Finding the way to a successful brand experience

Keeping consumers and finding new ones is a constant challenge for all organisations. Leaving them to get lost is unlikely to be a successful strategy. But people *will* get lost, and frustrated, anxious and even angry if a clear strategy is not in place for getting people to, and through, an environment. Next time they will find a more enjoyable place to eat, drink, visit and shop. And if they can't find their way to their destination in the first place, they will never be a consumer at all. Successful wayfinding strategies rely on clear, innovative signs and other wayfinding aids across all touch points to enhance the consumer's overall experience. Successful brand experiences rely on clear goals from the outset - If our branding loses its direction, then so will the consumer.

Is getting lost ever a pleasure or is it always a problem?
There are experiences that are designed to enhance impulsive meandering. There are environments where people just want to wander around, to lose themselves in the experience of a building or space. Places like museums, parks and shopping centres are designed to allow consumers to explore. But then, at some point they want to find a café, or a toilet, or the exit. Suddenly the signs, environmental information, building layout – the whole wayfinding system – really matters. If consumers become disorientated, they get annoyed or distressed and it affects how they remember their experience.

How do people find their way?
Wayfinding is a series of interlinked decisions. Each decision affects the outcome of the next one. And the point at which a directional decision has to be made – a decision point – is usually non-negotiable. Decision points can't be relocated without redesigning the building layout and its vertical and horizontal circulation routes.

Some people have a natural sense of direction and a good memory for landmarks. Other people need to constantly study the wayfinding cues that are provided like signs and maps to feel comfortable. And some people pay no attention to their route or surroundings until they need to find a particular destination, and then they look for someone to ask for directions.

There are many different wayfinding aids. Some devices are used consciously like signs, sat-nav or maps. But many other devices are used more subconsciously, such as lighting, flooring, prominent landmarks or architectural features. These more subtle devices can be an effective solution to guiding consumers along preferred routes within a branded environment if they are designed with wayfinding in mind.

Good architectural design of an entrance visually emphasises it much more effectively than a sign stuck above a door ever can. Clearly defined and well-lit internal and external pathways will control the flow of people much more intuitively than a directional sign, however well designed. But signs are needed at key decision points for reassurance and confirmation. The success of an environment relies on all environmental features working together to give the same wayfinding message, through an integrated design approach and holistic strategy.

Is wayfinding really part of branding?

Whatever the consumer journey, finding the destination, then being successfully guided through the spaces has to be part of the whole brand experience. Effective wayfinding systems enable consumers to be relaxed enough to notice other information and objects along the route – something that is essential to the success of retail environments but is important in all branded environments.

Wayfinding information can be used to control the movement of consumers and therefore to determine what they see and when they see it. Differentiated flooring surfaces and creative lighting are used extensively in retail environments, but much less effectively in many other environments. Queue barriers are effective, but are restrictive and may have a negative effect on the consumer's experience if they expected to be able to flow freely through the space. Different brands have different consumer aspirations. Different environments have different wayfinding problems.

We all know first impressions count

Spoken directions given over the phone, a map on a website, or an article in the paper all lead people to create a first impression of the brand and the wayfinding experience ahead of them. The clarity and tone of voice used for giving wayfinding information over the phone is important. Having an accurate map designed to reflect the organisation's look and feel rather than a photocopied page from the local A-Z is also important in creating a positive first impression.

Positive second impressions

As consumers enter the environment, their preconceptions of the brand are quickly confirmed or altered by what they see. As they move through the spaces their behaviour and reactions to the environment will evolve in response to visual, audio and other sensory cues. Lighting, scents, sounds and the layout of the space are amongst many elements that will determine how long people stay in the space.

If a consumer wants a coffee whilst shopping or in a museum, following the smell of coffee is a good experience, but is often not a strategy that can be solely relied on. However, if they want to find the toilet, being able to follow a smell is not a good strategy and clear signs become very important. If the consumer can find them easily, they will resume their journey more quickly than if they wander aimlessly around the space getting lost and disorientated. They may never return to their journey at all.

What do consumers want?

Through consumer behaviour audits it is possible to identify how consumers interact with the environment, where they get disorientated, where they feel comfortable and linger, which signs they look at and those they miss. Audit findings then lead to strategic thinking, which defines the wayfinding issues that need to be considered and solutions that reflect the organisation's brand essence. A wayfinding strategy is essential for all organisations that rely on people moving through three-dimensional spaces, rather than navigating through on-screen information, though some of the same thinking can be applied to both.

Do all buildings need signs?

Sometimes a building is designed to reflect an organisation's brand and be a destination in its own right, without relying on branded signs. The iconic Selfridges building in Birmingham is definitely a landmark building for the city, but does everyone know it houses Selfridges, or where the entrance is? Obviously not, because signs have been installed. The 'gherkin' in central London is a very prominent and memorable building, but do people know what its real name is and which companies are based there?

The world famous Tower Bridge shouldn't need a name sign, but people confuse it with London Bridge, and people failed to notice the entrance to the upper walkways until signs were installed.

Wembley Stadium with its 'arc' is famous as a landmark (as well as infamous because of its construction disputes and delays) before it even opens. As a destination many people already know where it is located and can see it from miles away, but signs will be relied upon when people lose sight of the arc as they get nearer and need to find a car park, stadium entrance and their seat number, surrounded by crowds of people.

