

HEALTH CARE - DESIGN

How to create healing, helpful orientation systems

Humans have a natural inclination to seek out reference points that help orientate us in the spaces we find ourselves. Health care and senior living facilities require a specific design approach to guide people through these complex environments. Well-designed and carefully placed signage provides a helping hand through built environments by giving visitors a sense of direction, order and place.

While signage and wayfinding often are associated with each other and can be used interchangeably, there are some differences between them. Signage is a communication tool that informs people of specific information they need to know about a particular facility. Wayfinding, on the other hand, is a term we use to describe visual reference points within a larger orientation system, such as wall graphics, directionals, floor arrows and larger indicators that help people identify where they are within a space.

When designing signage and wayfinding schemes, it is important to create a plan that will reduce stress, avoid confusion and improve visitor confidence. Signage designers should consider the multitude of demographics while developing the systems that create effective pathways, landmarks and visual cues. To execute a successful signage program, create graphic markers that are both practical and visually appealing to have the highest impact on visitor and staff experience.

Creating practical and aesthetically pleasing signage design goes far beyond the selection of the style, materials, fonts and spacing. There are standards and design choices that can be made to make wayfinding a more



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enjoyable experience for all. From a practical standpoint, adherence to the standards of the Americans with Disabilities Acts makes signage convenient and accessible to all users. For example, the use of Braille is a tactile method to assist the visually impaired, and appropriate mounting height accommodates those in wheelchairs. Aside from typographic signage, pictograms and the universal symbols of arrows, restrooms and handicap chairs act as a visual vocabulary to communicate important messages. The benefit of using universal symbols can be helpful to those who do not speak the local language, and thus they serve as useful communication tools in multilingual signage environments such as hospitals.

From an aesthetic perspective, signage should complement the character of the interior and reinforce the brand identity of the organization. Integrating branding and logos within the signage package adds value to the visual identity of the project – it reminds viewers where they are and who is treating and guiding them. Well-designed signage that depicts the brand can help foster a trusting relationship with visitors; so, when viewing a sign that exhibits branding elements, the viewer will form an association between the organization and having a sense of direction, safety and security. Another way to form a trusting relationship between

visitors and signage is to ensure that the sign design is consistent throughout the entire facility to avoid confusion.

An eye-catching approach to signage design is the integration of artwork because it provides touchstones for visitors moving through the space. Printing imagery of nature and abstract patterns on sign backgrounds as well as vinyl wall coverings allows signage designers to incorporate biophilic design, which provides an extra layer of healing to health care environments. This intersection of art and signage has the power to generate healing orientation systems that can be effective on a deeper emotional level that connects people to the benefits of nature. Furthermore, utilizing artwork can be beneficial to those who struggle with memory and spatial awareness. Portraying art in signage and wayfinding allows these patients to connect with the signage more than they would with purely typographic or numerically focused signage.

Some wayfinding programs will assign particular imagery to each floor; this helps visitors associate which floor they are on. For example, at the Denver Health Outpatient Medical Center, the signage and art consultants worked together to create a cohesive theme between the art and signage for each floor, representing the different neighborhoods of Denver. By selecting an artwork from each floor to serve as the background for that floor's signage, designers were able to convey the theme of the respective floor in a subtle yet effective manner.

The primary objective of signage and wayfinding in a health care or senior living environment is to give confi-



Wall and floor vinyl are effective wayfinding tools for guiding people to elevators, restrooms and parking garages.

dence and a sense of control to visitors and patients who may be stressed or overwhelmed, and communicate data in a clear and concise manner. By implementing both practical and stylistically pleasing signage, consultants not only can provide visitors and staff a clear plan of where to go but also highlight branding as well as reinforce the healing elements of nature through artistic imagery. While in the past it was important to blend signage into any given space, now signage is becoming more influential as a part of interior and exterior plans as a tool to guide people through spaces in a meaningful, accessible and fashionable way. ▲

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