EXTERIOR WAYFINDING

Taking on the Great Outdoors

*Wayfinding experts offer sound advice for dealing with large exterior projects*

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BY BILL SCHIFFNER

TRAVELING TO ANY TYPE of public location should be a seamless a task, and proper exterior wayfinding signage is the essential element that can guide visitors to their destination. In addition, this signage is often a visitor's first impression of an organization's brand. Although there are some great wayfinding products on the market, taking on a large-scale exterior wayfinding project such as a university, shopping mall, hospital or outdoor stadium can be a daunting task.

"Every project is different and you need to be prepared for that," says Alon Bar, general manager at Vista System, LLC, Sarasota, Florida. "Make sure there is nothing about this project you do not understand. That is key. Once you understand the purpose of the building or location and understand the flows, the rest will fall into place," he adds.
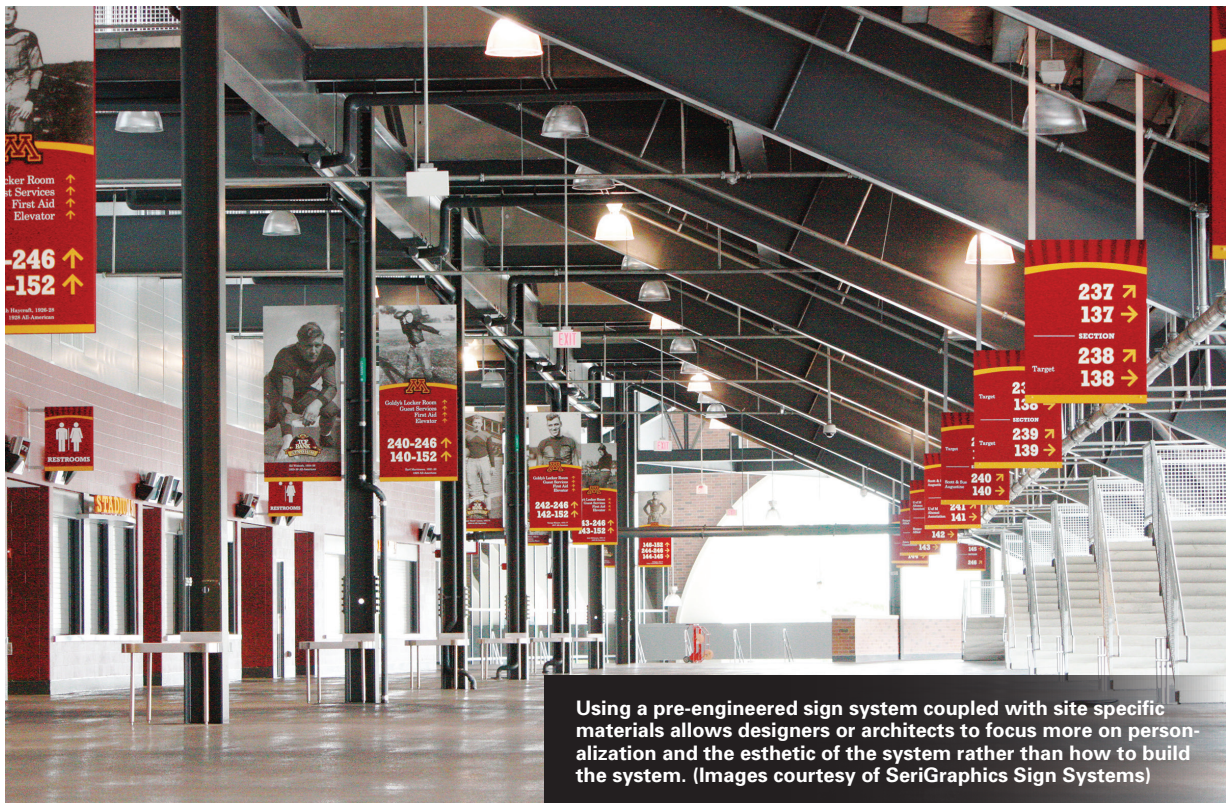
Using a pre-engineered sign system coupled with site specific materials allows designers or architects to focus more on personalization and the esthetic of the system rather than how to build the system. (Images courtesy of SeriGraphics Sign Systems)

Cloud Gehshan Associates recently created a full set of exterior directional signage for the University of Chicago. (Image courtesy of Cloud Gehshan Associates)

Bar says that effective wayfinding begins with a well-thought out, well-engineered plan that anticipates directional needs, guides visitors to key destinations and one that ties both outdoor and indoor locations together.

