KNOW BEFORE YOU SIGN • GUIDE 02

Your Business Location Is a Marketing Decision

How to think about visibility, accessibility, signage rights and customer flow as part of your brand strategy, not just a real estate transaction.

02

WHAT YOU WILL FIND IN THIS GUIDE

Section 1: Visibility, Can people find you from the road?

Section 2: Accessibility, Can people get to you and into your space?

Section 3: Signage Rights, What are you actually allowed to put up?

Section 4: Customer Flow, What happens once they walk in?

Section 5: Your Location Checklist Before You Sign

Section 6: One More Thing About Tenant Representation

INTRODUCTION

You Found the Space. But Does the Space Work for You?

Most business owners evaluate commercial space through two lenses: can I afford it, and does it fit my square footage needs? Those are valid questions. But they leave out something that matters just as much: your location is doing marketing work every single day, whether you think about it that way or not.

The street you are on, the signage you are allowed to display, the parking situation, the traffic patterns at 11am versus 4pm on a Tuesday: all of it is either building your brand or quietly working against it.

I have worked with business owners who found a beautiful space at a great price and still struggled because the location made them invisible. I have also seen businesses thrive in imperfect spaces because the owner understood how to work with what the location offered.

The difference between those two outcomes often comes down to asking the right questions before the lease is signed, not after.

This guide walks you through four things that get treated as real estate details but are actually marketing decisions: visibility, accessibility, signage rights, and customer flow. By the end, you will have a clearer framework for evaluating whether any commercial space is actually a fit for your business, not just your budget.

A QUICK NOTE ON WHERE I AM COMING FROM

I am a licensed commercial real estate agent in Northeast Ohio and a former marketing consultant. I spent about 15 years working with small businesses on brand strategy before moving into commercial real estate, so I tend to look at location decisions through both lenses at once. This guide is what I wish more of my clients had read before they started touring spaces.

SECTION 1

Visibility

Can people actually find you?

Visibility is the first form of free advertising your business has. If people can see your storefront, your signage, or your entrance from the road or sidewalk, you are getting impressions before you spend a single dollar on marketing.

But visibility is not just about whether you can see the building from the street. It is about how much time and attention a potential customer has to notice you, decide you are worth stopping for, and actually get there safely.

Destination vs. Discovery: Know Which One You Are

Before you evaluate a specific location's visibility, you need to be honest about how your customers will find you in the first place.

Destination businesses are ones people seek out intentionally. A specialty medical practice, an accountant, a B2B service provider, a law firm. People look you up, get your address, and navigate to you on purpose. For destination businesses, visibility still matters for professionalism and curb appeal, but it is not your primary customer acquisition tool. You can be on the second floor of an office building with no street presence and still build a thriving practice.

Discovery businesses are ones where impulse and proximity drive a significant portion of foot traffic. A restaurant, a salon, a boutique, a gym, a cafe. For these businesses, visibility is everything. If someone cannot see you from the road or stumble across you while they are already in the area, you are leaving customers on the table every single day.

Be honest about which category you fall into. Most businesses are not purely one or the other, but skew strongly in one direction.

What to Look for When You Tour

- What is the posted speed limit on the primary road? The faster traffic moves, the less time drivers have to notice you. A 35 mph commercial corridor gives drivers much more time to see your sign than a 50 mph arterial road.
- Is your entrance visible from both directions? Or does a curve, hill, median, or neighboring building make it difficult to see until you have almost passed it?
- Are there obstructions blocking your frontage? Trees, utility poles, neighboring signs, and other structures can block sightlines even on streets with good visibility for others.
- What does the property look like from the road at night? If your business will be open in the evening, visibility after dark matters. Look at the lighting, the signage illumination, and whether you can be seen.

- How much road frontage does the property have? A larger frontage generally means more opportunity to be seen before a driver or pedestrian has passed you.

