Signing for Success

Understanding the Importance of Wayfinding Signage Within the Retail Environment

*ALAN ROBERTSON**

Abstract: *The wayfinding signage of a retail destination is a key asset-management tool for owners and managers that can increase visitor dwell time, spend and the likelihood of a return visit. This paper examines the importance of implementing an effective system; the key issues to consider when doing so; and what technology may hold for the future of mall wayfinding.*

While the retail industry continues to struggle in the face of challenging market conditions, owners and managers have been looking to various initiatives to maximize mall performance without breaking the bank. Whether in a new building or existing center refurbishment, wayfinding signage should be considered as a means of adding real value to an asset, without excessive investment. (See Box 3-1 for the types of signage.)

Wayfinding signage is an essential component of a successful mall. Much more than simply a means of directing customers to the nearest toilets, well-conceived and delivered systems can bring generous commercial benefits to owners and managers, as well as improving the customer journey.

Put simply, "wayfinding is a spatial problem-solving process"[1] in which people orient themselves and navigate within a space. This encompasses all of the means in which people develop an understanding of their environment, from directional signage and environmental graphics to architectural details and features in the landscape. As such, it is much more than just signage, but as the most overt markers these are arguably of highest importance when implementing a system.

Box 3-1
Types of Signage

Every cohesive and coherent wayfinding system has at its foundation a recognizable sign family with an explicit hierarchy and structure that typically includes:

- *Gateway/arrival signs*—these make a statement about the environment and welcome the visitor. They can take the "sign on a building" approach or be a piece of public art, such as Heatherwick's "B of the Bang."
- *Direction signs*—as the name suggests, these define routes, assist people to navigate the environment and take the visitor on a journey.

Source: Air Design

- *Goal signs*—these confirm the user's arrival at a location (e.g., car park 1, toilets). An example of illuminated pictograms functions as goal signs in Corvin, Budapest, can be seen in the image here.
- *Directory signs*—these provide a list of locations that can be accessed from a specific point, typically a lift directory, a floor directory or a store directory.
- *Orientation signs*—plans or maps that position the visitor in the environment. As they are contextual, these signs can encourage exploration of the zone and so increase dwell time.
- *Information signs*—these detail the locale and the information they provide can be quite varied (e.g., opening hours, lost property, neighborhood facts).
- *Policy and safety signs*—this group of signs deals with policies particular to the mall, whether mandatory or just desirable (e.g., closed-circuit television, no smoking, no dogs, no skateboarding).

* CEO, Air Design

[1] Per Mollerup, *Wayshowing: A Guide to Environmental Signage Principles and Practices*. Lars Muller, Baden, 2006, p. 27. See also Craig Berger, *Wayfinding: Designing and Implementing Graphic Navigational Systems*. RotoVision, Switzerland, 2005.

Benefits of Mall Wayfinding

The benefits of a successful mall wayfinding system apply to two groups: visitors and administrators, whether they work in a development, marketing or managerial role.

Mall Visitors

For this group, the advantages of having a simple, recognizable and clear wayfinding system are obvious. They will be able to quickly understand the space, easily find their way and make informed decisions about the best route to take in order to reach their destination. The importance of signing to goal areas such as car parks, toilets and exits should not be underestimated—not only to prevent visitor frustration, but also to fulfill health and safety requirements.

Inability to find one's way around can leave a lasting impression that could prevent returns to the mall. The visitor journey is a key aspect of the retail experience, contributing to the time spent in the mall and the amount of money, too.

Mall Administrators

The positive correlation between dwell time and average spend per visit[2] highlights the importance of the visitor journey for the revenue stream in the mall. It has also been found that the more relaxed shoppers are, the more likely they are to spend.[3] Losing one's way to a destination can be stressful; therefore, wayfinding can have a profound impact on retailer revenues. While tenant mix and facilities are of course the primary drivers of dwell time, arguably an effective wayfinding system is an important aid, successfully directing visitors to where they want to be. Consequently, if visitors have had a good experience in the mall, they are more likely to return. These regular visitors are key to the continued success of a mall, by spending a great deal of time there and recommending the experience to family and friends.

