



POST-AND-PANELS

BY MIKE ANTONIAK



POST PLANNING STRATEGY

Careful considerations guide the design of effective post-and-panel signs.

To many visitors, a post-and-panel sign is merely a means to an end—providing information on what's nearby or help guide to a destination. However such casual observers miss the thoughtful collaboration and planning that often guides the design of these signs.

Matt Cavalier, project manager and designer with Cloud Gehshan (cloudgehshan.com) in Philadelphia, says several factors should be taken into consideration when designing post-and-panel signs—whether they stand alone or act

as components of a broader sign system. These include the setting and immediate surroundings, the personality of the host organization and facility, the brand logo and color themes, adjacent architectural or natural elements, viewing distance, and ultimately, the message these signs must convey.

“Some organizations want signs that are more traditional, some want something more contemporary,” says Cavalier, noting his firm has designed them all.

The company specializes in “experiential graphic design” as consultants

on graphics programs that often include informational and wayfinding post-and-panel signage. Its designs assist and inform visitors to parks and corporate complexes, campuses, and municipalities, and many of its projects start from the “ground up.”

For example, the College of New Jersey recently hired the company for a new wayfinding strategy and sign system for the school's 289-acre campus. The design incorporates the school colors in panels with flourishes borrowed from the college's classic Georgian Colonial

All Photos: Cloud Gehshan.

architecture as visual reminders visitors are on campus.

Owners of established facilities also turn to Cloud Gehshan to replace, upgrade, or expand existing sign systems. “There are instances where we’ll work with a client who wants us to look at their system with a fresh set of eyes and improve it,” adds Cavalier.

For clients with multiple locations, post-and-panel signs can serve as branding tools, with a look that immediately lets viewers know they have arrived.

For example, Cape May County, a popular beach destination on the New Jersey coast, contracted Cloud Gehshan to develop a comprehensive wayfinding system to guide motorists, pedestrians, and bicyclists throughout the region’s sixteen municipalities.

The design emphasizes the area’s environment and association with summer fun at the shore. The posts are built from recycled pier pilings, while the panels are painted from a pallet of distinct but complementary colors for each municipality. On the back of each sign, graphics like silhouettes of dune grass dress up the signs as a reminder to visitors of where they are.

Guiding Design Concepts

“A sign can look great, but if the message is incorrect or unclear, it hinders rather than helps the target user,” observes Cavalier.

For post-and-panel signs, there are design goals to achieve:

- Legibility and ensuring that contrast and letter height is properly sized to be read at desired distance;
- Complying with ADA or other requirements;
- Using materials and fabrication methods to ensure durability and resistance to vandalism/tampering;
- Complementing the environment while improving the first impression of visitors; and
- Displaying the right balance of programming and content or functionality within the confines of the sign panel.

The design process often involves several sessions of back-and-forth discussions as Cloud Gehshan’s team works with clients toward the design that ful-

fills all their requirements.

“We sometimes have the freedom to be more creative in our designs, while some of our more corporate, university, or hospital clients may already have a set of standards in place that we have to

LEGIBILITY, CONTRAST, AND LETTER HEIGHT ARE SOME IMPORTANT DESIGN GOALS TO CONSIDER FOR POST-AND-PANELS.

work within,” says Cavalier.

The interpretive and wayfinding post-and-panel signs at Tylor Arboretum, an outdoor living museum near Philadelphia, showcase that creativity.

Twenty-five illustrated panels guide visitors around and highlight its natural

attractions. The panels themselves are curved, often setting informative text against graphics or photos depicting the arboretum’s plants and wildlife.