VISIBILITY REALITY CHECK

Drive the route your customer would most likely take to visit you. Drive it at the speed limit. Note the first moment your future space becomes visible. Note any obstructions. Then ask yourself: if I were a potential customer who had never heard of my business, would I notice this place?

SECTION 2

Accessibility

Can people actually get to you?

Accessibility covers two distinct things: getting to your location, and getting into your building. Both matter, and they require different questions.

Getting There: Traffic and Parking

Access points are more important than most tenants realize. A property might sit on a busy road with thousands of cars passing per day, but if traffic is moving fast and there is no left turn permitted into your parking lot, a huge portion of that traffic is functionally inaccessible.

- How many entrances does the property have, and which roads do they connect to?
- Is there a raised median on the primary road that prevents left turns in? Customers coming from one direction may have to drive past you, turn around somewhere else, and come back.
- What does parking look like at peak hours, not just on the Tuesday morning when you toured? Ask the landlord or adjacent tenants what the busiest periods are.
- Is the parking lot well lit and easy to navigate? A confusing or poorly lit lot creates friction before a customer even gets to your door.
- Is public transit nearby? If your target customer or employee base relies on buses or rideshare, proximity to stops and routes matters in ways that are easy to overlook when you are driving to every tour.

Getting In: The Physical Space

- Are the entrances ADA compliant? This is not optional and it is worth confirming rather than assuming.
- Is accessible parking close to the entrance? Are there the appropriate number of accessible spaces for your square footage?
- Does the lobby, vestibule, or entrance area create a welcoming first impression? Or does it feel like a maze?
- If you have deliveries or vendors, is there adequate loading access that does not block your customer entrance?

Do Not Forget Your Team

Accessibility for your employees is just as important as accessibility for your customers, and it is the thing business owners most consistently overlook when they are focused on their customer experience.

If your staff cannot get to work easily, you will deal with chronic lateness, higher turnover, and coverage problems that directly affect the customer experience you are trying to create. Before you sign, think through how your employees will get there, especially team members who do not drive.

ACCESSIBILITY TEST

Visit the property at least twice: once during a low traffic time and once during peak hours. Observe parking availability, entrance traffic, and how easy it is to get in and out of the lot. What looked easy on a quiet morning may look very different at noon on a Friday.

SECTION 3

Signage Rights

What can you actually put up?

This is the section where the most business owners get caught off guard. You may find the perfect space and already be mentally designing your sign, only to discover that the municipality, the landlord, or the property's governing documents restrict what you can actually do.

Signage is not just a branding decision. It is a legal and contractual one. There are at minimum three layers of rules that govern what you can put up, and they all apply at the same time.

Layer 1: Municipal Sign Codes

Every city and municipality has a sign ordinance. It governs things like sign size, height, illumination type, setback from the road, the number of signs permitted per property, and in some cases the content of signs. Some municipalities in Northeast Ohio are strict, particularly in areas with active planning and design standards. Some restrict certain types of illuminated or digital displays entirely.

You can typically look up a municipality's sign code on their official website, or ask your real estate agent to help you pull the relevant provisions before you get too far into a lease negotiation. Do this early.

Layer 2: Landlord Restrictions

Your lease will almost certainly include signage provisions. Some landlords maintain strict aesthetic standards for the property. Others require written approval before any exterior changes, including signage installation. Some require you to use their approved sign vendors. Read the signage clause before you sign the lease, and ask specifically whether any modifications require approval and how that approval process works.

Layer 3: Multi Tenant and Shopping Center Rules

If you are in a shopping center, an office park, or any multi tenant building, there is likely a tenant signage program in place. What is included varies widely. You might get a panel on the pylon sign at the road, a nameplate on an entrance directory board, and a sign on your suite door. In some properties, that is all you are entitled to. If you were expecting large exterior wall signage or an illuminated cabinet sign above your door, you need to confirm this is permitted before you commit.

