Ten Questions

1 What is "Wayfinding?"

Wayfinding is the art and science of directing people in motion. It involves the orderly presentation of information needed to help people understand their location relative to the environment and find their destination.

A number of visual and verbal cues are used to convey that information: architecture, lighting, landmarks and wayfinding signage, to name a few. These elements also serve the purpose of conveying an organization's brand elements.

2 When is wayfinding assistance needed, and what are the benefits?

Wayfinding assistance is needed if people complain of difficulty finding their destinations, staff are frequently interrupted to give directions, and traffic patterns need to be reworked to limit circulation (i.e. through residential areas in a city, patient care or staff-only areas in a hospital, or secure areas in a corporate facility).

Benefits include less staff downtime, better traffic flow along approved routes, increased customer satisfaction and higher rates of return.

3 How do I start working on a wayfinding plan for my organization?

Gathering a group of stakeholders affected by wayfinding issues is a good start. These should include administrators, facility managers, marketing/ branding staff and maintenance personnel. Analyze your organization's current wayfinding program and the challenges your customers face. Build a business case for the benefits that can result from more effective wayfinding, including less downtime for staff, a higher rate of customer return, etc. Developing a comprehensive wayfinding signage standard results in lower costs for future signage changes and ongoing maintenance.

4 How and when do I select a wayfinding firm?

Through a Request for Qualifications or a Request for Proposals, as you'd select any professional consultant or service provider. When doing so, review the firm's qualifications and similar experience, past and proposed fees, testimonials from previous clients, and professional organizations with which the firm is affiliated.

5 What information do I need to provide to the firm?

Your current brand standards and usage guidelines, nomenclature for departments and destinations, whether each destination is primary or secondary, site plans and floor plans (if appropriate), and vehicular and pedestrian circulation logic. The wayfinding firm will conduct a site visit to collect this type of information and observe current wayfinding patterns, while gathering feedback from stakeholders on wayfinding challenges and the potential look and feel of the new system.

Ten Questions

6 What should I look for in an effective wayfinding system?

An effective wayfinding system combines an appropriate design aesthetic that reflects the organization and reinforces its brand. A simplified signage system allows for easy and inexpensive updating as destinations change. At the heart of the system is a logical, consistent information hierarchy that uses easily understood destination names delivered at the appropriate time, so that users of the system are not overwhelmed with too much information, or left stranded by too little.

7 How is a wayfinding system approved?

Depending on the type of system and your organization, a wayfinding system typically goes through several approval stages. The system's look and feel are reviewed and approved by a team of stakeholders representing the client, as are the locations of wayfinding elements and the messaging logic. The system may need to be approved by governmental agencies as well. If needed, a mock-up system can be installed along selected routes to test the effectiveness of the signs and messaging in the environment prior to final approval.

8 What should I look for in designing a wayfinding system's elements?

The signs and other elements that make up a wayfinding system should exhibit simplicity, consistency, brand continuity and ease of fabrication. The various elements should relate to each other visually, so that people using the system can recognize the next wayfinding device in the environment as they encounter it. Messaging must be at a sufficient scale, and the number of messages appropriately limited, that users can read and react to the messages in time. This means that larger text and fewer messages are required for drivers on fast roads, for example, than for drivers on slower roads or for pedestrians.

9 How do I know what wayfinding information goes where?

An Information Hierarchy should be established early in the development of a wayfinding program to identify the sign types needed, their function, and the order that they appear as a person navigates the environment. Once the visual design of a system is approved, Sign Location Plans and Sign Message Schedules are used to verify where the various elements of the system are located, and the messaging that appears on each sign.

10 Who produces the signs that make up a wayfinding system?

A sign fabricator or fabricators are selected to produce the signs that make up a wayfinding system. This happens through a process of pre-qualification interviews, sign sample submittals and an open bid process. The wayfinding firm assists through the development of bid documents and involvement in a punch list program following the installation of signs; this assures that the finished product looks and works as specified.