He adds that when creating a signage system for an area, understanding the building or architectural structure it is essential to develop a strategic wayfinding scheme. "Research is an important step to understanding the build environment and where information is needed in order to maximize legibility of the wayfinding system," he adds.

"The function of wayfinding is to inform people where they are going and

For its project at the University of Chicago staff from Cloud Gehshan Associates tested all the key sign types. "First a local fabricator made mockups that the design team viewed in place; these helped us confirm legibility, colors, sign size, placement options and overall appearance in the landscape," says Gehshan (Images courtesy of Cloud Gehshan Associates)

Gehshan says the stone and glass gateways for the University of Chicago were also tested in mockup form; it was especially important to confirm the appearance and scale inexpensively before the gateways were constructed. Collaboration with the fabricator greatly enhanced the effectiveness of the project. (Image courtesy of Cloud Gehshan Associates)

their surroundings," adds Bill Freeman, V.P. of architectural signage, Howard Industries, Fairview, Pennsylvania. "Don't make people think—show only what is needed and remove excessive information. You need to approach the project through the eye of a first-time visitor to the facility."

Working Closely with the Client

Virginia Gehshan, principal at Cloud Gehshan Associates, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, says the key to any large project is in the overall process. "This means that the right individuals on the client side need to be included. When working on a complex university or medical project, for example, the stakeholder group typically includes at least 10 departments. There are many individuals who have a vested interest in a successful wayfinding system—and these people have valuable insights to share.

Halverson says developing a prioritized outline of deliverables, project requirements, constraints and goals at the beginning of the project will help. (Image courtesy of SeriGraphics Sign Systems)

Halverson says its key to outline wayfinding and branding objectives as defined by the proper stakeholders of the site. Listing of primary, secondary and tertiary destinations within the overall space. (Image courtesy of SeriGraphics Sign Systems)
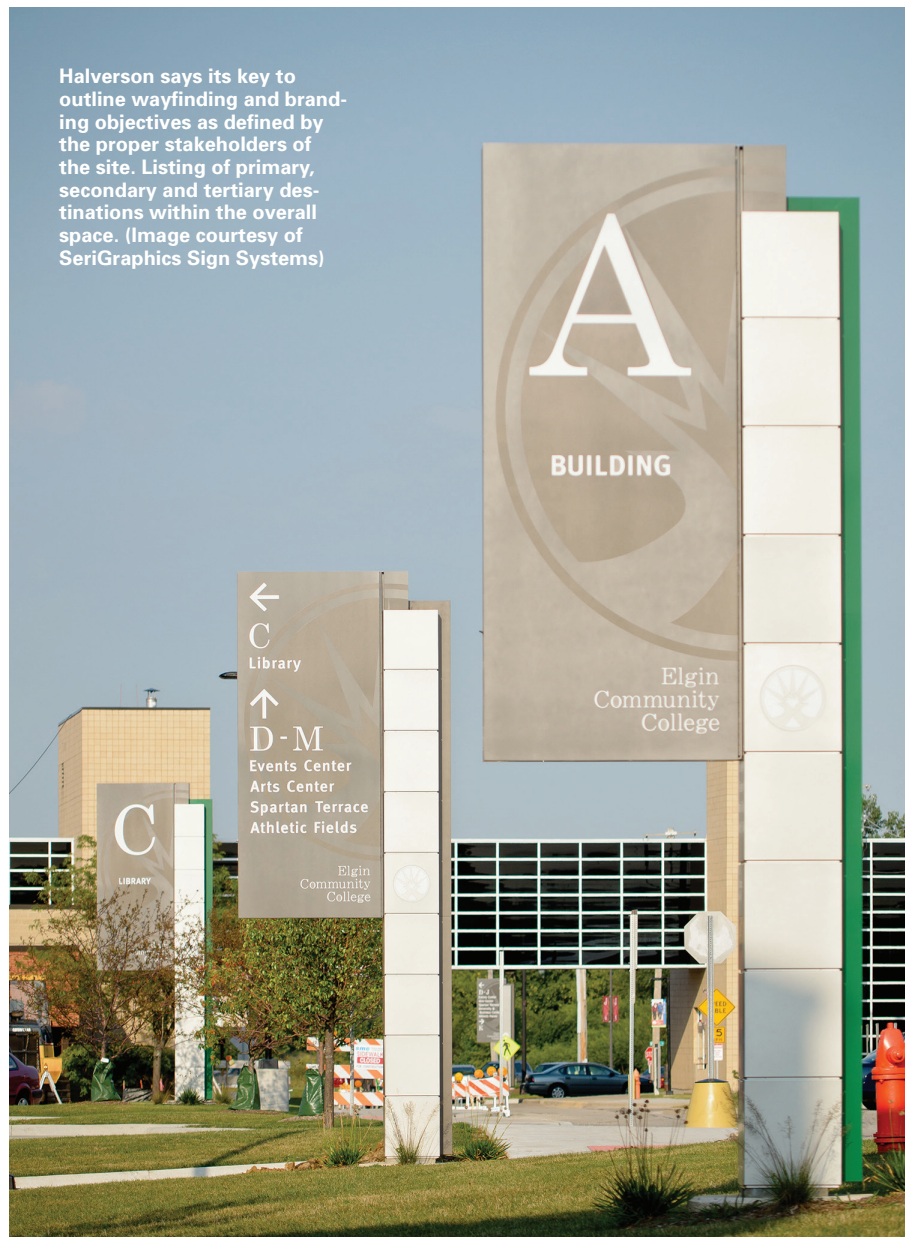
An inclusive process also ensures 'buy in' which helps with ongoing funding for implementation."

