck for years but eventually the business grew to the point it made more sense to buy a ten foot trailer. I had a friend of mine construct a removable frame to bolt to the trailer with compartments to hold the signs. The total investment was about fifteen hundred dollars but I was able to recoup my money quickly due to the increased number of signs I could haul and improved efficiency.

In the beginning, I stored the signs in my garage during the week. This was fine for awhile but eventually the space they were occupying became a problem. Now I rent a storage unit to store the signs along with additional inventory and stands. It is an added cost but you can write off this expense on your taxes and my wife is a much happier person with them out of the garage.

You will have gas expense and you must keep a mileage log to keep up with the miles you are putting on your vehicle.

I have always deducted mileage on my taxes along with any tools and supplies I may need to operate my business in lieu of depreciating a vehicle. It is not

complicated and don't get bogged down on this. I work this business as a sole proprietor and I report my earnings as a 1099 independent contractor. *I am not a tax advisor so please check with a qualified tax person to get the best advice for your situation.

Now that you know the costs, you are better prepared to decide how much you can charge for your services.

Agreements and Maps

After you agree on the price per sign, you will then want to have a written agreement with your clients that states clearly what you will do for them and what that service will cost.

You will also want to layout a route that you both agree would be the best strategy for driving the most traffic to the development.

Simply print a map of the area and select sign locations that you both can agree will optimize traffic. When you look at the area from an aerial view, you will quickly see the best directions to drive traffic.

In Spring Hill, TN we have several interstate highways that feed traffic into our area along with a busy main street through the middle of town. You want to place your signs where they will receive the greatest exposure and be the first thing people see when they exit the interstate into your area. You also want your signs to be visible when people are stopped at large intersections. Those few minutes of attention are valuable and you want to make the most of each opportunity.

If you choose to place thirty signs for your client, show on the map a series of Right Arrows, Left Arrows and Straight Arrows that would direct traffic to their property.

When the quantity and location has been finalized, create and sign a document that includes a clause of how much notice you need to terminate the agreement.

Fortunately, most all of our terminations have been due to fact that they sold all of their homes! That is a very exciting day because you have helped them succeed with your services. That is very gratifying for you as a business person and certainly gives you something to talk about to your perspective clients.

You seldom lose someone for good service. They will not forget you when they start their next project. We also have several large developers that have multiple projects going at the same time. Some developers have projects all over middle Tennessee and around the country.

Additional Tips

As I mentioned earlier, you will need to keep an inventory of additional signs and stands in storage. These signs will be used to replace worn and damaged signs due to weather and wear and tear. When the signs begin to deteriorate and the ink begins to fade, it is time to replace that sign. The sign represents your client and if they look worn and damaged, it will give perspective buyers the wrong impression. Always keep extras on hand to replace them when necessary.

Unfortunately, another reason you need to keep inventory is due to signs coming up missing. For whatever the reason, people will remove the signs. It can be very frustrating for you and your client but it is something you need to be aware of and prepared for.

I know that some people are not happy with the location of a sign if it is near their business establishment or in front of their home. Over the years, we have found sign locations that minimize the losses and do not seem to bother anyone.

Also, you must keep yourself safe! It is very important that you protect yourself and pay attention. You are parking and moving around traffic areas and this business is not worth you getting hurt.

We have attempted to find safe places to pull off the highway to place the signs. If you have to walk a little further to avoid placing yourself in danger, then please do so.

Also, use your Emergency Flashers in your vehicle at all times while you are placing signs. We have purchased a LED Flashing Yellow Beacon that plugs into a standard power port and has a magnet to attach the beacon to the roof of our vehicle. This flashing light is visible to other drivers and lets local law enforcement know that you are conducting business and not stuck on the side of the road. You can purchase one at most any auto parts store.

We have nice people check on us regularly to see if we need help and of course police officers will stop and make sure we are okay. The yellow beacon seems to minimize these stops and make you look more official.

Make sure you are covered with the proper Auto Insurance to protect yourself and your property. When I purchased the trailer, I added it to my insurance for a few dollars per year. Small price to pay to be covered.

One last consideration and it is a big one. Set up a separate bank account for

your business. Deposit all the payments from clients into this account and keep track of the money coming out. This will benefit you greatly at tax time.

There are many benefits to owning a small business. In order to enjoy and maximize these benefits, you must be organized and protect yourself. Treat this new venture like a business and it will serve you well.

Summary

I want to thank Christian Nordin, the gentleman that originally gave me an opportunity to place signs to make a few extra dollars a month. We still work together today. He works full time as a pilot for one of the major airlines and continues to run a thriving directional sign business today. I choose to maintain my business here in the Spring Hill and Franklin area while his business is spread out all over Middle Tennessee.

That is one of the advantages of a business of this type. You make it fit your lifestyle. In the beginning, you may want to do all of the work yourself and keep all the money.

As you grow, you may want to leverage your time by hiring people to place the signs for you. You will make less money per client but this approach will free you up to build your business or start a new venture. All the while, helping someone create a nice side income of their own.

Regardless on how you choose to start and grow your directional sign business, I can testify that it has been a viable source of income for me and my family for many years.

If you could use a few hundred or few thousands dollars extra per month and willing to invest a little sweat equity, this business is for you.

So, what's stopping you from creating your own *Sign Hustle* today!

About the Author

Pierce Marrs has been a successful sales professional for over thirty years. He is a Life and Business Coach. Writes regularly and hosts the Shark Tank Fan Podcast. He resides with his wife, Lesa, of thirty-two years in Thompsons Station, TN just south of Nashville.