

GETTING FROM HERE TO THERE AND BACK AGAIN

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Successful graphic signage and visual displays ideally engage, communicate, educate, and inform the museum guest in a diverse, cross-cultural environment.

Everybody loves a good story. Whether it explains where all the dinosaurs went, how did similar cultural practices spread across the globe, or, how do I find the restroom? A desire to share information and a need to satisfy curiosity are goals to provide a positive experience by cultural venues and institutions.

From cave paintings and cairns to hieroglyphics and emoji's, we humans yearn to communicate with each other. I will explore and share methods of promoting communication in a growing global community using the language of signage, symbols, and color.

Well-conceived and thoughtfully executed wayfinding signs, graphics, photographs, pictograms, and labels get attention and inform people quickly and effectively. Knowing one's audience and communicating clearly are key elements to creating a visual guidance system that works across multiple languages.

For practical purposes, I will confine my focus to wayfinding systems and their contribution to a positive visitor experience.

People don't always behave predictably. Occasionally they may require some visual guidance to influence their movement in the desired direction to obtain the optimal experience from an exhibit space. Design and implementing the effective placement of markers can make a world of difference between telling a story that makes sense and wandering about aimlessly and frustrated.

When visitors need to ask a staff member for directions, it is a clear indicator that the current system that is in place is not functioning correctly. The telltale signs are when visitors have a map of the floorplan in hand and switch their puzzled gaze from the map to any sign to point them in the direction they want to go but, they do not move in that direction. Many times, I have approached such visitors and asked if I may be of service and usually physically guide them to a point where they can reach their destination.

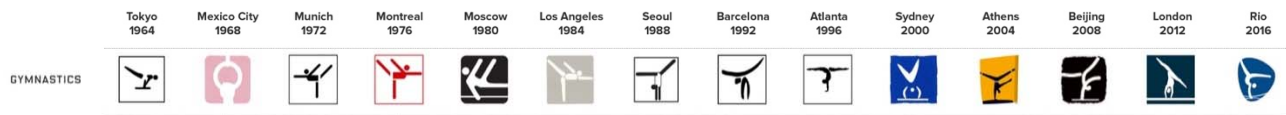
In their 1992 book, "Wayfinding: People, Signs and Architecture", environmental psychologist, Romedi Passini and Canadian graphic designer Paul Arthur state: "In today's complex maze of urban structures, wayfinding is no longer simply a matter of putting up directional signs, it is a multi-faceted problem that requires sharp design skills."

Where design is concerned, I am an avid proponent of the philosophy that less is more. This is particularly true in the matter of informational graphics. It is imperative to clear through the visual clutter and communicate clearly and concisely. In today's world, competition for individuals' attention is fierce and continuous. In order for a signage system to succeed, there must be three elements at work. Clarity, consistency, and continuity. Clarity of message, consistency of imagery, and continuity in appearance and identity.

Clarity of message means, keeping it simple. Information should be presented in a straightforward manner that is easy to understand. I have found that when unnecessary embellishments are added, visual or verbally, in an attempt to broaden a meaning, it tends to obscure the message. Sometimes, we can benefit from the use of a good editor to clear away the bits that tend to get in the way of communicating efficiently.

Consistency of imagery encourages easy identification from one element in a series to the next when placed throughout a building, a park, or a city. This could be the use of color, font, texture, pattern, or style of graphics. Some facilities make it easier to remember where a particular section or department is by assigning each their specific color, for example, magenta for mineralogy, blue for botany, purple for paleontology.

Continuity in appearance and identity is the third element. An example of this is the Olympic icons used here since 1964, representing each event. Whether it is Tokyo, Munich, Atlanta, Sydney, Beijing, or Rio, the host country has added its visual character to Olympic iconography.

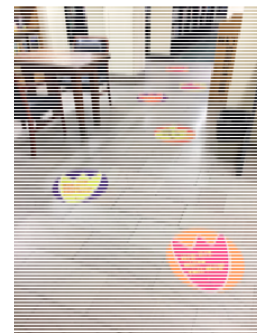
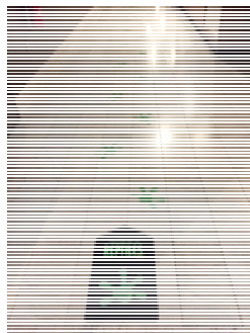


Wayfinding is a unique problem solving that guides people through a physical environment and enhances their understanding and experience within a space. It is particularly important in complex building environments. According to SEG, Society for Experiential Graphic Design, “Comprehensive wayfinding systems often combine signage, maps, symbols, colors, and other communications. Increasingly, they integrate mobile applications, digital displays, RFID, and other wireless technologies.

I want to share a few examples that I have worked on at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History that have met the challenge of providing solutions for unique wayfinding communication.

The Carnegie Museum of Natural History recently hosted a temporary exhibit, Reptiles: Live. The challenge was to direct the attention of visitors to the exhibit down a 300 foot (100 meters) long marble hallway past an exhibit which houses a selection of specimens from our Section of Birds, known as “Bird Hall.”

The solution that Erin Foster, the museum’s content developer, and graphic designer provided was a digital file that I printed, cut, prepared and installed a series of 180 gecko footprints, evenly spaced on the floor, from one end of “Bird Hall” to the entry doors of the exhibit gallery. The point of origin was marked with a large graphic arrow that said, “Follow me to Reptiles: Live.”



