

Showing the Way

An effective wayfinding strategy integrates signage with other architectural elements

By Frank Douglas

WHEN WE GET lost, most of us know where we want to go — if we could just figure out how to get there. We find ourselves wandering through anonymous corridors and elevator lobbies; walking right past nearly invisible entrances or exits. Are these corporate and institutional facilities or architectural mazes?

It does not have to be so difficult.

An effective wayfinding strategy establishes clear pathways through specific signals including signs, maps and other “landmarks,” to direct the user from one point to another. Large-scale wayfinding programs for office parks and campuses or exterior and interior graphics systems for multi-building complexes, including retail centers, health care facilities and office buildings — all provide the visitor, traveler, shopper or patient with critical information in a readily understood format.

Wayfinding provides simple visual clues for people to find their way into and through complex environments. At hospitals, offices, shopping centers, hotels or any number of public assembly facilities, users require different levels of information to get to and from their destinations. Such information placed at timely and appropriate decision-making points (such as street and corridor intersections, departmental entries, and elevator lobbies) creates memorable landmarks.

Not all facilities need a sophisticated wayfinding strategy; however, it is hard to ignore the symptoms when one is needed. People are lost. They constantly end up in the wrong place.

In confusion, users compensate by asking for directions — often distracting facilities and security staff or other users. Or they make their own hand-crafted signs or maps. And they complain.

The facility may have signage but the numbers, labels or coding (color, alphanumeric, iconic) are confusing. There may be too many signs. Visitors and staff may under- or over-utilize building amenities. Worst of all, customers may stop coming, causing revenues to drop.

What does a successful system accomplish?

When the appropriate wayfinding program is in place, pathways to “places” are clearly defined. Messages carried by the signage are user-friendly and understandable.

When a wayfinding system is successful, users sense order through identification of distinct zones — public/private, functional/territorial — and prioritization of spaces — primary, secondary, tertiary. Visual “signals” or “landmarks” are equally understandable. In fact, a good system maximizes the use of environmental factors (lighting, furnishings, architectural space and details, and landscape architecture) as wayfinding devices.

What tools — “hardware” and “software” components — are used to create a wayfinding solution? The hardware is the family of signs developed to meet a specific facility requirement while the definition of the specific needs and corollary development of a philosophy for moving the user from point to point is the all-important software component or true wayfinding. Signage hardware is the most recognizable aspect but is only one part of a successful system.

Not surprisingly, people are the single most important component in developing a strategy. Where is the facility user going? By identifying user patterns and destinations, wayfinders understand how a facility operates and how occupants and visitors should be moved through spaces and directed to their destinations.

Because a building supports many different lives every day, wayfinding “software programmers” solicit information from people familiar with facility functions at all levels.

For example, maintenance and security staff are asked questions about how to find offices, individuals or restrooms, making them a vital source of information about the real “life” of the facility. Understanding the difference between how a facility should operate and how it actually does is key to developing the appropriate wayfinding system.

High-impact messages delivered by the architecture, landscape architecture and lighting of a facility are already familiar to users. The goal is to discover opportunities to reinforce architectural and interior architectural cues that support wayfinding. Through the creative use of color, materials and the location of sign types, a wayfinding program integrates graphics with the building architecture and interior finishes creating landmarks for a navigable environment.

Effective programs achieve the greatest impact with the fewest number of signs. Careful attention to the development of a hierarchy of sign types that communicate through their message character, location and overall appearance creates a system that saves on the cost of hardware and maintenance and best serves the user and owner.

First-time users of a facility have only a few moments to determine what to look for. To speed them to their destinations, the system needs to telegraph critical information quickly, clearly and memorably. Wayfinding messages must be prioritized — major destinations appear first; sub-destinations occur as the visitor gets closer to the desired location or at message hubs such as an elevator lobby directory or a nurse’s station.