Low footfall and penetration levels are a problem across the retail sector, contributing to diminished revenues and dissatisfied tenants.[4] Areas that are not very visible or malls that have been extended commonly experience reduced footfall. With penetration into these "dark areas" difficult, wayfinding strategists need every means available to encourage people to use these spaces. Ensuring there is something worth visiting in the space is the first place to start. If there is not, mall administrators should consider introducing art, interactivity, movement, retail or food and beverages to create visibility and activity that will draw flow into that area. (For instance, as seen in Figure 3-1, a Wi-Fi zone was created in Novy Smichov, Prague, to draw visitors to an underused space in the mall.) Of course wayfinding can be used alone to highlight facilities, tenants and benefits found in an area. Signage is the most obvious platform to do so, but architecture, lighting and mall furniture all contribute to how visitors perceive and move around a space. As such, the best approach always combined interior design, retail strategy and wayfinding.

Figure 3-1
Wi-Fi Zone, Novy Smichov, Prague

Source: Air Design

The need to capture passing trade is especially crucial for malls in densely populated retail areas, but it is also important for those nearby highways or transport hubs. Every effort should be made so that the journey from the initial sight of the mall (usually, exterior signage) to its entrance is clear, simple and easy to navigate. The importance of prominent exterior signage is demonstrated at Queens's Arcade in Cardiff, Wales. (See Figure 3-2.)

Planning a Wayfinding System

In implementing a wayfinding system, mall administrators need to:

1) embrace a strategy;
2) understand best communication practices;

[2] Business Blueprints, *The Role of Market Research in The Modern Shopping Centre*, 2009, retrieved August 9, 2012.

[3] Michel Tuan Pham, Iris W. Hung, and Gerald J. Gorn, "Relaxation Increases Monetary Valuations," *Journal of Marketing Research*, Vol. 48 (No.5), October 2011, pp. 814-826.

[4] Mary Portas, *The Portas Review: An Independent Review Into the Future of Our High Streets*, 2011, retrieved August 9, 2012.

Figure 3-2
Exterior Signage at Queens Arcade, Cardiff, Wales

Source: Air Design

3) ensure that the signage design complements the architecture of the shopping center; and
4) recognize the dynamic nature of spatial navigation.

1. Wayfinding Goals and Strategy

Wayfinding strategies need to be integrated seamlessly to create a free-flowing environment. Easing traffic flows, customer circulation, and correct messaging at decision points are some of the simple wayfinding principles. Not only must the visitor's decision be as easy as possible to make, by having the information in the right location and level at the right time, it is also possible to influence what that decision is likely to be by ordering or weighting the information appropriately.

2. Information Delivery

"Less is more" should be the guiding tenet of any wayfinding system. More often than not, the number of signs within a space should be decreased rather than increased. One sign will often do the job of three far more effectively, while architectural environmental elements such as shape, materials, color and lighting can also inform user journeys.

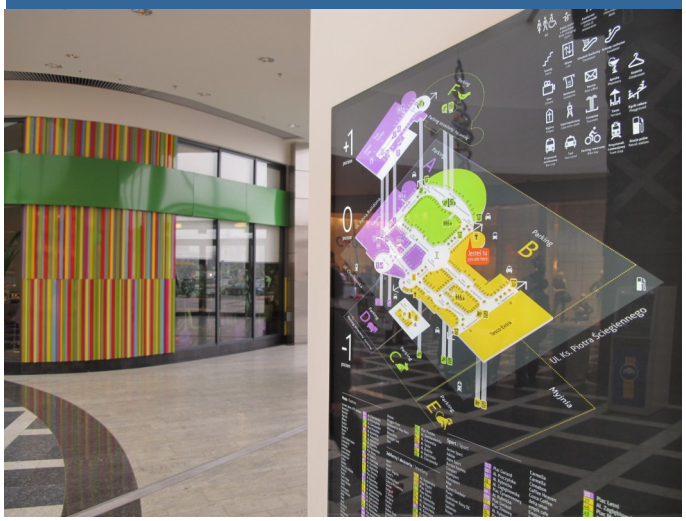
Typography: Selection of the wayfinding typeface must be governed by legibility, not dictated purely by corporate or brand-identity considerations. Sans serif fonts are preferable to serif, as the shapes of letters are more easily recognizable.[5] Individual letters should also be examined for potential legibility problems (similarity between the letters "a" and "o," for instance). How they are seen from farther away must be considered and tested. Words are also read by the shape they create, not just by the letters themselves; and because lower-case letters are more distinguishable, capital letters should be avoided.