She adds that other crucial participants in the stakeholder process are the individuals who will manage and maintain the system. Their needs must be considered or the system will eventually break down. "Part of our role is to help the client determine which department receives and approves sign requests, updates sign messages, facilitates physical maintenance and coordinates with sign vendors."

New Elements Coming into Play

Adam Halverson, president/CEO, SeriGraphics Sign Systems, Minneapolis,

Minnesota, says one of the big design trends he is seeing is an increased demand for branded elements, unique finish materials and electronics incorporated into pre-engineered sign systems. "Using a pre-engineered sign system coupled with site specific materials allows designers or architects to focus more on personalization and the esthetic of the system rather than how to build the system. It also saves time for the designers, has less manufacturing surprises and is generally faster to manufacture."

He points out that there is a whole universe of areas to consider when designing, programing and implementing a successful wayfinding system. "The best place to start is the Society

Halverson suggests identification of intuitive areas for wayfinding signage, icons, visual cues or other navigational landmarks to help with wayfinding. (Image courtesy of SeriGraphics Sign Systems)

(Right) Bar says a good plan for choosing the right materials is very similar to choosing a good background before taking a picture in the world of photography. "Choosing the right material is key for getting into design." (Image courtesy of Vista System LLC)

for Experiential Graphic Design (SEGD - *www.segd.org*). For more than 40 years the members of this organization have helped define and master this question for our profession. I believe wayfinding is 50 percent art and 50 percent science; and there are no wrong answers, only wrong turns and confusion if a project is executed poorly. Thoroughly understanding your client objectives and goals prior to starting is step one. The thousands of decisions, plan reviews, site walks, creative sessions, code reviews and discussions you conduct thereafter should lead to a well-designed and functional wayfinding system," he adds.

Outdoor Challenges

Freeman says there are many challenges for projects of this scale. "First, before you dig you really need to look at local code compliances and make a call to the local 811 hotline. What is hidden under the surface can sometimes require the best-made plans to be changed."

He says to try to design the signage using physical elements, which exist on the proposed signage site. "For example, focus on the architectural shape of buildings, doorways and windows. Try to incorporate any logos where available.

