

Making My Way by Wayfinding

PMM5 Postscript™ 38

Background Information: Carol Sconzert writes about signage and wayfinding in Chapter 28 in *Professional Meeting Management*®, fifth edition. In that chapter, she:

- Differentiates the three functions of signage
- Distinguishes audience variables
- Discusses how wayfinding applies to the event industry and its application to signage plans
- Describes the basic of print production and how it affects the ordering process

PMM5 Postscript™ Use: This PMM Postscript™ provides information on other wayfinding elements. It addresses:

- What to look for on site inspections that impact wayfinding
- Why wayfinding is important
- Other wayfinding elements: maps, written directions, symbols, landmarks, trails, audible

The PMM5 Postscript™ also includes additional group discussion or research projects to supplement the PMM5 chapter.

Learner Outcomes: After reading this PMM5 Postscript™, you will be able to:

- Describe how wayfinding benefits the meeting.
- List the four design elements in a way finding system.
- List the eight forms of wayfinding clues.
- Create a strategy for using wayfinding clues effectively in a meeting setting.

Related PMM5 Chapter: Chapter 28, Signage and Wayfinding for Meeting Managers
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Wayfinding Defined and Designed

Wayfinding refers to the ways in which people and animals orient themselves in physical space and navigate from place to place (Wikipedia). Wayfinding provides a methodology for people to find their way to and around a destination. The term "wayfinding" was first used in 1960 by architect Kevin Lynch in his book, *The Image of the City* (Lynch, 1960).

After Lynch coined the term "wayfinding", environmental psychologist Romedi Passini expanded the concept to include signage and other graphic communication, clues inherent in the building's design, space planning, audible communication, tactile elements, and provisions for special-needs users (Passini, 1984).

Wayfinding is the process of using spatial and environmental cues to navigate through an environment. Properly designed, a wayfinding system integrates with surrounding architecture, landscape, interior design and lighting, making it easier for people to access and understand the environment.

Basic goals in designing a wayfinding system include:

- Allowing people to know where they are, find the best route, recognize the destination and find their way back
- Creating images that are appropriate and legible
- Developing a unique system that functions well
- Integrating the system into the overall architecture and aesthetic
- Communicating to a multilingual audience

Blending wayfinding elements into key communications like advertisements, marketing brochures, registration, and Web sites provides meeting participants with the information they need — even before they arrive on site.

Which Way?

Why is wayfinding important? Most organizations strive to hold meetings that are user-friendly and member- or employee-focused. Wayfinding systems help achieve that goal. By eliminating disorientation and enabling wayfinding, meeting managers create well-designed and well-managed meetings.

More specifically, a focus on wayfinding improves:

- Functional efficiency
- Accessibility
- Safety
- Feelings of comfort

Good wayfinding decreases:

- Frustration and stress
- Late arrivals
- Time spent giving directions

Wayfinding During Site Visits

When viewing a potential site for a meeting, most people unconsciously consider wayfinding elements. Architecture and design elements on site are the first level of wayfinding clues. Effective architectural and design wayfinding clues include:

- Building layouts
- Corridors separating different functional space
- Lighting
- Use of color
- Use of patterns
- Use of texture

All these clues allow people to quickly grasp and understand the environment.

On site visits, check for:

- Clearly identified arrival points
- Delineation of areas (meeting spaces, public spaces, etc.)
- Memorable landmarks along corridors and at key decision points
- Consistent lighting, floor coverings and architectural finishes in specific types of spaces

Sites with good wayfinding are created through a collaborative effort of design professionals — architects, designers and sign makers. The site will help shape the experience for meeting participants.

Wayfinding Meeting Systems

A wayfinding system incorporates branding, signs, maps and directional clues that tell participants where they are, where they want to go and how to get there. When determining what types of wayfinding elements a meeting manager need for a meeting, start with these design issues:

- **What is the function of a meeting wayfinding system?** What are the needs for this meeting?
- **Who is the audience?** Are they residents or from out of town? Is there more than one user type? How will each navigate the space differently?
- **What is the sequential context?** In other words, where are people coming from? Where might they be headed? How will they be using the various wayfinding elements?
- **What is the medium?** Will it be printed or viewed on the computer? What size will the final piece be?

