

SIGN LANGUAGE

WAYFINDING DESIGN REQUIRES A TEAM APPROACH



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Though a wayfinding system is composed of many elements, signage is the written communication tool most often relied upon to help visitors, patients and even staff navigate their way through a health care facility.

Signage systems can be elaborate, using “high-tech” elements like touch screen directories, or simple, utilizing basic devices such as safety cones and signs ordered straight out of the manufacturer’s catalog.

Most systems have some modular capabilities for visual continuity and easy updating, and slight size variations can provide a hierarchy with more dominant elements used for more important messages. For example, identification reading “Emergency Registration” should be bolder than a plaque for “Housekeeping.”

Too often, however, hospital signage systems result from renovation projects, focusing on the needs of the new addition rather than the needs of the overall health care facility.

Day-to-day operation

An effective signage system is like a business plan. Both are intensive when being planned and in their initial phases, then transition into day-to-day operational guidelines. Thus, it is important to occasionally pull the plan out of the drawer and reevaluate, establish new directions and dedicate new resources. Sometimes this can be performed in-house, but an independent expert can often give a more subjective review.

Each sign has a specific message to communicate, each should enhance the environment, and each should be inter-related through a common design theme.

In today’s health care facilities, the information to communicate can be massive, and directional signs can be overwhelming. Information needs to be concise and prioritized through a pre-

planned visual hierarchy. For example, signage systems should not fall into the trap of listing every possible destination. If a large percentage of visitors check in at an information desk, that should be the priority and secondary directions should be posted beyond that point.

Likewise, placement is a key factor in effective signage. This is not limited to simple line of sight but extends to impact. It is not enough for a sign to be seen; it should be a dominant element in the space. Of course, placement can conflict with artwork, life safety notices, clocks and a variety of other elements fighting for a place in the visual hierarchy, and care must be taken to balance function and aesthetics.

Signage done right is clean and concise. It enhances the space but is basically invisible when not needed.

A team approach

A team approach can provide perspective and ensure that various department interests are addressed. For instance, a director of emergency and a head of the gift shop have very different perspectives, but each should have a place in the development of a signage system.

A core group of staff concerned with improving customer service should be formed as a “Wayfinding Needs Committee.” At a minimum, the following de-

partments should be involved:

- Administration provides credible direction to the committee and also illustrates to the rest of the staff that top management is behind the project and will support its results. Administration also prioritizes resources.

- Facilities personnel deal with maintenance that often requires moving and occasionally relocating signage. They provide a perspective on how often changes will be required.

- Marketing knows where the facility’s corporate branding efforts are going, and how individual products and services will be presented.

- Materials management ensures cost containment throughout implementation and can ensure a strong vendor relationship for affordable updating.

- Nursing services can address what patient care information should be posted, such as “Prone to falls,” “Nothing by mouth,” etc.

- Planning addresses the campus master plan and off-site expansion. This input helps direct how wayfinding will become part of future projects.

- Security provides firsthand experience in dealing with customers and their problems, as well as guidance in determining the extent of vandalism to be factored into the program.

A subjective evaluation

The analysis-of-needs phase includes a subjective evaluation of existing conditions. It determines user profiles, identifies destinations and preferred pathways, establishes goals and generates a list of preliminary design parameters. Extensive photography will document exist-

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AIDING WAYFINDING WITH EASY-TO-UNDERSTAND DIRECTIONS

Educating health care facility staff and volunteers on the proper way to provide directions is an essential element of any wayfinding program, and it is a skill that is often much more complicated than it seems.

For instance, staff and volunteers must be aware that a preferred pathway to a destination is not always the shortest way. An extreme example would be telling visitors to “cut through” the pathology department to get to the cafeteria. In this instance, the shortest distance between two points is definitely not the best. Staff and volunteers must also be able to understand and communicate with users who have low reading levels (if they read English at all) or low vision. Users may also be elderly and intimidated by the complex environment and foreign terms like “outpatient services.”

It may be helpful to provide staff and volunteers with a brief in-service program to discuss the benefits of consistent terminology, and what the preferred pathways are. They should also be taught to use landmarks, such as “go to the red wall and turn left; the elevators will be on the right.” Staff and volunteers should be taught to keep the directions as simple as possible, giving visitors a limited amount of information such as “Human Resources is in room 4235. That is the fourth floor on the two hundred wing. Take elevator C to the fourth floor.” The users may have to navigate 20 turns to get there, but the essence of self-navigating has been communicated.

Self-navigating is a deductive process of “proximity, direction, destination.” The mental picture is that of a baton in a relay race being passed from one runner to another. Likewise, visitors are passed off from one decision point to another until they arrive at their destinations.

Conventional wisdom discourages dependence on compass-related directions because not everyone orients well to them. This is especially true indoors. The exception to this rule is when historical use by staff and visitors is strong enough to build on as a foundation, establishing terminology that the staff can easily relate to. In such instances, it may be helpful to label the various floors-wings as “2-North,” “3-East,” etc.

Additionally, it may be helpful for staff and visitors alike to have a printed guide, titled: “Your Guide To The Medical Center.” This would list the most common destinations, identify where they are located, and communicate how to get there through text and graphics.—*R.C. & R.S.*

ing conditions and help convey why certain areas need specific attention.

Initial meetings can include a quick survey of all department heads to determine the extent of customer complaints and discuss staff observations of disoriented visitors. If the problem is credible and commitment to resolving the issue is sincere, the committee can prepare a request for proposal to find experts to help investigate and orchestrate a wayfinding program.