Symbology: Providing instant visual references to a facility or a building, symbols obviously benefit visitors who do not speak the language of the development or have learning difficulties. The symbols' relationship to the chosen typeface will be designed so that the weight and style appear to be an extension of the font. The directional arrow should follow the same stylistic formula.

Orientation: A site plan of the space will provide visitors with a wealth of information, and, combined with real-time experience of the surroundings, will enable them to build a cognitive map of the destination.

"Heads-up mapping," the method of orienting maps to the user's perspective, is best practice. Research has shown that people can find their way much more easily when using these maps than the traditional north-facing examples.[6] (An example of head-up mapping can be seen at Silesia City Center, Katowice, Poland, in Figure 3-3.) Moreover, store directories for malls with over 150 retailers need to be designed carefully. Ideally, interactive wayfinding should be introduced for larger destinations where long lists of stores can be a problem, which will be discussed later in this paper.

Figure 3-3
"Heads-Up Mapping," Silesia City Center, Poland



Source: Air Design

[5] Andreas Uebele, *Signage Systems and Information Graphics: A Professional Sourcebook*, Thames & Hudson, London, 2007.
[6] Daniel R. Montello, and Corina Sas, *Human Factors of Wayfinding in Navigation*, 2004, retrieved August 9, 2012.

Language: Generally speaking, the language of the destination will be the language of the state in which it is located. Other considerations may apply if the catchment population is multicultural and some languages are spoken more widely (obviously, it would not be practical to design an effective signing system that caters to every language through the use of translation). However, such elements as pictograms, mapping, lighting and landscaping will be huge aids to speakers of foreign languages.

3. Form and Function

Product design: This is an extremely important part of the wayfinding system, as the style and form of the signs will not only act as a visual connection and wayfinding guide but the quality will also reflect the status of the destination. Likewise, the materials used must support the architectural aesthetics. Signs need to sit comfortably within their surroundings and be easily found when needed, while blending into the environment when not.

Materials: It is imperative that the choice of materials fit their purpose. Their endurance in the elements must be checked to ensure that temperature extremes do not hinder the user's wayfinding experience. Other factors to observe include reflections in glass and glossy surfaces, finger marks, staining, rain drips and warping, and fading in the heat. Signs should be a part of any maintenance program.

Technology: Integrating new technologies may complement a static sign system. However, the need for a more reliable "low-tech" option should remain for those needing quick information.

Touchscreen kiosks can benefit visitors, retailers and owners of a mall. Digital store directories allow interactive wayfinding with an accessible and easy-to-use interface. Visitors can obtain directions from where they are standing to a particular retailer. Step-free access routes can also be specified for disabled visitors. By encouraging engagement with a mall, dwell time and spend will be increased. Retailers are also able to highlight their promotions and encourage footfall by advertising on the screens. Managed properly, these technology uses generate revenue and can become a real asset-management tool for owners.

Free Wi-Fi and dedicated zones for Internet access can make use of space that would otherwise have been empty. These encourage visitors to linger within the center, raising the likelihood of increased spend rises accordingly.

Ease of update and change: Inevitably, things will change in and around the mall over time. The site may expand and contract, and additional signs may even be needed. To ensure continued confidence in the wayfinding, it is important that any changes should be made in the same style, size and finish as existing examples.