Thinking like a user leads to common-sense decisions like displaying wayfinding messages in the order in which they occur, not alphabetized or not including back-of-house or “non-destinations” on signs.

Facility users are quick to pick up other cues from the environment that prove to be powerful aides when skillfully incorporated into the wayfinding system. Color can be compelling or it can be confusing background noise and visual clutter. When used as a coding device, four colors are the understandable limit for the average user. By clearly defining color’s function, what it means and how much color to use, the design team can boost the impact of the system.

In our increasingly multilingual society, the use of dual-language signage systems is often mandatory. Critical as these systems are they can be difficult to administer. With the message area on signs at a premium, determining when and where to use the two languages and how to communicate the messages quickly (with the fewest words in both languages) demands careful programming.

“A picture is worth a thousand words” is certainly true in wayfinding. International style symbols or a “picture language” are often more effective than words in communicating functions such as elevator lobbies, emergency centers and public amenities (cafeteria, gift shop, chapel, telephone and restrooms).

“You are here” mapping puts the user in place and provides real comfort, especially in large facilities where other signage can be overwhelmed by the sheer size of the buildings or complex.

Consistency is key to effective use of maps. By presenting the user with one consistent format from application to application, even when maps of varying scales and detail are required, and maintaining a consistent orientation, mapping reinforces recognition and orients the viewer. Because three-dimensional mapping (perspective or isometric) corresponds most closely to the user’s experience of space, it is the most effective.

The wayfinding team

A successful wayfinding strategy can be generated by a core group of two or three key decision-makers, or may require broad groups of specialists. Depending on the complexity of the facility and the concern for a special group of users, consulting teams might include behavioral psychologists, security consultants, material testing specialists, and consultants in the areas of demographics, market research and marketing/public relations.

Essential members of the team include the facility owner as represented by administration (CEO/financial/strategic planning/marketing), facility planning (facility management/maintenance), operational managers (department heads), and end users including workers (building tenants), building staff (maintenance or security), visitors (shoppers, guests or patients), and suppliers and vendors.

The user requirements and preferences are solicited in a number of ways, among them focus groups and surveys. Wayfinders — design professionals who specialize in creating and implementing systems — include designers, project managers and technical managers (for program implementation).

On projects involving new construction or renovation the team also includes architects, primary and secondary consultants (lighting, acoustics, security, etc.), and contractors.

The facility staff continues to be important even after the wayfinding plan has been implemented. Inevitably, building personnel will be solicited to help users find their destinations. A thoughtful wayfinding strategy boosts the effectiveness of individuals who are asked to help and minimizes disruption to other personnel.

Downsizing has led to the elimination of information/reception stations at entry or key decision points. Staffing costs should be weighed against the loss of time and potential loss of business that occurs when there is no one to receive and assist visitors, shoppers or other users. If significant barriers exist, Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) guidelines may require posting personnel to assist persons with disabilities.

Once was lost but...

Training personnel throughout the facility in the basics of the wayfinding systems enhances the value of the program. Using simple tools like a program outline, support materials or an orientation video can save countless hours and dollars once a system is implemented.

The impact of the ADA and the state and local building codes which incorporate ADA questions are essential components of any wayfinding system. Many ADA issues — typestyle, stroke width, contrast, mounting and illumination — will affect other aspects of the strategy and should be carefully integrated into the overall program.

Off-the-shelf and custom signage packages have pluses and minuses and should be assessed accordingly. An off-the-shelf system may appear to cost less (although not necessarily). On the other hand, a custom program can be tailored to the unique environmental needs of a facility. The best answer may be a combination: off-the-shelf hardware for more common sign types and custom hardware developed for high-profile signs that respond to specific facility needs.

There is no reason to be lost or to lose customers. Obvious, recognizable and familiar design elements work together as an effective system that will save time and money for the savvy building owner or facility manager. Like other facility issues, wayfinding benefits from holistic thinking. When thoughtfully planned and carefully selected, wayfinding signage works to integrate other building components in the service of users.