Prior to initial on-site surveys, the wayfinding expert should become familiar with any expansion and marketing plans. Initial on-site visits often include extensive staff interviews to understand the staff’s perspective and provide a foundation for staff to rally behind a unified methodology.

In addition to the staff’s input, most facilities have ongoing relationships with planners, architects, interior designers and even contractors. Each brings their expertise to the table while interacting with a wayfinding expert. This is especially important when renovations or major expansions are taking place.

A proactive approach to code compliance can also have immeasurable benefits. Health care facilities have to deal with a wide range of codes and standards not only as written but also as interpreted by representatives from authorities having jurisdiction. The expert should review the local sign codes and standards early in the process to avoid delays.

The resulting plan

The resulting plan is best viewed as a master plan dealing with the campus as

it exists, but also looking ahead at growth and the inevitable changes. However, this is a slippery slope. The team can overreact to providing for change and lose the need for high aesthetics. It is similar to reusing existing furniture in new upscale spaces. It can be done but may be shortsighted.

Conveying the design concepts can take many forms:

- Sketches, possibly integrated with existing condition photos;
- An illustrated lexicon showing how the various elements of the program interrelate in a shared environment;
- Photos of other projects with comparable needs;
- Models, especially when consider-

ing complex or unique shapes;

- Catalog sheet information for standard products to be considered;
- Prototypes or mock-ups to view potential solutions in the environment;
- Budgets and alternatives; and
- Recommendations of potential project phasing.

Documentation determining the criteria for a sign assures future cohesion. For example, is the entrance to “Volunteers” a department sign or a basic room identification sign? Written guidelines on what constitutes a specific sign type provides visual order and helps the program grow and expand.

The final wayfinding master plan manual includes all the deliverables.

Contract document specifications

Once the plan is set, basic contract documents, or “control drawings,” can be devised to detail the following specifications:

- Sign type drawings, based on sign type and usually grouped by sign functions, such as “Department Identification,” “Room Identification” and so on. Each sign of a specific type will have similarity in size, format and construction.
- Message schedules of each sign and its corresponding legend. This ties into the sign type drawings and the location prints.
- Location prints show the location of each sign by number that relates to the message schedule.

It is not always in the facility’s best interest to pursue competitive bids, but every facility wants to be assured of the



TOP: A carefully orchestrated wayfinding plan often relies on signage and requires extensive documentation to be expandable and vibrant.
BOTTOM: Unique spaces help in orientation and provide landmarks as points of reference for wayfinding.

best value available and can understand the benefits of a long-term vendor partnership. Stories about unqualified vendors that actively pursued a large initial contract and did not service it afterward are common.

Additional contract documents to obtain competitive bids should include:

- Performance specifications, written in the standard Construction Specifications Institute three-part format;
- A bidder qualification questionnaire to determine the qualifications to perform the work; and
- Itemized bid sheet to establish a base price for change orders and reorders.

Once the project is awarded for fabrication, the wayfinding consultant coordinates work with the client and with one or several sources. Sign vendors are included along with other artisans such as engineers, electricians, masons, painters, wallpaper hangers, manufac-

turers and installers.

Orchestration of the implementation includes the following:

- Reviewing shop drawings, submittals and alternates;
- Overseeing compliance to the design intent and bid documents;
- Negotiating change orders as required and acting as owner's advocate;
- Facilitating implementation; and
- Evaluating implementation and providing a punch list of items not up to standards.

Implementation

The implementation itself often takes place over several phases based on construction and other priorities because few facilities can afford to update everything at one time.

Thus, the vendor relationship has much more than short-term financial ramifications; it is more about partnering for the long term. Likewise, care should be taken when implementing a proprietary product line as relationships can change as time progresses.

The high cost of a comprehensive wayfinding program may be hidden in a large construction project but be a significant cost to maintain or update. A decision such as "we now are going to do admissions in another area" can cost thousands of dollars in directional updates without any construction.

Consequently, a well-planned program provides for economical updating. An easily updated system may involve expensive frames and fixtures with relatively inexpensive modular inserts that can be relocated or replaced as needed.

Many facilities like to supplement the vendor with in-house capabilities. This provides some benefits but is not a cure-all. For instance, it is very hard for an in-house sign shop to say "no" to a specific request even if it is not appropriate.

Permanent room identification should be done in raised and braille, even in nonpublic areas, but may be lim-

ited to a comprehensive room numbering system. A facility may identify other signs in raised and braille as part of an overall plan to be user friendly to those with low vision. In fact, it should look at low vision as it would a language user group. If a large percentage of a facility's clients were Hispanic, it would accommodate that need. Likewise, it should accommodate clients with low vision.

Once again, other parameters such as cost to update and aesthetics must be considered. The entire wayfinding program should be image driven, integrating the visual integrity with the utilitarian need to communicate. Marketing goals should be expressed through the signage, not independent of them.

An often-neglected area of wayfinding installation is staff training. In-service sessions must stress why consistent terminology is critical and how to give consistent, simple directions.

Facilities and environmental services personnel also must be trained on how to update and maintain the various components. Some systems rely on cardstock inserts for updating. In such cases, software and training should be provided. If specialized sign equipment is included in the project, contract documents should require that staff is fully trained on proper use and the layouts for specific applications and formats.

What all are striving for

A wayfinding program utilizing a well-thought-out signage system can decrease customer complaints, lower visitor stress levels and free up staff time.

The facility will convey an impression of high-quality care, and isn't that what all health facilities are striving for? ■

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