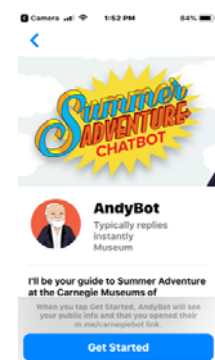
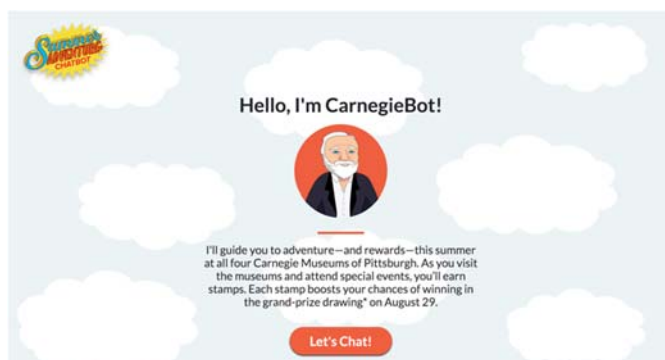
The result was a clear direction to the exhibit gallery with no question of where to go to get in. The solution was relatively low cost and highly effective. I enjoyed watching the children jumping from footprint to footprint, playing hopscotch down the length of the hallway.

As it happens, our neighbor, The Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, has also employed the use of floor graphics. We share an adjoining wall of windows which overlooks the Carnegie Museum of Natural History's dinosaur hall. On the second story of the library, stacks are a series of large colorful stylized dinosaur footprints with text that read, "Hey, Hey Dinos This Way!" The graphics lead the viewer to the windows for a view of our world-class dinosaur fossil collection.

No matter the size of the institution, there are always budgetary constraints. There may arise a need for signage that will change on an ongoing basis. Adhering to a budget can become an issue if the graphics become what is referred to in the sign industry as "three-day trash." With this in mind, I adopted the use of Art Cat, the children's mascot for the Carnegie Museum of Art and developed a reusable graphic. On our in-house equipment, I printed, mounted, and die cut a 48" high figure of Art Cat holding a blank sign and applied a dry erase laminate to the entire image. Now, Art Cat has enabled the Museum of Art to reuse this free-standing figure with messages that can change on a daily or, weekly basis. Rather than producing 20 to 30 of these signs per year, they can reuse this same one board over and over. The result is a sustainable solution that saves both material resources and money. Everybody loves a bargain, especially when it makes them look good.

In nature we can rely upon fixed objects in our environment like the star patterns, moss growing on the north side of a tree or, occurrences like the sun rising in the east and setting in the west to provide a reference for navigation. Over thousands of years, the hippocampus in the brain has developed to retain memories of time and space to recall our journey and guide us to our destination. However, within the past twenty years, people have begun to rely heavily upon the GPS to direct them, turn by turn, through their travels. Paper maps are becoming a thing of the past, and we are increasingly less aware of the landmarks and topography that used to guide us. Instead, we wait for the next audio prompt from our mobile devices to get us where we want to go. In many ways, we have disassociated ourselves from the world that surrounds us, and our experiences rely on a navigation system that is separate from our intuitive selves.

Last Summer, the Carnegie Museum of Natural History, initiated a Summer activity using Facebook Messenger to engage and guide visitors through our collections. The Summer Adventure implements the Carnegie Bot, which is accessed and activated by any mobile device that can use Facebook Messenger. It's as simple as point and click on the QR code and the visitor's screen displays the information associated with that particular location. A description of the specimen and directions to the next stop is provided. Translation to the viewer's native language can be set using the touchpoint on their mobile device, making the experience accessible to all.



I want to share a concept that is in the early stage of development to identify the different departments located throughout the museum. Presently, generic looking cut vinyl lettering identifies many of the museum department doors. Technically, it serves the purpose. Read the label, and we know what is behind the door. We strive for every aspect of our institution to be exceptional. The appearance of the department doors should be as exciting and vibrant as the results of the research that they bring forth. These doors are visible to the public and present a blank canvas on which we can spark imagination and garner excitement. After all, it is the work happening behind the doors that reveal new discoveries.

For the doors to the Section of Entomology, start by creating by going big. By using a super-sized Monarch butterfly and a gigantic Luna moth on a teal blue background, it leaves no doubt as to which department one is about to enter.



The Big Bone Room that houses the research for the section of vertebrate paleontology is in a well-traveled hallway on the ground floor of the Museum. It is easy to walk by without even noticing that there is anything there at all. An exciting visual brings the image of the department to life and make the dinosaurs dance. By wrapping the doors with an Allosaurus skeleton and labeling with a large bold typeface, each doorway becomes an exhibit themselves. Better to be daring and fail than to be timid and succeed.

When creating any sign or graphic, it should be a primary consideration of which materials are best suited for the job. Some essential questions to ask are: Is this for indoor or outdoor use? Longtime exposure to UV rays will cause colors like red and black to fade more quickly. What is the expected lifespan of the piece? A material like aluminum or plexiglass rather than paper or, foamcore, should be used for long term displays. Will it be accessible to the public reach? (little fingers love to pick at any edges. Loose or, not.) What is the best process for building the product?

Taking time to plan at the beginning of a project will pay off substantially in long term success. A collaborative and open conversation with all parties enhances strong relationships and creative outcomes. Success is a more predictable result when we share information and talk with each other about our goals and expectations. It is time well-spent.