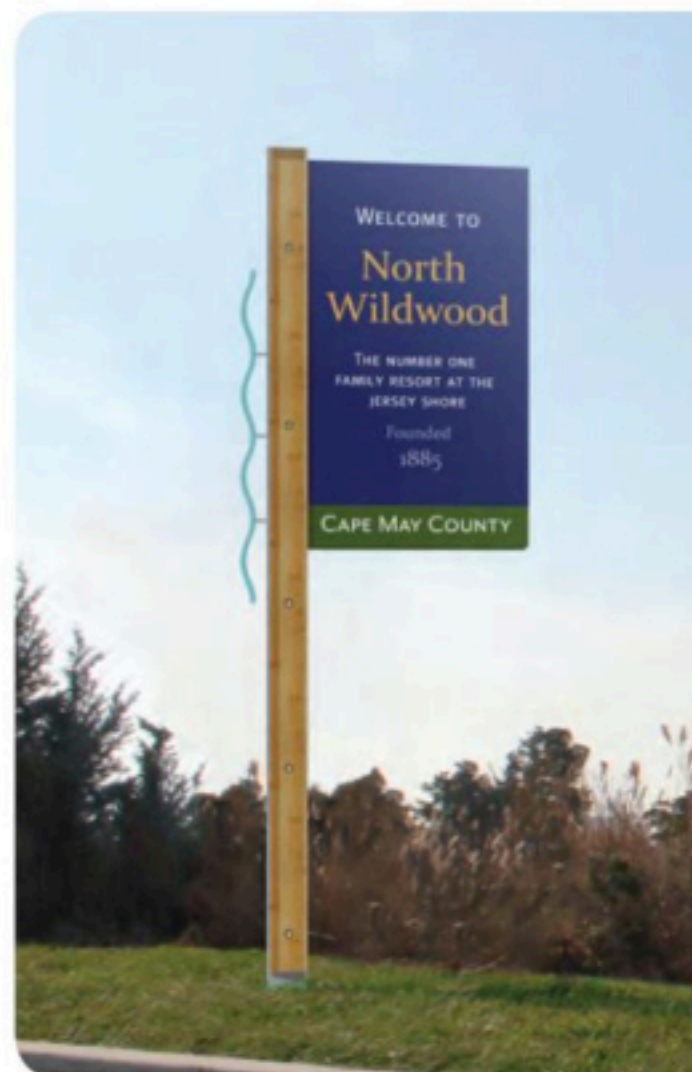
“We designed the structure and aesthetics with posts fabricated to mimic waves of grass, a natural element of that environment,” notes Cavalier.

A more traditional approach to post-and-panel signs can be seen at Elon University in North Carolina. The institution commissioned Cloud Gehshan to develop an integrated wayfinding and signage master plan reinforcing its brand identity.

The shape of panels and frame elements borrow from the school’s architecture and official colors. A compatible blue is featured where needed to alert visitors when they are headed off campus to the closely associated town of the same name.

Visual Audit

On all projects, the design process typically begins with a site visit and a visual audit of the setting—and existing signage, if there. On new projects, the concerns may be best placement and size of signs. Where post-and-panel signs are in place, the intent is to encounter them





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like a typical user. "We want to experience the sign like a first-time visitor and see how well that sign works for someone trying to get around," explains Cavalier.

Then the collaboration begins as Cloud Gehshan's team sits down with

client representatives for initial discussions. Their goal is determine and realize the client's expectations in a way that complements their identity graphically.

The design challenge on post-and-panel signs can be to stand out so they

are readily apparent yet still complement their surroundings.

"In addition to taking cues from the built environment, we also consider natural surroundings like foliage and native plant species," says Cavalier. "On occasion, we have also been requested to develop signage that is very contemporary or simple that contrasts or stands-out from the architecture and landscape elements."

For Pennsylvania's multi-location Natural Lands Trust, Cloud Gehshan's challenge was to educate visitors about the organization's commitment to conservation while guiding them around several preserves.

The finished design combines wooden posts sourced from native species with easily installed and maintained panels. A distinct red was chosen for consistency and to stand out against the greens of the natural environment.

It typically can take several rounds of revisions before an acceptable design is achieved. Occasionally the team must convince clients of the merits of a fresh design or revised content. "When there's a system already in place, sometimes there's resistance to making any changes," notes Cavalier.

One of the largest problems they may encounter is nomenclature. "Sometimes what's there is way too complex," says Cavalier.

For ADA-compliant signage, the design must adhere to well-defined

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guidelines. In other situations, team members may serve as editorial advisor, determining what essential information to display.

Once content is set, clients may need to see actual renderings of a design before they fully appreciate its merits. "The norm for post-and-panels signs is often interpreted as limited to the use of metal extrusions with sheet metal attached in some fashion," says Cavalier.

The challenge can be to demonstrate how "thinking outside that box" can result in some creative and elegant forms. "These more complex forms usually require extensive modeling—both hand-built in scale and 3D computer designs—to document the correct dimensions/templates to build from," explains Cavalier. "Collaboration with a skilled fabricator and a prototyping process is also helpful and sometimes entails several iterations."

Before the design phase is complete, they may experiment with placement of mock-up signs. With directional panels, for example, field tests can identify where and how large the sign should be before a driver reaches a decision point.

Most designs give clients the flexibility to update panels, as needed. "Some collegiate or hospital clients will construct a new building as soon as every five years, which may influence content on directionals or maps," says Cavalier. ■



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