

SPECIAL REPORT: MARKETING & COMMUNICATION



Exit & Greeting Area
Sortie et aire d'accueil
出口及迎接区

Sign of the times

Effective wayfinding utilises tools ranging from psychology to technology to communicate with passengers and boost customer satisfaction levels, writes Nicole Nelson.

From the 'big picture' to the smallest of smart phone screens, efforts to accentuate wayfinding are promoting high passenger satisfaction at airports around the globe.

To provide some historical context, wayfinding is commonly used in reference to architectural and design elements that aid orientation, and in an airport context, Amsterdam Schiphol is often applauded for its revolutionary efforts dating back to 1967.

Newly built for the jet age, interior architect, Kho Liang le, and graphic designer, Benno Wissing, contrasted Schiphol's neutral interior design with striking signage that stood out sharply in layout, dimensions and colour.

With a 'passengers first' credo, the designers introduced a colour-coded scheme with yellow signs for everything related to arrivals and departures, and green signs indicating all other airport facilities.

Stripped of all things superfluous, this novel approach of simplicity and straightforwardness was not only new but also immediately

successful. Following Schiphol's lead, other international airports soon imitated the system in whole or part. In the meantime, Schiphol continued to improve upon its wayfinding efforts, and radically updated the system with the addition of wayfinding symbols in 1990 under the direction of Paul Mijksenaar.

Mijksenaar's consultancy bases all of its design on applied psychology. "When passengers are under stress and busy with baggage and tickets, they don't want to have to look for signs for information. They want it to jump right in front of where they need it, so the location and the conspicuity is of enormous concern," says Paul Mijksenaar, founder and director of the international design bureau bearing his namesake.

"Every time I tell someone this, it sounds so obvious. But it obviously is not that obvious," he continues, noting that architects often try to hide the signs because they do not fit the landscape of a nice building.

"Many architects will move a sign sideways or colour it grey to blend in and make it less conspicuous," sighs Mijksenaar, who claims that he



Multi-lingual signage at Vancouver International Airport.

is lucky not to have that problem at Schiphol as the airport’s architect shares his desire to focus on the needs of the passenger.

“The passenger comes first and we always keep that in mind. We follow the ‘four Cs’ rule in that we want to make things comprehensive, consistent, clear and conspicuous,” says Mijksenaar.

And such is the importance that Schiphol places on wayfinding that it requires it to score customer satisfaction levels of 92% or higher in surveys such as ACI’s Airport Service Quality (ASQ) questionnaire.

Mark Adamson, director of Geneva-based DKMA which helps coordinate ACI’s customer benchmarking survey, believes that Schiphol’s wayfinding efforts have caused other worldwide airports to take note.

“When we make comparisons over time, we are seeing significant improvements as airports start looking around the world to identify best practices with hints and tricks,” says Adamson.

“One of the things we have found is that there are a number of factors in the survey that if you get it wrong, your passengers really

dislike the airport. Wayfinding is one of those. If you can’t find your way through the airport, people get very stressed and frustrated. That is automatically reflected in their overall opinion of the airport.”

Peter Gargiulo, director of strategy management with Wayne County Airport Authority, claims wayfinding to be Detroit Metropolitan Wayne County Airport’s “halo”.

“There are things passengers say are important to them such as ambiance of the airport, cleanliness of the terminal, cleanliness of the washrooms and things of that nature. But some airports have an element that flavours a passenger’s entire experience, and for us, it is wayfinding,” enthuses Gargiulo.

“I am not allowed to disclose ranking information, but I can say from Detroit, our wayfinding scores are our top scores. When you do the analysis you basically see that wayfinding is a halo. If you are very satisfied with the airport’s ease of finding way, you are much more likely to give us an overall satisfied reading.”

Gargiulo says that the seeds of wayfinding had begun at the airport well before his arrival in 2005 when Detroit and its old Northwest Airlines connecting terminal was considered very difficult and confusing to use. At that time, Detroit was considered one of the worst airports in the world.

“When the decision was made to build a new terminal, they went to a straight-line model, which is very good from an airline efficiency standpoint, but it is also very beneficial from a passenger wayfinding standpoint,” Gargiulo remarks in reference to Detroit’s new McNamara Terminal, noting that it is very hard to get lost in a linear terminal.