Building a Better System

A wayfinding system may consist of some or all of these elements:

- Signage
- Maps
- Directions
- Symbols
- Audible clues

- Landmarks
- Trails
- Tactile communication

Wayfinding is using the entire surrounding environment to help people get around.

The PMM Postscript™ will address signage, maps and diagrams, written directions, symbols and audible communication in detail.

Signage

People scan signs very quickly. If they can't find the information they need, they'll look for another source of information. Signs need to be easy to see, read and follow. Their design and positioning should be consistent. Well-designed signs group and emphasize information. They link text and arrows clearly and use color appropriately.

Carol Sconzert identifies the types of signs found at meetings (Sconzert, 2006):

- **Identification** — used to establish a destination or to define the activities as belonging to the meeting. Example: Event Name, names of places or functions "Speaker's Lounge"
- **Informational** — provide background or information. Example: Exhibit Hours
- **Directional** — assist attendees in moving safely and efficiently. Example: signs with arrows

In addition, when planning a meeting a meeting manager also considers the need for signs for internal and external (outside the venue) use. Or whether it is necessary to have signs for vehicles and people on foot.

Signs should be consistent across these factors:

- Typefaces
- Type sizes
- Design
- Names
- Colors
- Symbols
- Positioning/Locations

Basic sign design tips include:

Typefaces — No single typeface provides optimum legibility, but sans serif typefaces are easier to read on signs than serif typefaces. For signs, meeting managers should:

- Use a bold sans serif typeface with a large x-height and thick stems
- Use upper case for the first letter and lower case for the rest of the word

Names — Names, locations and destinations should always be listed in a consistent, understandable and logical way. Names, including locations and destinations, can be listed in one of the following ways:

- In alphabetical order
- By function
- By direction on directional signs
- By floor

Arrows — How text relates to the arrows will affect how easy directional signs are to use. Arrows should:

- Be clearly linked to relevant text
- Show the appropriate direction
- Not be separated from text by too much white space
- Have a consistent style, size and position on all signs

Positioning — Signs should be located where people need to make a decision. Locate signs:

- At a consistent height so people know where to look
- Where people approaching from all possible directions can see them
- Close to eye level so people with visual impairments can read them from a close distance
- Where people can stop and read them without causing an obstruction

Maps and diagrams

A well-designed map will be a great wayfinding aid for many people. A simple site diagram can help them understand the meeting site and see where they need to go.

Maps should show:

- Important details
- Text in a legible size
- Landmarks or prominent site features

Check the final product for readability and impact. Ensure that color is used effectively and consistently throughout.

Depending upon the space utilized, a meeting manager may wish to consider using 3-dimensional diagrams. Three-D diagrams are especially useful if there are changes in level at the meeting site.

Written directions

Depending upon the meeting or participants, a meeting manager may find it beneficial to include written directions. This is especially important if a location is especially difficult to find.

Write directions in bullet points. Directions should:

- Be short and simple enough to remember
- Include road names (as appropriate)
- Include times and distances between stages
- Include landmarks or features people will recognize
- Refer to what the signs on the route and at the site will say

Participants may ask for directions from on-site staff, staff at area hotels or restaurants. Depending upon the scope of the meeting, ensure that staff working in places proximate to the meeting are aware of the meeting and able to assist attendees with directions.

Symbols

Symbols or icons can work by themselves or in conjunction with maps, signs or other visual representations. At their best, symbols can contribute simplicity, clarity and personality to a wayfinding system.

If new symbols are created for a meeting, their effectiveness will depend on:

- How easy the new symbol is to understand
- How the symbol appears on signs, its size and legibility
- How complex the meaning of the symbol is

Test new symbols to find out if people understand them. Check the legibility of the symbols from the distances they are to be viewed. Also, if the audience includes people from other cultures, determine if the symbol signifies something different to them.

Another common mistake is using too many symbols. This will cause confusion just as color coding breaks down when too many colors are used. While there is no set rule on how many symbols can be effectively used, pre-testing will help avoid this mistake.

Audible Communications

Audible communication plays an important role in wayfinding. Audible wayfinding clues include verbal instructions, public address (PA) systems, elevator chimes and water fountains. When planning a meeting, examine the site for any audible wayfinding elements.

