



Signs for the Times

Beyond Wayfinding: Creating Event and Brand Experiences with Signage

By: Mariela McIlwraith, CMP, CMM, MBA,
president of Meeting Change



MEETING PROFESSIONALS INTERNATIONAL

For years, meeting professionals have used event signs for directional and informational purposes, helping participants navigate event spaces and the experiences therein. Increasingly, however, they're leveraging these signs to transform meeting spaces into brand experiences, to create a sense of place and to achieve education or networking objectives. Herein, we review best practices in sign design and production and identify trends that can create a real wow for attendees around the world.



CONVENTIONAL EVENT SIGNAGE

Traditionally, event signage has been used for identification, information, direction or warning. Examples of each are shown below:



RECOMMENDATIONS

For these traditional uses, event signage should be easy to read, convey information concisely and provide flexibility in case of unexpected changes. To improve readability, graphic designer Erika White recommends the following tips.

- Use a bold, sans-serif font such as Univers, Arial, Helvetica, Avante Garde, Gill Sans, Roboto or Avenir.
- Use dark font colors on a light background to provide a high level of contrast.
- Use sentence case, instead of all caps.
- Leave white (negative) space around the text.
- Use non-glare or reflective backgrounds (especially for the vision impaired).

Directional signage should provide clear and concise information. White recommends the following.

- Avoid paragraphs; use short, to-the-point statements, icons and arrows.
- Be consistent in the order that information appears on signs (session name, room name, session time).
- Use the minimum number of characters needed (9 AM instead of 9:00 a.m., day instead of full date).
- Consolidate information when possible (Registration Hours: 7 AM to 5 PM, Monday to Wednesday)
- Use internationally recognized symbols on signs (the American Institute of Graphic Arts provides them for download free of charge).

No matter how much advance planning, last minute changes are often necessary onsite. White suggests the following.

- Use Velcro arrows on directional signs.
- Verify onsite printing capabilities and use pre-designed templates for last minute needs.
- Use pre-designed templates with white backgrounds so last-minute sponsor logos can be added.



Design activism:

The symbols we choose to use in our signage can make a social statement. [The Accessible Icon Project](#) provides a free download of a revised icon for the International Symbol of Access that represents movement. Another example of design activism would be non-gender specific icons for restrooms.

A SENSE OF PLACE

Event signage can help create a “sense of place” that can draw from either the local region or organizational brand. MPI research¹ shows that event participants want to experience their meeting’s destination, and not simply an event space that is indistinguishable from others around the world. Consider the experiential marketing value of giving participants the sense that they have arrived at a unique event, and not simply an address or venue.

If you create a space that has its own identity, and especially the identity of the conference, participants can sense they will witness something special, says Anders Ladegaard, a visual and auditive artist who works closely with Denmark-based event design platform Meetovation. Participants start to listen and feel invited, safe and welcomed.

Different elements can create this regional or brand sense of place. Consider imagery, shapes or color palates that depict local landmarks, industries or attractions. From a brand perspective, creating a sense of place is more than applying corporate or event logos or logotypes, beyond even following corporate style guides. Creating a sense of place means representing the brand (or event) values through design choices that reinforce key messages.

“If you create a space that has its own identity, and especially the identity of the conference, participants can sense they will witness something special.”

– Anders Ladegaard

STRATEGIC “SIGNARY”

Signs and surface graphics play an important role in achieving event objectives, and it is important that they are strategically designed and placed with their true impact in mind. Meeting planners should utilize signs not only to direct attendees, but also to inspire and educate them, according to Jayson Haynes, managing director of hospitality and convention operations for FedEx Office. Ladegaard references the architectural principle “form follows function” when designing visual elements for events. Keep purpose front-of-mind in determining type and form.

Beyond traditional functions of wayfinding and identification, signage can drive event objectives by creating the right physical environment for those objectives to be achieved. Ladegaard describes how color and design choices for a wellness conference can promote thoughtful reflection, and how visual elements (including signage) create a full sensory experience, that may also include music or scents to create emotion in participants that drive meeting objectives.





CASE STUDY: WEC15

Consider the 2015 MPI World Education Congress in San Francisco. MPI brought in visual elements that represented the city as a center for technology innovation and combined them with the event theme to produce a unique environment for the event. Jeff Daigle, MPI's creative director, used these innovative uses of signage at the event.

The event theme was “finding your professional edge,” and signs conveyed the theme with messages such as “You’ll find your edge straight ahead,” “Let’s find your edge together” and “Looking to get smart? You’re in the right place.” The messaging was specific to the conference experience, with the aim of fulfilling the promise of the promotion onsite with the same look, feel, attitude and language throughout the space.

The Career and Learning Center was a flexible space where participants could choose to have impromptu meetings, review MPI research, participate in campfire or brainstorming sessions. The space was modeled after a Silicon Valley office space, and featured office doors made from meter boards to identify the different activities in the space. Couches and seating proffered inspirational words like “create” and “collaborate.”

Lollipop stands showcased ad-hoc “eureka moments.” Participants scanned the QR codes on signs and received points in the event gamification tool.



SIGN SCIENCE

Color selection can have an important effect on the event experience, says Andrea Sullivan, an organizational psychologist who has done extensive research on enhancing meeting experiences with neuroscience principles. Sullivan, together with Janet Sperstad, CMP, director of the meeting and event management program at Madison College, outline the specific effects of color on mood and cognition in their white paper, “Mindful Event Design: The Psychology of Physical Meeting Environments.”ⁱⁱ

- Red stimulates the brain and increases vigilance and memory.
- Yellow enhances concentration and produces a happy, peaceful mood.
- Blue calms and enhances creativity.
- Green relaxes and alleviates stress.

