



By Tyler Stangier

A Comprehensive Wayfinding and Signage Plan is an Important Part of Your Parking Operations

BACKGROUND

How many times have you been in a parking garage and found yourself completely confused, disoriented... even lost? Or perhaps you came back to your car after attending a three-hour meeting and asked yourself, "Now, how do I get out of here?" It is also quite possible that you had difficulty finding your way back to the garage to retrieve your car in the first place!

The above scenarios are common wayfinding challenges in the world of parking; often resulting in a frustrating experience by our parking customers.

I frequently visit parking facilities of all shapes and sizes and many suffer from a lack of properly planned and designed wayfinding graphics and signage. I'm still amazed at how often I can get confused or completely disoriented – particularly since I'm quite familiar with the array of garage deck layout options – and in many instances, I have a good idea where I need to go!

As parking managers, we all want to provide the most convenient, safe and efficient parking experience for our customers.

The benefits are obvious:

If a customer can use a parking facility with ease (for example, doesn't find themselves driving the wrong way into oncoming traffic), they are more likely to return to park in your garage again and again.

In addition to good wayfinding within a parking facility, let's focus on a component of the overall wayfinding plan most overlooked by the parking community and city/municipal/

university planners alike: getting lost within a parking garage.

Have you ever been lost trying to get to your parking destination, or perhaps the parking facility is full when you arrive and there were no instructions, directions or information on where to find the next closest parking?

The APPROACH

When researching a plan to replace the dated signage in our parking facilities, I realized it was important to approach wayfinding holistically. Our plan includes addressing the entire trip from the time the customer starts researching parking options, to the round-trip to and from their destination.

Some important components of our wayfinding plan:

- Provides web based information that is clearly understood and speaks to how our wayfinding system works.
- Provides information on space availability in the facility and indicates when the lot is full.
- Provides information to all parking groups, such as persons with disabilities and motorcycle drivers.
- Redirects the user if the desired parking destination is full or unavailable well in advance of the driver arriving at the location.
- Directs the user once inside the facility and redirects if a specific area within the facility (ie, a specific level) is full.
- Directs the user where to park within the facility in association to key destinations (ie retail, major attractions etc).

- Directs the user to the nearest egress (stairwell or elevator).
- Orientates the user on which egress will lead them to key destinations.
- Assists the customer in remembering where they parked when returning to their vehicle.
- Directs the user out of the facility and provides information for their return trip.

It also became apparent how difficult it would be to get approval for some components of the wayfinding plan. Retrofitting signage on the interior of a parking facility is one thing. However, signage exterior to the facility on municipal roads, highways and other peripheral routes is quite a different matter.

The University of British Columbia (UBC) operates under the University Act, and much like a city or municipality, is governed by bylaws, regulations and community plans. Therein lies the challenge; getting "buy-in" from the various stakeholders and community officials, while meeting all of the regulatory requirements.

During dialogue with various university stakeholders regarding our wayfinding ideas and plan, we were met with concerns, resistance and challenges.

Some of these challenges included:

- a desire to minimize signage on campus,
- conflicts with the approach from campus planning,
- conflicts surrounding intent - for example, as the University had a clear vision to reduce vehicle traffic coming onto campus, was this wayfinding plan "sending the wrong

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message”, encouraging and facilitating more traffic,

- challenges working and coordinating with two regulatory bodies (University Planning and Ministry of Transportation).

The PLAN

In order to be successful in implementing our signage retrofit requirements and building out our comprehensive wayfinding plan, we looked to hire a consultant with expertise in wayfinding. The consultant needed to have experience in planning wayfinding in a university environment, taking into consideration the challenges we were facing.

Once we found our consultant and prepared our comprehensive wayfinding plan, we were able to prioritize the work. Naturally, we could not implement the entire plan, given budget restraints and the time involved for consultation.

In the end, we decided first to tackle the garage signage retrofits, which included all vehicular wayfinding and parts of the

pedestrian wayfinding internal to the garage. We have just completed this phase and are currently moving ahead on completing our internal pedestrian wayfinding signage, focusing on providing directions to users going to the various faculties and venue destinations.

The final phase in our implementation plan will be to build out the exterior vehicular and pedestrian wayfinding plan. The consultation process is well underway with Campus and Community Planning and other University stakeholders.

CONCLUSION

With any wayfinding and signage plan, the success depends on the effectiveness of the actual signs. Are they visible and do they provide meaningful information that is easily understood? By tackling your wayfinding requirements as a comprehensive plan, rather than “piece meal”, you will provide your customers with an efficient and easily understood wayfinding system.

The benefits cannot be understated and include increased customer satisfaction, increased revenue and decreased traffic congestion.

It is important to plan out the implementation phases to assist in budgeting and communicating the plan. If stakeholders and those who will be affected by the program have a clear understanding of the plan - what it will look like, when it will be implemented and how it fits within the environment - they will be less likely to resist it.

If you can, retain a wayfinding (traffic) consultant who can assist you, not only in preparing the wayfinding plan but also in communicating it out to the community and stakeholders.

Good luck in planning your Wayfinding / Signage plan. ■

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