

meeting management

BY CAROL SCONZERT

Helping **Your Attendees** Find Their Way

Take your audience into account when developing effective signage at your event

THE FACILITY IS SPARKLING, AN EXCITED CROWD IS LINED up at registration, exhibitors and session speakers are polished and pumped. What more can a meeting planner ask for? How about satisfied attendees who find everything they need in an easy and effortless manner, who glide smoothly down the aisles with ample time to engage with exhibitors, who are rested and alert at each session?

What can spoil this feeling of exhilaration? Attendees and exhibitors — even those who are experienced road warriors — can find a trade show or convention overwhelming. Too often the sources of the distress are the very tools which should be most helpful: wayfinding and signage.

Wayfinding addresses the response to the human need to find our way. The term was first used by American architect David Lynch (*The Image of the City*) as he described the layout of streets, numbering systems, and the use of visual cues in urban design which allow people to form their personal mental maps of orientation.

Today, the term encompasses all forms of stimuli which feed the human senses with information and reference points to guide us. For example, when someone comes upon clusters of comfy chairs, they understand they are in a lounge area. Audio logos appearing on the screen or the dimming of lights communicate the end of a session without words.

Signage is more than text on a panel, especially

in the transient nature of events. In public places and scenarios such as trade shows where large crowds are assembled, effective signage is critical. When used correctly, signs serve to inform, protect, and direct people efficiently throughout facilities. Incorrect use of signage can result in confusion, frustration, and risks to personal safety.

What is the difference between positive information gathering and annoying intrusions? It is the perception your attendees have of how each message they encounter is delivered. When the placement and timing of information is carefully considered, visits to the exhibit hall, session rooms, and special areas take place with a sense of ease.



As with all facets of your show design, the starting point for a successful signage plan is a solid understanding of your audience demographics.



event, and how will they learn it? Consciously prioritize information for them.

Does your audience have a large international base? A recent biotech conference in San Francisco reported that more than 25 percent of the attendees were international, yet there was not a single sign in any language other than English.

Consider Your Audience

As with all facets of your show design, the starting point for a successful signage plan is a solid understanding of your audience demographics.

How many of your visitors are veterans of your show, and how many are new attendees? What will the new folks need in order to grasp the format of your

What is the average age and the gender split among your guests? In certain groups, vision issues should be considered to facilitate readability with fonts and colors. Eight percent to 10 percent of the male population is color-blind, so if your audience is mostly male, this fact should guide the color palette selection for your show design and signage. Poor contrast of type against background is an issue for people with cataracts — over 7.2 million Americans in the 40-69 age group. The age — and therefore mobility — of your audience should also be factored into the time allowed between sessions and keynotes.

Your industry sector will also provide you with clues of how to best convey content on signs. Scientific communities are used to certain formats, such as tables, in the citation of data. Other groups may better absorb information in formats such as line and bar graphs. International icons are useful and familiar tools for visitors and many technology markets have proprietary symbols to serve contextual roles.

Know Your Show

The logistics of your show will guide you in some of your decision making for signage and wayfinding. Do you hold the event in the same venue each year, or move to new cities? This will affect the amount of ancillary signage needed to assist their movements. Is your show heavily weighted with educational sessions over exhibits? Are there multiple buildings and/or floors your attendee must navigate for your event? You may choose to have more “You Are Here” aids on the conference room levels and other strategic points of flow.

Public events require signs with simplified language, bullet points, large type, and arrows. Trade event signage is more complicated; since there are many activities and sessions, more directional signs and props are needed. As you increase the amount of content on the signs, allow more standing room for multiple viewers and be sure that the location is well out of the flow of traffic.

As new technology elements are added to your show, such as wireless kiosks or sync stations, evaluate if traffic patterns are changed or new bottlenecks created. Often the inclu-

sion of new elements prompts relocation of existing components for a more logical flow. ■

Editor's Note: *Look for part 2 of this column in the February issue of *Convene*.*

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Helping Your Attendees Find Their Way, Part 2



In the December issue of *Convene*, this column discussed wayfinding in terms of attendee needs; Part 2 explores facility considerations

AS YOU PLAN YOUR EVENT'S SIGNAGE, CONSIDER FIRST the existing signage of the building, internal traffic flow, and traffic patterns of vehicles and buses around the building. What percentage of your attendees will be arriving on foot or vehicle? The first impression of your show should be equally effective for either mode. Some buildings have a dramatic front entrance but the exhibit halls and session rooms are more conveniently accessed through a

The Don'ts & Don'ts

- ➔ Don't try to make up for overall budget overruns when it comes time to order signs. Some sign orders are submitted with far too much copy to fit the panel size in order to save money. Your signs will end up with type so small or so dense on the panel that no one will bother to read them.
- ➔ Don't use source artwork for your event design that includes an arrow as a prominent element. Arrows on signs should mean only one thing: "Go this way."
- ➔ Don't go overboard with color-coding. Color can be a very effective directional element, but as a rule of thumb, three or four color codes are easily retained; five is pushing the limit.
- ➔ Don't underestimate the value of "You Are Here" maps. People must be able to quickly grasp the layout of the building and their location within it because they must make decisions in a short amount of time.

less prominent door. A large show in San Francisco effectively managed traffic by playing up the deco treatment on the south side of the street, where attendee registration was held. Meanwhile, the north lobby for exhibitor registration was still "in brand" but at a more subdued level of deco for exhibitors who had been on site for several days already. The result? Exhibitors were able to avoid crowds of attendees who were just starting to get their bearings.

Resist renaming building areas to honor sponsors or designate content, despite coaxing from your sponsorship team. Your attendees will use a broad array of tools to find their way around your event, including maps from sources outside your show. Renaming rooms will hinder their efforts to get to sessions, especially when the facility or security staff has never heard of rooms by that name. More dramatically, obscuring facility signage with different names can become a safety issue if emergency teams need to quickly find their way to someone in need.

In addition, consistently use the same name to designate event areas: Once you refer to it as the

E-mail Center on the floor plan don't switch names and call it the Attendee Lounge on other signs and the Cyber Café at its entrance.

Crowds and Safety

Show managers must plan wayfinding with contingencies for event bottlenecks, such as celebrity speakers and popular promotions by exhibitors. Safety is a particular concern when huge crowds are excited to reach a goal. Small framed signage in high traffic areas can become a trip hazard. In some instances, larger signs and props strategically located will divide a large mass of traffic into smaller streams that may move more smoothly. The caveat is that sign content must clearly convey that all avenues lead to the same destination, to avoid hesitation and confusion. Overhead signs for directional content are a great solution in areas where you expect large crowds.

The natural ebb and flow of crowd movement should be a conscious priority when planning signage. Don't place heavy copy signage in areas where you need to keep people moving. In your enthusiasm to create a wonderful entrance unit, don't compel the visitor to read the complete show program reproduced on the curved tower and thus risk whiplash accidents from the crowd. Likewise, stairwells and escalators are a particular hazard if someone is trying to read excessive copy on an overhead archway.

In addition to crowd considerations, think of individual behaviors within the crowd. Are attendees fumbling with the materials they just picked up at the registration area as they move toward a stairwell? Where is the best cell phone reception? Your signage and other wayfinding cues can help or hinder them at these times. ■

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