

Where do I go from here?

By Jackie Kinder and Catherine Eckman

Good signage makes for a more user-friendly library

A good signage system is one of the most important elements involved in promoting user satisfaction in any building open to the public. This is true whether the building in question is a shopping mall, bank, hospital, or library.

The user's perceptions of the building and its services will be affected, consciously or unconsciously, by the building's signage or lack thereof. Signage is the first thing most people will seek upon entering a building, especially an unfamiliar one. If signage is not available, or if it is inadequate or unattractive, the user's perceptions and expectations can be negatively affected.

At Thomas Cooper Library, University of South Carolina, a major signage project was recently completed. This project was initiated as the result of a perceived need by both library users and staff for directional and informational signs throughout the building. The primary objective was to enhance accessibility to library collections and services.

Background

Thomas Cooper Library was built in 1959 to be used as an undergraduate library. In 1976 the building was enlarged and became the main campus library, housing both the graduate and undergraduate collections. In this second phase of construction 290,000 square feet were added by expanding onto the rear of the library and building additional levels underground.

Because most of the newer addition is below ground, users are not immediately aware, upon entering the building, of the actual size of the library. Stairs to the lower levels are not visible or easily accessible.

For aesthetic reasons the building had never been equipped with adequate signage. Indeed, there were originally very few signs in the building. Those that did exist were either confusing or too small, and thus often overlooked.

While the library had been in need of adequate signage for many years, two major organizational changes spearheaded this particular project. First, a substantial staff shortage necessitated the reassignment of stack-level personnel to other library departments. There would no longer be staff available on the lower levels to assist users. Second, the building's floors were renumbered. It was now critical that users be able to find their way around the building with little or no help.

Since students often perceive the library as confusing and unorganized, and are intimidated by its size and the amounts of information available, it is important for signage to enhance the image of the library as user-friendly and not add to an already existing negative image. We determined that a combination of signs and various library handouts (e.g., a self-guided library tour handout which included a building cross section and floor plan handouts for the various stack levels) would be necessary to alleviate user frustration and help users find their way around the building. The signage project was, therefore, part of a larger effort by the library to help users become more self-sufficient. The accompanying checklist was designed to aid in the planning and implementation of the library signage project.

Conclusion

Quality signage is one indicator of a user-friendly library. A successful signage system involves both planning for initial implementation and periodic review to allow for changes. Signs appropriate at one time will most likely need to be revised as the library adds or changes services, access points, and functions.

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Basic considerations for good library signage

Preliminary planning

- Walk through the building and try to experience it from the user's perspective
- Look at the building's floor plans for ideas about where signage is needed
- Determine what the most frequently asked directional questions are
- Ask for input from other library staff
- Determine what type of signs are needed (e.g., service points: circulation, reference; facilities: copiers, phones, restrooms; directional: getting around the building, getting around a floor, getting out of the building)
- Look at sign catalogs and samples for ideas
- Determine sign format (e.g., moulded-injected letters, hanging signs, signs mounted on walls, painted-on signs, or a combination of the above)
- Select the type of lettering to be used
- Select colors to be used for lettering and background
- Determine how large signs and lettering should be
- Determine what signs should say (this should be consistent throughout the library, including library handouts)
- Determine the number of signs needed

Successful signage should meet the following criteria

Visibility

- Signs for major service points should be visible from the entrance if possible
- Signs should be visible from a reasonable distance
- Signs should be visible from any direction
- A building cross section sign should be visible from the entrance to help orient the user to the building

Aesthetics

- Signs should not clash with the building's decor or purpose
- Signs should be numerous enough to ensure that users find what they need, but not so many as to appear visually overwhelming or cluttered

Maintenance/costs

- Signs should be difficult to deface or vandalize
- Signs should be easy and inexpensive to update or change
- Signs should be durable
- Signs should be easy to clean
- Cost of signs should include installation

User-friendliness

- Signs should be easy to read
- "YOU ARE HERE" indicators in contrasting colors should be used on building cross sections and floor plans
- Building cross sections should be located in stairwells and both inside and outside of elevators
- Floor plans should not be so detailed as to be confusing to the user
- Exit signs should be clearly marked
- Braille signs should be included