

Maintaining billboards – minus the birds.

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What could be more attractive to pigeons than an outdoor billboard rising into the sky? It's the perfect lookout perch to spot dangerous predators before they attack. It's a sheltered infrastructure for roosting and nesting, with built-in escape from nasty weather. Yes, pigeons do flock to such inviting outdoor arrangements, high up and out of harm's way.

Tom Gould, Operations Manager for the Milwaukee office of Lamar Outdoor Advertising, has seen it up close. Too close. "Metropolitan areas are especially attractive to pigeons," Gould says. "With the typical double-faced billboard, birds like to roost between the signs and set up shop in the structure near the top where they're protected from the elements."

Constant Clean-Up

One of Gould's customers had a billboard located in a car lot. The billboard began collecting a line-up of pigeons across the top. "The customer had to wash his cars every day," Gould notes. If such a situation is allowed to continue, things only become worse, Gould says. "Ultimately, the landowner gets fed up and says to us, 'Either fix the bird problem or take down the billboard.'"

During his 20 years in the business, Gould has tried several methods to fix the problem. First, he says, "I had an exterminator bait the sign with something called hot corn, which makes birds ill." But, he adds, the Animal Rights people don't take kindly to this technique.

Then Gould moved on to tacky-foot products and sticky gels that are applied with a caulk gun. But the crew members who had to apply and reapply the substances got full of messy glue as well as highly unpleasant pigeon glop.

"Spikes worked," Gould says, "but the spikes had to be removed and reattached each time we moved the billboard. It was too labor-intensive."

The Value of Personnel

In every case of bird deterrence, Gould and his company are concerned about the welfare of employees. Lamar Outdoor Advertising has more than 150 offices and 149,000 billboards nationwide. Pigeon droppings harbor disease and bacteria that can be harmful to humans. "If pigeon feces pile up and the rain doesn't wash it all out," Gould says, "we have to power-wash the billboard. We were concerned about airborne disease and the effect on the health of our employees."

Gould thought of setting traps, but he concluded that it would be too costly to set and bait the traps, remove the captured birds, re-set and re-bait the traps, and so on.

To discourage red-tail hawks, a bird more common in Wisconsin than in many places, Gould put netting around one entire billboard. But, Gould says, if a hawk did manage to navigate past the netting and take up residence, no one wanted to climb up and confront the talons. "Red-tail hawks are very aggressive," he says. "They'll dive-bomb and attack, especially if they're defending nestlings." Since red-tail hawks are protected by law, any measures to remove them must be totally humane.

Technology to the Rescue

"In 2002, I was looking for something better when I received literature from Bird-X describing the BroadBand PRO unit," Gould says. The high-tech programmable broadband unit delivers a multitude of ultra-sonic bird cries, frequencies, and volumes at random and targets pest birds with an unrelenting combination of species-specific cries and visual scares that deter them from perching on the signs. "I was a bit skeptical, but I wanted to try it," he adds. So he ordered one. "It was easy to install," Gould says. "When we turned it on, the pigeon problem ceased *immediately*. And it's still working," he notes.

At first, he programmed the BroadBand PRO at high volume. “The billboard was located across the freeway from Marquette University in Milwaukee,” he says, “and despite the sound of high-volume traffic, the Marquette security guards could hear the screech. So we turned it down and we’ve had no complaints since.”

Gould says there is no noticeable difference in the electric bill since installing BroadBand PRO. “The cost of running the broadband unit is insignificant compared to the cost of running four to eight high-powered lights on the billboard,” he says.

Gould was on a roll. Next, he dealt with the bird trouble at the car lot. “The issue here was primarily sparrows,” he relates. “In the fall, they feasted on berries, leaving multi-colored droppings all over the cars and the lot.”

Gould called upon BroadBand PRO again, and it worked—until someone was bothered enough by the sound that he or she cut the wires to the speakers one night, even though the unit was set on low volume. Philosophically, Gould recognized that you can’t please everybody all the time, so he plans to move the unit.

Sound Business Practices

Gould plans to move the broadband unit to a shopping center, where birds are creating a nasty mess on the sidewalks and parking lot. He understands the economics in company terms: “It’s a pricey unit,” he says, “but well worth it. We don’t want to lose a prime revenue-producing location.”

He points out another economic issue as well. “Pigeon droppings contain acid that is destructive to steel,” Gould explains. “Keeping signs, posts and poles in good structural shape has several benefits. They look good to the public and it adds to the durable life of the structure. Bird droppings can cause paint to peel, setting off a negative syndrome of erosion. When you have a 30,000-pound steel structure supported by one steel pole, it’s something to think about,” he contends.

A Southern Solution

In another part of the nation—South Florida—Hector Rivera is thinking, too. Rivera, Director of Florida Operations for Viacom Outdoor, doesn’t mince words about the birds’ habits. “It’s disgusting,” he declares. “Pigeon droppings are all over the billboard, the structure, the parking lot, rooftops, and the vehicles parked underneath the billboard.” Pigeons will line up the whole length of a 48-foot billboard, he says, and maybe even nest in the structure.

Rivera has his own favorite remedy for dealing with pigeons that infiltrate billboards and other outdoor signage. “I’ve been using Bird Proof Gel since the early 1990’s,” he says. “It’s the only thing that really works for us.”

This transparent gel repels pest birds from their normal roosting areas. When applied to ledges, beams, rafters, cornices and similar bird “landing sites,” the gel discourages birds from alighting and nesting. It has a tacky feeling that birds shun, yet it’s harmless, odorless, nonpoisonous and environmentally friendly. Rivera’s crew applies Bird Proof Gel to the top rail of billboards, where the pigeons attempt to land—until they feel the annoying grip of the gel.

As an alternative, Rivera says he tried BroadBand PRO and it worked for awhile; and when the birds returned, he tried changing the settings for volume, frequency and other programmable features. But overall, he prefers the gel, which continues to work well for him.

However, Rivera acknowledges a drawback of Bird Proof Gel. “In a hard rain,” he says, “the product may wash away.” Then his customers call and complain, so his crew must reapply the gel. “Typically, we reapply the gel three times a year,” he says. Florida’s tropical rainy season can be hard on products applied to outdoor surfaces. Most climates are less harsh, so reapplication is needed less frequently. Rivera points out, however, that anything that prevents gross accumulated droppings is worth some effort.

Another drawback, Rivera notes, is that his crew members don’t like to touch the sticky product or the filthy area where bird droppings have been plastered.

Gould and Rivera realize that one solution may not fit all settings, but each is happy to have a deterrent to problem birds. Because their companies maintain thousands of billboards nationally and, in the case of Viacom Outdoor, internationally, their objective is to guard those billboards from any infestation of birds and keep the landowners and customers smiling.