Pylon signs in particular are worth asking about specifically. In some properties, tenants pay a monthly fee to be included on the pylon. In others, space is allocated by square footage or seniority. In others, the landlord controls pylon placement entirely. You do not want to assume inclusion and find out later it costs extra or is not available.

QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE YOU SIGN

- Is exterior signage permitted on this space? What are the size limits and material requirements?
- Is illuminated signage permitted? What type, channel letters, cabinet, backlit, LED?
- Who is responsible for sign installation, and does it require landlord approval?
- Is there a pylon or monument sign at the road? What does tenant inclusion cost, and is space available?
- Is there an existing tenant directory in the building lobby? Are all tenants included?
- Are there any pending changes to the property's signage program under the new lease term?

THE REAL COST OF A SIGNAGE RESTRICTION YOU MISSED

For discovery based businesses, limited signage is not just an inconvenience. It is a real revenue problem. A salon that cannot put up an illuminated sign is invisible after dark. A restaurant with no pylon presence on a high speed road is relying entirely on word of mouth and digital search. Factor signage limitations into your rent calculation. A lower rent space with severe signage restrictions may cost you more than a slightly higher rent space where you can be seen.

SECTION 4

Customer Flow

What happens when someone walks in?

Customer flow is about the physical experience of moving through your space. It starts before your customer reaches your front door and it ends when they leave. Every step in between is a brand touchpoint, and many of those touchpoints are shaped by decisions that are locked in before you open.

The layout of a commercial space is not infinitely flexible. Structural walls, utility hookups, plumbing locations, electrical panels, HVAC equipment, and entrance configurations all constrain how you can arrange your interior. The time to understand those constraints is during your tour, not during buildout.

Before They Enter

- What is the parking lot or approach like? Is it clean, well lit, and easy to navigate? A disorganized or poorly maintained approach creates a negative brand impression before a customer even sees your interior.
- Is there clear wayfinding from the parking area to your entrance? Multi tenant properties in particular can be confusing. Numbered suite entrances, unclear signage, and circuitous paths through buildings all add friction.
- What does your exterior look like relative to your neighbors? Is there anything about the shared property that could reflect poorly on your brand?

Inside Your Space

- Where is the first thing a customer sees when they walk in? That first impression point is prime real estate within your space. It should not be a cluttered storage area or a blank wall.
- Is there a natural path through your space, or will customers feel uncertain about where to go? Ambiguous flow creates anxiety, and anxious customers buy less and leave faster.
- For retail and food service: where do people naturally linger versus where do they move through quickly? High traffic paths are where you want your highest margin items, not your necessities.
- For services: is there a clear intake point, a waiting area, and a clear separation between the customer facing space and your back of house operations?

The Lease Decisions That Affect Flow

Customer flow also affects the square footage decisions you make, and it is worth thinking through before you commit to a number.

Some business owners sign for as much space as they can negotiate, then realize they have dead zones that feel empty and awkward. Oversized spaces can actually undermine your brand by making your business look underperforming, especially in the early months.

Others sign for a smaller footprint to minimize rent, then discover they cannot serve customers efficiently. Long wait times, cramped service areas, and inventory storage competing with customer space all affect the experience you are delivering.

Think about the flow you want to create first, then match the square footage to that experience. If you are uncertain, walk through the space with a tape measure and mentally block out where everything will go before you sign.

Buildout and Tenant Improvement Allowances

If the space requires significant work to support your intended customer flow, find out early what the landlord is willing to contribute through a Tenant Improvement allowance. TI allowances vary significantly by market, by landlord, and by how desirable a tenant you are. In a competitive vacancy environment, landlords may offer more. In a tight market, less.

Whatever the TI allowance is, make sure you understand what it covers, what it does not, who manages the buildout, and what happens to improvements you make if you eventually vacate the space.

> **FLOW AUDIT EXERCISE**
>
> On your next property tour, do this: walk the space as a customer would, starting from your car. Note every moment you feel uncertain, every visual impression that does not match your brand, and every physical constraint that would affect how you serve customers. That walk is your flow audit. Do it before you fall in love with the bones of a space.