Following the success of Northwest’s McNamara Terminal, Detroit proceeded to build the North Terminal to serve all of the other airlines following the straight-line model.

“That has proved very beneficial as well,” he adds. “If you look at the ASQ results, passengers tell us ease of finding their way through the airport is one of their most favourable experiences in Detroit.”

Gargiulo claims that from a design standpoint, a linear terminal effectively shows passengers the way to go making wayfinding almost intuitive. Certainly features such as the McNamara Terminal’s central water feature attracts attention and provides a navigational guideline without explicitly calling out.

He also believes that the terminal’s design exhibits a sense of repetition that makes passengers feel comfortable where they are. For example, at the end of each set of moving walkways, passengers will always find washrooms, flight information screens, shops and food and beverage units at regular intervals throughout the terminal.

At the North Terminal, sensory items such as colour, lighting and ceiling height were used to help guide passengers along.

“You will see blue as a colour that helps intuitively draw people in the ticket lobby toward the security checkpoint which is framed in a different colour,” Gargiulo says, noting that Detroit has implemented Schiphol’s colour coding methods in a modified way in the North Terminal.

He says: “There is a sign that leads you to security, but in as much as we can use the landscape items to help guide passengers, I think it is an easier experience for them.

“Then we add on signage which tells passengers the way to go with consistent language, font size, vertical placement and dimensions. The signs are really used more for confirmation. As you get closer, you get more detail as you reach the appropriate point.”



Detroit Metropolitan Wayne County Airport.

Wayfinding is, however, certainly not just limited to architectural elements and signage to aid the passenger experience of orientation and choosing a path within the airport environment.

The final element in Detroit's successful wayfinding programme is technology that shows passengers the way to go. A video that was made as a promotional tool for the North Terminal is being utilised, as is a multi-user flight information display system (MUFIDS).

"We start from the big picture aspects - the design and the emotional feel of the building - and then move down toward the technical aspects - the signage and technology - to help passengers move throughout the airport," explains Gargiulo.

Omnivex Corporation is a leading provider of display management software solutions for digital signage and its president, Jeff Collard, certainly believes that interactivity is the new direction of wayfinding.

"Messaging has to be contextual with appropriate language and it needs to be tied in with real-time information," muses Collard. "It needs to be supplemented with flights, warnings and alerts, so integrating with the overall airport system is absolutely critical."

Collard notes that wayfinding is a fundamental part of international customer care at Vancouver International Airport. Using both static and dynamic signage, Vancouver Airport Authority focuses on ensuring that passengers, as well as meeters and greeters, get the information they need when and where they need it.

English, French and Chinese is used on all primary wayfinding signage along with international pictograms while Omnivex's dynamic signage via plasma screens is used to provide additional languages such as Korean, Japanese and Punjabi, catering to a truly international audience.

In all formats, digital wayfinding provides airports with an opportunity to tap into a new revenue stream.

Mike Zmuda, director of business development for NEC Display Solutions, says the commercial hardware company's product can be found in 70% of airports throughout the world today. Many of these global NEC monitors display not only flight information and directional signage, but advertising.

"Advertising is the focus for many in wayfinding," reveals Zmuda. "If it isn't, it should be because you are not only promoting your airport, but you are promoting your city and the establishments there. If you are going to help that promotion, it doesn't hurt to put in advertising for those establishments and generate some revenue."

In November 2009, NEC launched Vukunet, a centralised, automated platform that connects digital signage network owners with advertisers in an effort to distribute ads across digital out-of-home networks.

"This new platform links the advertisers to digital signage networks in a way that has never been done before," claims Zmuda, noting that Vukunet can automatically deploy advertising content to digital airport monitors through a patent-pending application that will run on any third-party Windows-based content management system.

"Vukunet makes airports part of an umbrella of networks that are accessible to ad agencies to actually be able to see what ad space is available in a real-time environment."

Perhaps the most unusual wayfinding tool available to airports today is Airport Wayfinder, a 3D animated airport information programme that uses the latest streaming video technologies to offer passengers a virtual tour of an airport via the Internet.

To date, 32 airports across the world utilise the programme, which has been developed by Air Travel Video Technologies in conjunction with ACI.

So, in today's high-tech world you don't even have to be at the airport to find your way around it!

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