



Leading the way

Wayfinding pioneer, Paul Mijksenaar, provides his thoughts on how good signage can reduce the ‘hassle factor’ of air travel and make for a smoother journey for passengers.

Effective signage does more than just help people navigate their way through the terminal – it can also reduce passenger stress levels and indirectly generate revenue.

After all, a ‘happy’ and well-orientated passenger is more likely to be relaxed and prone to spend money in an airport’s shops and restaurants than an anxious or lost one.

So what exactly is ‘good signage’ or wayfinding as we prefer to call it? Well, the solution entails more than just putting up some signs. We always apply a set of basic requirements. These include:

- Signs should be conspicuous
- Signage should be clear, unambiguous and comprehensive (avoiding airport and airline jargon)
- Wayfinding should be consistent from access roads to gate
- Signs should be legible for everyone: young and senior, experienced and inexperienced, native and foreign users
- Signs should be attractive and a joy to the eye

How does this translate into the airport environment? As a general rule, we believe that good effective wayfinding should be clear, distinctive and non-obtrusive, as passengers should always have permanent access (field of vision) to flight information boards and other information screens.

This is important because people constantly want or feel the need to check them for information about their flight – delays, gate changes, cancellations, boarding announcements, for instance.

And when the passenger does decide to proceed to their gate, they should be able to follow a consistent flow of conspicuous, readable and unobstructed signs that will direct them to their destination without delay.

Only when passengers know – mostly by experience and hearsay – that they can rely on the wayfinding system, are they willing to commit time for shopping or feel at ease enough to have a drink or a quiet meal.

Indeed, at some of the airports we have worked for, this works out so well that some passengers have nearly missed their flights because they became

so totally absorbed by the delights of the airport that time, and almost their aircraft, passed them by!

Lessons to be learned? I believe that architects and other laymen in the field of visual information design, often seize the colour coding box to hide their incapability to create ‘intuitive architecture’.

Some airports, for example, have colour coded parking garage levels and concourses, but I doubt if many passengers are even aware of this, partly because of lack of standardisation but mostly because they are more focused on the series of rather complex tasks they are being asked to perform.

What could be really useful for travellers, is to recognise the process of their itinerary at an airport: departing, check-in and/or ticketing and gates and, on their way out: baggage hall, arrivals hall, public transport and parking.

In between, they need restrooms, airport information and other common airport facilities.

Wayfinding should therefore articulate these processes and colour coding is actually one of the most powerful means of doing this, as has been proved at Amsterdam Schiphol and New York’s JFK, Newark-Liberty and LaGuardia airports.

Everything else like architecture, shopping and advertisement has to yield to this basic traveller’s need to negotiate their way through the terminal as quickly and easily as possible.

It is in an airport’s best interests to get wayfinding right, as doing so will help increase customer satisfaction levels that that could lead to more passengers and, at the end of the day, more revenues. AW

About the author

Paul Mijksenaar is founder and partner of Mijksenaar Wayfinding. The company counts Amsterdam Schiphol, New York JFK, Washington Dulles, Frankfurt Airport and Athens airports among its clients.