SECTION 5

Your Location Checklist Before You Sign

Four categories. Dozens of questions. One decision you will live with for years.

Use this checklist when you are seriously evaluating a commercial space. Run through it before you make an offer, before you engage in lease negotiation, and definitely before you sign anything.

- **VISIBILITY**
- ☐ Can my signage be seen from the primary road?
- ☐ Are there obstructions blocking my frontage or entrance?
- ☐ Am I a destination or discovery business, and does this location match that model?
- ☐ What does the property look like at night, when I will actually be open?
- ☐ How much road frontage does this property have?
- ☐ Is the address easy to find on navigation apps and maps?

- **ACCESSIBILITY**
- ☐ How many entrances does the property have, and from which roads?
- ☐ Is there a median or other feature preventing left turns in?
- ☐ What does parking look like at peak hours?
- ☐ Is the lot well lit and easy to navigate?
- ☐ Is public transit accessible if relevant to my customers or employees?
- ☐ Are entrances ADA compliant?
- ☐ Is accessible parking close to the main entrance?
- ☐ How will my employees get here? Is this realistic for my team?

- **SIGNAGE RIGHTS**
- ☐ What does the municipal sign code permit for this property?
- ☐ What does my lease allow for exterior and interior signage?
- ☐ Is illuminated signage permitted?
- ☐ Who approves sign installation, and what is the timeline?
- ☐ Is there a pylon or monument sign? What does inclusion cost?
- ☐ Is there a tenant directory in the building? Am I included?
- ☐ Are there any pending changes to the property signage program?

- **CUSTOMER FLOW**
- ☐ What does a customer see, feel, and do from car to counter?
- ☐ Is there clear wayfinding from parking to my entrance?
- ☐ Does the floorplan support the customer experience I am trying to create?
- ☐ Are there structural or utility constraints that limit my layout?
- ☐ Is the square footage right for my intended flow, not too much, not too little?
- ☐ What TI allowance is the landlord offering, and what does it cover?
- ☐ What happens to my improvements if I vacate at lease end?

SECTION 6

One More Thing About Tenant Representation

Most small business owners go into a commercial lease negotiation without representation, because they assume it costs money. It does not.

Tenant representation in commercial real estate is paid by the landlord at closing, not by you. When you hire a tenant rep, the landlord's commission covers both sides of the transaction. You get an advocate who knows the market, knows how leases work, and will push back on terms on your behalf, at no out of pocket cost to you.

What does that actually look like in practice?

- Someone who has toured every comparable space in your target area and can tell you whether the asking rent is fair.
- Someone who can read a lease and flag the clauses that are actually worth negotiating versus the ones that are standard.
- Someone who will ask all the signage, accessibility, and buildout questions on your behalf before you fall in love with a space.
- Someone who can make you a more credible prospect in a competitive market.

I work specifically with small business owners, including minority owned, women owned, and veteran owned enterprises, who are looking for commercial space in Northeast Ohio across Cuyahoga, Summit, Portage, Lake, and Geauga Counties. I also work with property owners who have vacancy they need to fill.

I am deliberately early in my commercial real estate career, and I will tell you that upfront. What I bring is a marketing background, a genuine interest in helping small businesses make good location decisions, and a lot of time and energy to do the work. If that sounds like a fit for where you are, I would love to have a conversation.

LET'S TALK

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This guide is for general informational purposes only. It does not constitute legal or financial advice. Lease terms and municipal regulations vary by location. Always consult qualified legal and financial

professionals before executing a commercial lease agreement.

QUESTIONS ABOUT COMMERCIAL SPACE?

Let's talk it through.

Hey, I'm CiCi Caver, Licensed Real Estate Sales Agent at Kowit and Company Real Estate Group. If you're looking at a space in Cuyahoga County and want a second set of eyes before you sign, reach out.

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