A sign-design manual can guarantee that any additional signs or changes match the existing signing scheme. An essential reference tool, it includes all wayfinding elements and sign types, dimensions, locations, color and material references, specifications and even contact information where applicable.

Sustainability: This can be broken down into two areas: the initial impact of manufacture and installation of the wayfinding system, and its subsequent lifecycle cost.

Careful consideration will need to be given to material selection, how signs are powered, how they are maintained and what happens to them if they become redundant. For example, using solar power or internally illuminated signs will not only reduce installation costs but will also use a renewable power source, thus helping to reduce the carbon footprint. In lighting signs, light-emitting diodes are more expensive than traditional fluorescents; however, their operational energy consumption and lifespan outlive any other lighting type and will ultimately save on maintenance costs. Lifecycle costs should be evaluated in tandem with capital costs.

Nonetheless, design efforts are futile if signing contractors do not follow the lead. They must be aware of the environmental issues and adhere to best practices. Exploring the ongoing costs from changing signs, cleaning and general maintenance is also important. If technology is integrated into the sign, the ongoing technical support for regular updates should be assessed.

Inclusive design: Malls and the wayfinding within them must be accessible to people with disabilities. An inclusive wayfinding system will create an accessible, welcoming environment to everyone and will often prove to be the most cost-effective. Many of the reasons people with physical, sensory or cognitive impairments have difficulty finding their way is the same for all able-bodied users.

The many forms of visual impairment make it difficult to specify a solution suitable for all. Sign legibility is governed by an amalgam of factors. Type size, contrast, location and color should all be studied to ensure

compliance with legal requirements. Braille and tactile signs must be considered, although their use is not universal and the number of visitors who are able to use these signs will be small.[7] When reviewing colors for the signing scheme, good contrast must be a controlling factor, with black and yellow rating the highest in this respect.[8] Visitors with hearing or audible impairment will benefit from pre-visit information made available on the destination website.

4. Legacy and Future-Proofing

A successful design for any destination will take into account the fact that the scheme will naturally expand and contract depending on the stages of development, use and evolution over the next decade and beyond. When developing the wayfinding system, the design team must remember that certain legends will change and devise a solution for ease of update. For example, digitally printed maps will allow changes in the mall to be easily updated on the store directories.

The appointment of a dedicated "wayfinding champion," with overall responsibility for its management, will assist with implementing the scheme and ensuring its smooth operation in the future.

The Future of Wayfinding in Retail

Technology offers great opportunities for wayfinding, and while some integration is already appearing in the use of touchscreen kiosks, mobile technology is likely to provide further development in the future through location-based services.

Users of the center's Wi-Fi will be able to pinpoint their exact location through maps already loaded on the app. Much like the touchscreen kiosks, visitors will be able to find stores and plan a route from their current location. Similarly, if Wi-Fi points were installed in car parks, users could mark their locations in order to find their way back later in the day.

Of course, should tracking software be linked to this location-based technology, center management will be able to collate detailed data reports on footfall, retailer involvement and performance and opportunities for further commercialization around the mall.

Conclusion

Wayfinding systems are important tools in the mall administrator's toolbox to ensure the visitor journey is easy and enjoyable, further improving the overall retail experience. By investing time and money into developing a good system, administrators are also able to glean monetary returns through increased visitor dwell time and brand engagement. However, to maximize these benefits, a thorough wayfinding process should be undertaken, considering strategy before implementation. This, along with a move towards the integration of technology, will ensure the system is relevant, sustainable and easy for administrators to manage.

Alan Robertson is CEO of Air Design, a design consultancy specializing in works for the retail destination sector. Based in London, the company also has offices in Moscow and Shanghai. For further information on Air Design or to contact Alan, please email alan@airdesign.co.uk or call +44 (0)845 450 6575.

[7] Berger, p. 36.
[8] Mollerup, *passim*.