Freeman says that with any project you need to approach the project through the eye of a first time visitor to the facility. (Image courtesy of Howard Industries)

Make certain to use easily read fonts with contrasting colored background. Again, check local codes to make sure your ideas will be expectable. Design a sign that is modular so future changes and expansion is not a problem. A site survey is always a good idea so placement of the signs can be functional," he says.

Material Aging Issues

Bar thinks one the biggest challenges lies with the materials being used. "Natural materials age in a more static way but are harder to work with and harder to shape. Synthetics are an option because they are very easy to shape but the elements can very quickly make these unattractive. Seeing what happens with natural material the challenge is to bring the same type of aging reaction with material that is easier to form. Very similar to choosing a good background before taking a picture in the world of photography with this challenge choosing the right material is key for incorporating it into the design," he concludes.

Taking a Test Drive

Gehshan says that prototyping is another important key when working on large outdoor products. "It is very important to 'test drive' a design solution, whether in temporary or permanent materials. For example, at the University of Chicago we tested all the key sign types. First a local fabricator made mock-ups that the design team viewed in place; these helped us confirm legibility, colors, sign size, placement options and overall appearance in the landscape."

She adds that after the bid was awarded, the fabricator made prototypes in the final materials. "These provided an opportunity to check the sign detailing. The stone and glass gateways were also tested in mockup form; it was especially important to confirm the appearance and scale inexpensively before the gateways were constructed. Collaboration with the fabricator greatly enhanced the effectiveness of these activities."

Other things to consider are keeping within city and state guidelines. "For all exterior projects we must comply with ADA and common sense guidelines for

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height (to bottom of the sign), protrusion (how far the sign panel extends from the post), placement (preferably away from foot traffic such as in a planting bed), type sizes and type contrast level. For exterior vehicular signs the MUTCD (Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices) rules for cap heights, font choice, reflectivity and the number of sign messages are primary," she adds.

Freeman suggests trying to design the signage using physical elements, which exist on the proposed signage site. For instance, focus on the architectural shape of buildings, doorways and windows. (Image courtesy of Howard Industries)

Other Points to Consider

Halverson says it's wise to develop a prioritized checklist of deliverables, project requirements, constraints and goals at the beginning of the project that will also help. Some of these items include:

• Conducting a city ordinance and code check or discussion with the proper city official is extremely important. Understanding these rules before you begin will save you the embarrassment and time loss if the city is not on board with your plan.

• Understanding previous challenges navigating to site destinations.

• Modalities: pedestrians, autos, bikes, public transit, etc.

• Outline of required signage for compliance versus navigation.

• Understanding the 10-year master plan (design a scalable solution).

• Identification of intuitive areas for wayfinding signage, icons, visual cues or other navigational landmarks to help with wayfinding, remember successful wayfinding is not always best solved with just "signage."

• Understanding the user demographic, languages and possible need for universal symbols.

• Understanding pre-engineered sign systems and infrastructure requirements needed to fulfill the functional requirements of the project.

Teaming Up with Design Firms

There are huge benefits to sign companies that offer these services in-house. Halverson adds. "Customers love the one-stop shopping approach and profit margins are usually slightly higher, plus you are bringing value to the project (not just a commodity). However, on medium-to-larger scale projects, I feel it is best to team up with a professional SEGD-affiliated design firm that specializes in these services. There are a very limited number of sign companies that can successfully perform the design and build of a strategic wayfinding system. Many sign companies try and most fail as the experience and resources required are simply underestimated."

He adds there is a new network just recently created that provides designers with pre-set sign families that feature an integrated set of interior and exterior wayfinding signs. "With access to this online network, designers can select from a series of cohesive sign families and then easily modify the design aspects of that family to achieve a finely-blended wayfinding signage solution to match their project environment. A complete documentation packet is generated with supporting design drawings specs from CSI (Construction Specifications Institute).

The network—called SeeSaw—is the first of its kind, and is presently in the final stages of its beta release. During this beta stage designers can access the site, without credentials, at *www.seesawsigntools.com*. Tools like SeeSaw will help facility managers, owners, and architects find turnkey design and build sign partners in their area," Halverson concludes. **SDG**

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