Branded waypoints

Exploring alternatives to standard signs can create opportunities to reinforce the brand and enhance the consumer experience. If branded graphics or artworks are designed and positioned to also be 'waypoints' they can be both inspiring and functional. Waypoints are commonly used by the armed forces for navigating through environments where signs do not exist such as oceans, mountains and even underwater. A branded waypoint could be a sculpture, a hanging, a floor graphic, a creatively lit wall or ceiling. But to be effective as a waypoint they need to be describable so people can refer to them in spoken directions and recognise them when they see them. They need to be memorable so people on subsequent visits remember them. And they need to differ from each other so people are reassured they are passing, or waiting at the right waypoint.

How do people use signs?

When other wayfinding solutions are not appropriate and signs can't be avoided, it is important that there are as few of them as possible and those that are installed are effective and reflect the brand style. Most people use signs by first locating it by visually scanning the space, at a height they expect the sign to be located. They read it if the text is large enough to be legible from where they are standing. They then hopefully understand the information, relate it to the environment they can see and move in the direction the sign directs them, or they are confused and look for other wayfinding devices. People with visual impairments can still use signs, but they can't visually scan the space or relate the sign to the environment it is located in. They find the sign through touching the space at a height they hope to find the sign.

People will also use pathways, architectural features, landmarks or lighting to confirm their direction decision. They then look for another sign or wayfinding device that is consistent with the previous one, confirms they understood the last piece of information and reassures them they are heading in the right direction. This process is repeated until they find a sign or other feature that tells them they have arrived at their destination. Each journey stage is inter-linked so one weak link or a misleading sign and the whole process fails.

Why signs don't work

Signs don't work when they are not visible or readable from the angle of approach or when they are not illuminated. Signs don't work when the sign face is too glossy so glare from lighting makes them difficult to read. Often the logo on branded signs has not been designed for signage. For example, the corporate typeface is too small or too light-weight, and the logo uses low contrast colours or is too complex to be legible.

The reason why directional signs don't work is usually linked to the arrow. The two most common problems are that the arrows on the sign do not relate to the text so it is difficult to understand which destination the arrow relates to. Or the arrows on the sign do not relate to the environment so it is difficult to understand where the arrows are trying to direct you.

Making signs work

Though we use much more than signs to find our way, signs are important. The graphics, text and three-dimensional form needs to be carefully designed. Signs should not be the designs for paper or on-screen blown up big and stuck on a square light box.

Signs can be grouped into two key types. Directional signs that always include an arrow and guide people along a route. Locational signs that tell people they have arrived at a destination (also known as identification or destination signs). Branded signs are usually locational signs, but all signs should be designed to reflect the brand essence.

Designing a single sign is easy. However, most organisations need a family of signs, not just one. Things that make all signs work are:

- sufficient colour contrast between the sign and its surroundings. For example, white letters on a dark grey coloured wall, rather than brushed stainless steel on a mid-grey wall.
- sufficient contrast between the text and the sign colour.
- avoiding corporate colours that are too low contrast and selecting a darker hue for use on signs
- avoiding light-weight and italic corporate typefaces and selecting a bold (usually sans-serif) typeface for use on signs.
- text that is big enough to be read from the intended viewing distance and speed (smaller text on signs at eyelevel, for someone walking past, than on signs for drivers travelling at 30 miles an hour)
- symbols that are simple and based on internationally recognised standards.

Making logos work on signs

When designing a logo it is a fair assumption that it will be used on signs somewhere. Whether it is five feet high illuminated letters on the top of a high-rise building, or a logo subtly carved in stone at the entrance to an exclusive club. It is essential that when developing a new logo and selecting corporate type faces and colours someone in the team is asking, "what will the new logo look like on signage?" and "is the corporate typeface suitable for directional signs or do we need to select an additional typeface for signs?"

Signage is often a single page in the brand guidelines document showing a square or rectangle with the new logo placed as it appears on the literature. Signs are a three dimensional object located in a three dimensional environment. They need to be handled very differently to paper-based information to fully utilise their potential as a branding device.

Pushing the sign design boundaries
Short time-scales and tight budgets can lead to the wayfinding strategy being non-existent and the sign designs being slotted in at the end of the project. This leads to standard, functional signs that sometimes work, but will usually fail to inspire and are not likely to enhance the branded environment, the customer experience or the brand message. Signs can be innovative and creative – a wall graphic, a flooring effect, a lighting feature. Especially if the decision points are identified and ear-marked early enough and wayfinding concepts are integrated into the structure of the space

All branding teams need someone to be asking, "How will people find their way around? What will they being trying to find? How can we integrate the wayfinding system into the structure of the space? How can we enhance our branded environment and consumer experience through the wayfinding experience they are going to have?"

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Enterprise IG
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Enterprise IG believes that great companies and their brands are built on a Compelling Truth™. A truth so powerful it is transformational – building preference and differentiation with consumers, customers and employees. At Enterprise IG we partner with our clients to find the Compelling Truth™ that underpins their company, product or service brands.

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Enterprise IG wrote the official NHS guidance on wayfinding and has developed many wayfinding strategies and sign designs for complex environments including Wembley Arena, Tower Bridge, the Natural History Museum, Heathrow Airport, ExCeL Docklands, The British Library, The National Library of Wales and over 25 NHS hospitals in the UK.