On site visits meeting managers can look for these audible clues:

- Are visitors or guests greeted prior to stepping up to the information or check in desk?
- Can the staff easily describe a route to a likely destination for the meeting?
- Are house or self-help telephones available at all check-in/information desks?
- Do airport shuttle drivers, bell staff and wait staff guide visitors to their destinations?
- Are the elevators equipped with audible chimes?
- Are there audible landmarks, such as water fountains, at waiting areas?

Many people would rather ask for directions than use signs. The information staff provides over the phone and around the site is a key part of the wayfinding system. It is important that directions are accurate and easy to follow. Staff giving audible directions must use names that are consistent with those used on signs and maps at the meeting site.

Depending upon the size and complexity of the meeting, a meeting manager may need to provide information for staff to provide verbal directions. Or a meeting manager may need to provide additional written instructions for staff to hand out. Determine whether verbal (audible) or written descriptions are necessary based upon:

- The number of changes in direction and floor level along the route
- Whether there are landmarks they can refer to
- Whether signs on or in the buildings supplement the instructions
- Whether they can divide the route into three or four instructions

A meeting manager can create audible clues during the meeting through the use of music, by locating certain locations near a water fountain or through the use of audio logos signifying the end of a presentation.

Other Wayfinding Clues

Other wayfinding clues include landmarks or trails. A meeting may or may not take advantage of outdoor landmarks or trails. However, even inside, look for landmarks to help attendees navigate the meeting site. Venues may establish "shorelines" and "trails" between major destinations using materials having differing resiliencies, such as concrete and carpet. The meeting site may use texture to differentiate between different areas. The site may have "rumble strips" at the landings of stairs and escalators. Tactile communication, achieved by textured floor coverings assists all visitors, not only the disabled. Other tactile communication includes raised letters, Braille and textured door knobs (to differentiate between public and non-public spaces).

Color

In developing wayfinding elements, color may help the meeting participants more easily navigate the meeting. When using color-coding, it should be:

- Identified as a color-coding system, not just as decoration
- Explained in a legend
- Used consistently on all wayfinding information, such as maps, signs and on architectural and interior features
- Perceived easily especially for first-time attendees or people with a visual impairment

Other tips for meeting managers creating wayfinding systems:

- Don't use colors that could be confused with safety sign colors.
- Don't use more than five colors.
- Don't use colors that are not sufficiently different from other colors.
- Don't use white with yellow, instead always use black or a dark color with it.
- Don't use two variants of the same color, such as dark green and light green

Final Tips

Meeting managers can create more accessible meetings by incorporating some of these final tips into their meeting planning practices:

1. Coordinate all wayfinding strategies into other communications like marketing materials, banners and websites.
2. Standardize names for all buildings, services and destinations, and display them consistently on all graphics applications.

3. Communicate clearly and consistently throughout wayfinding elements.
4. Use easily understood "plain" language.
5. Establish consistency in sign placements and graphics layouts.
6. Size messages and signs appropriately for viewing distances.
7. Furnish generous spacing between letters, words and message lines.
8. Provide an orientation point such as a North indicator or a "you are here" star on maps.
9. Provide participants with wayfinding information prior to the meeting.
10. Include wayfinding details in confirmation letters to speakers.
11. Train on-site staff to mark individualized paths on hand-held maps for attendees.
12. Select letterforms and color combinations that comply with Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Accessibility Guidelines. If people will attend with visual impairments, consider those needs.

Summary

Even though signage plays an important role in wayfinding, the process doesn't rely exclusively on signs. Meeting managers are encouraged to select sites that offer architectural and design cues to aid wayfinding. To supplement existing wayfinding clues, meeting managers should use signs, symbols, maps, written directions and other wayfinding elements to help participants navigate a space. By doing so, meeting managers will be enhancing the comfort of their participants, making the meeting function more efficiently, improving accessibility, ensuring safety and creating a professionally managed meeting.

Group Discussion or Projects

1. Look at the pedestrian international symbols offered through AIGA, a professional design association, available at <http://www.aiga.org/content.cfm?ContentAlias=symbolsigns>. How and where could a meeting manager utilize those symbols?
2. If a meeting will include participants with visual impairments, what wayfinding elements could help those attendees?
3. What role do you think digital signage will play in the future of meetings? Have you seen examples of digital signage?
4. What should a meeting manager do if the venue selected has poor signage and is not navigated intuitively?
5. Why would a meeting manager use symbols in a sign system?
5. Analyze the international symbol for wayfinding? Does it convey meaning? Is it a good sign?



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