

***What you need to know:***

**...TO SERVE YOUR  
CLIENTS BETTER**

## **A merchant's guide to Quebec's Sign Laws**

**Fall 1996**

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### **The language of signs -- A short history**

Since 1977, the language of commercial signs in Quebec has been regulated by the Charter of the French Language (Bill 101). Over that 20-year period, there have been many changes to the rules and much public debate about those changes. The law originally banned the use of languages other than French on commercial signs. Later amendments and successful court challenges have resulted in other languages being permitted, first on interior signs, later on virtually all signs.

For merchants and business leaders looking to serve their customers as best they can, the question of signs has often been confusing -- not to mention expensive!

The following information is designed to clarify the confusion, and help you offer your customers the best service you can, in a legal, logical and fair manner.

***Can I legally post signs in English as well as French ? Yes.***

*The Charter of the French Language* states that French is required on all public signs and commercial advertising. Other languages ARE permitted, so long as French is markedly predominant.

***What is meant by "markedly predominant" ?***

The law defines markedly predominant as "...where the text in French has as much or greater impact than the text in other languages". This requirement must be met in one of two ways:

For every English sign posted, there must be two signs posted in French, OR

Bilingual signs may be posted as long as the French text on the signs is twice as large as the English text.

*(The full text of the sections of the Charter of the French Language dealing with signs are reprinted at the back of this pamphlet.)*

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## ***The Signs Regulations:***

**Regulation defining the scope of the expression "markedly predominant" for the purposes of the Charter of the French language**

**1. In signs and posters of the civil administration, public signs and posters and posted commercial advertising that are both French and in another language, French is markedly predominant where the text in French has a much greater visual impact than the text in the other language.**

**2. Where texts both in French and in another language appear on the same sign or poster, the text in French is deemed to have a much greater visual impact if the following conditions are met:**

2.1 the space allotted to the text in French is at least twice as large as the space allotted to the text in the other language.

2.2 the characters used in the text in French are at least twice as large as those used in the text in the other language: and

2.3 the other characteristics of the sign or poster do not have the effect of reducing the visual impact of the text in French.

**3. Where texts both in French and in another language appear on separate signs or posters of the same size, the text in French is deemed to have a much greater visual impact if the following conditions are met:**

3.1 the signs and posters bearing the text in French are at least twice as numerous as those bearing the text in the other language;

3.2 the characters used in the text in French are at least as large as those used in the text in the other language: and

3.3 the other characteristics of the signs or posters do not have the effect of reducing the visual impact of the text in French.

**4. Where texts both in French and in another language appear on separate signs or posters of a different size, the text in French is deemed to have a much greater visual impact if the following conditions are met:**

4.1 the signs and posters bearing the text in French are at least as numerous as those bearing the text in the other language:

4.2 the signs or posters bearing the text in French are at least as twice as large as those bearing the text in the other language:

4.3 the characters used in the text in French are at least twice as large as those used in the text in the other language: and

4.4 the other characteristics of the signs or posters do not have the effect of reducing the visual impact of the text in French.

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### ***What do I do if a government-appointed signs inspector visits my business?***

The law does provide for inspectors to visit stores and other businesses. Their powers to check on the language of signs are quite broad. The inspector may act on his or her own initiative or upon a complaint.

The inspector may ask the merchant for documents or information and make copies of them. It is an offense to hinder an inspector from performing his duty.

Once the inspection is complete, a decision is made by the *Office de la langue française* whether to give formal notice of an infraction to the alleged offender. That notice contains a specific complaint, directions for correcting the alleged infraction and a time period for compliance. Anyone who receives such a notice may write to the *Office* explaining the reasons for the situation before any formal action is taken.

If there is no agreement, then the *Office* can refer the matter to the Attorney-General, who may then take formal action in the courts. The office of the Attorney-General must inform you that it is now handling the file.

If notice of a court action is received from the Attorney General, Alliance Quebec suggests you seek legal counsel immediately, or phone us.

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### **Where can I get advice if I am charged with an infraction?**

**Alliance Quebec invites you to call us at (514) 932-3292. While we cannot offer direct legal counsel, the Alliance can provide you with further information regarding your rights under the law.**

**The *Charter of the French Language* basically allows you to serve your customers in English as well as French. The law allows for commercial signs in both languages, with French predominant, under most conditions. We urge you to make use of the law -- to serve your customers better.**

***For more information, please contact Alliance Quebec.***