Similarly, Sullivan and Sperstad recommend the use of elements or imagery of outdoor environments, as they reduce stress and facilitate attention restoration.

At eye level, a sign can stimulate conversation and discussion, Sullivan says. Below eye level, it is more likely to evoke emotion, and above, tends to elicit reflection. Depending upon the results you want, consider where you are placing your signs.

Signage can also alleviate what Sullivan describes as “navigational angst.” Keep signs simple, she says, and use graphics that require less brainpower to decipher than words. She cautions against complex, color-coded floor lines. Looking down evokes emotion, so any sense of directional unease a participant may be experiencing could be exaggerated.

Haynes supports a simplification strategy. If you use thoughtful, crisp design in your signs, and you are thoughtful in the way you place them, you can convey your message, as well as a sense of calm and order, he says. The opposite is also true; you can overdo it. “You can put too much signage up, and possibly, placing it haphazardly, thereby creating a sense of disorganization and even chaos.”

In their white paper, Sullivan and Sperstad also emphasize the value of first impressions. “Once we’ve adapted to a particular set of stimuli, we no longer notice them, and we are much less likely to remember the details. For this reason, our first impression upon entering an environment is the most powerful.”

The last impression is also important. “Known as the Recency Effect, our brains tend to remember our most recent experiences over experiences occurring earlier,” they write. “In addition, as we are exiting an environment or event, we are more aware of producing the outcomes we intended to produce in that environment.”

“First impressions matter,” Haynes says. “We’re seeing meeting planners brand the windows, the doors and the entrance to the hotel so when the attendee arrives and they approach and enter the hotel they feel enveloped, they feel like they’re already part of the event and it really helps welcome them. They know they are in the right place – and that they are welcomed to the event.”

Thank attendees for being a part of the community, or challenge them to utilize information they picked up, Haynes says. “We definitely see the front and the end of the event as key times to capture the attention of attendees and reinforce the message that was communicated to them.”

At eye level, a sign can stimulate conversation and discussion. Below eye level, it is more likely to evoke emotion, and above, elicit reflection. Depending upon the results you want, consider where you are placing your signs.

– Andrea Sullivan



SIGNAGE ROADMAP

Developing an effective signage strategy requires following specific steps.



DETERMINE MESSAGING GOALS

MPI's Daigle begins the design process by defining organizational goals, participant demographics and other key stakeholders. Then, he crafts a narrative for the event and develops the event creative, including the design and messaging that support the event's theme. Ladegaard begins by determining the emotional approach for the event, and then considers design. Stakeholders include the event team, the event owner, the creative team, and, in some cases, lead sponsors.

ASSESS PHYSICAL NEEDS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Next, assess needs and opportunities with a site walk-through at the venue with production partners. They can identify areas where signage has been used effectively in the past, which types of substrates can be used in a given location and any venue restrictions. For outdoor signage, such as street banners, planners need to identify permit requirements and deadlines, as well as materials best suited for local weather conditions, including UV stable inks. Conduct this onsite walkthrough three months or more before the event and walk through the main traffic flow, Daigle suggests.

Identify rigging points and opportunities for big-splash signage as well as areas for directional signage. Once all the opportunities are identified, create a wish list, and then adjust it based on budget. When identifying wayfinding needs, consider the needs of all participants, and identify accessible routes.



Service Blueprinting and Signage:

Service blueprinting “specifies how a service process should be constructed from scratch.”ⁱⁱⁱ A service blueprint identifies all of the activities in creating and delivering a service. In the case of a meeting, this involves registering, arriving onsite, attending sessions and meal functions and departing. Each one of these activities can be further examined. The blueprint is used to clarify interactions between staff and customers (participants), and the potential fail points in the process. Applying this principle to wayfinding, planners can identify where participants may lose their ways and need directional signage.

SIGNAGE ROADMAP (CONTINUED)

DESIGN AND PRODUCE

With the messaging, opportunities and budget identified, the design and production process can begin. “It’s a matter of understanding what the promise of your event is and then utilizing your creative promotion to fuel that,” Daigle says. “Depending on what the signage is—whether it is brand signage, directional or informational—fueling all of that through the story of your conference will result in much better signage.” The creative process should be done within the boundaries of the brand’s standards, including color matching. A well maintained, G7-certified printer, combined with Pantone matching and the right selection of substrates and inks are all factors in achieving this color matching.

INSTALL ONSITE

Any signage installation that requires rigging needs to be mounted by trained professionals. In most cases, venues have exclusive providers that offer this service. Assign an onsite team to change signs at the appropriate times and monitor that private functions are not accidentally posted on venue digital signs.

DISMANTLE, STORE AND LIFE-CYCLE PLAN

What goes up, must come down. The same safety principle applies for dismantling event signs as applies for installation. Additionally, make plans to store reusable signs for future events and arrange for the donation, recycling, repurposing or disposal of other signage materials.

EVALUATE AND REPORT

Following the event, review the effectiveness of the signage strategy and any recommendations for future events. Cover signs’ contribution to the event experience, the types and quantities of signs used, the budget and what was done with the signs following the event. If the signs were designed to interact with the event app, measure and report these interactions.

“It’s understanding what the promise of your event is and then utilizing your creative promotion to fuel that.”

– Jeff Daigle
Creative Director,
MPI



Sponsorship Fulfillment:

Recognition on event signs is an important sponsorship benefit. Communication between the sponsorship and production teams ensures that these benefits are delivered. Signage can also interact with the event’s mobile app to provide valuable data analytics that increase a sponsor’s measurable return on investment.



Digital Signage:

If your event is using digital signage outside function rooms, confirm that it will transition when participants move, and not at the precise session start time to avoid confusion. Alternatively, find out if the sign can also display the next session name as well as the current one.

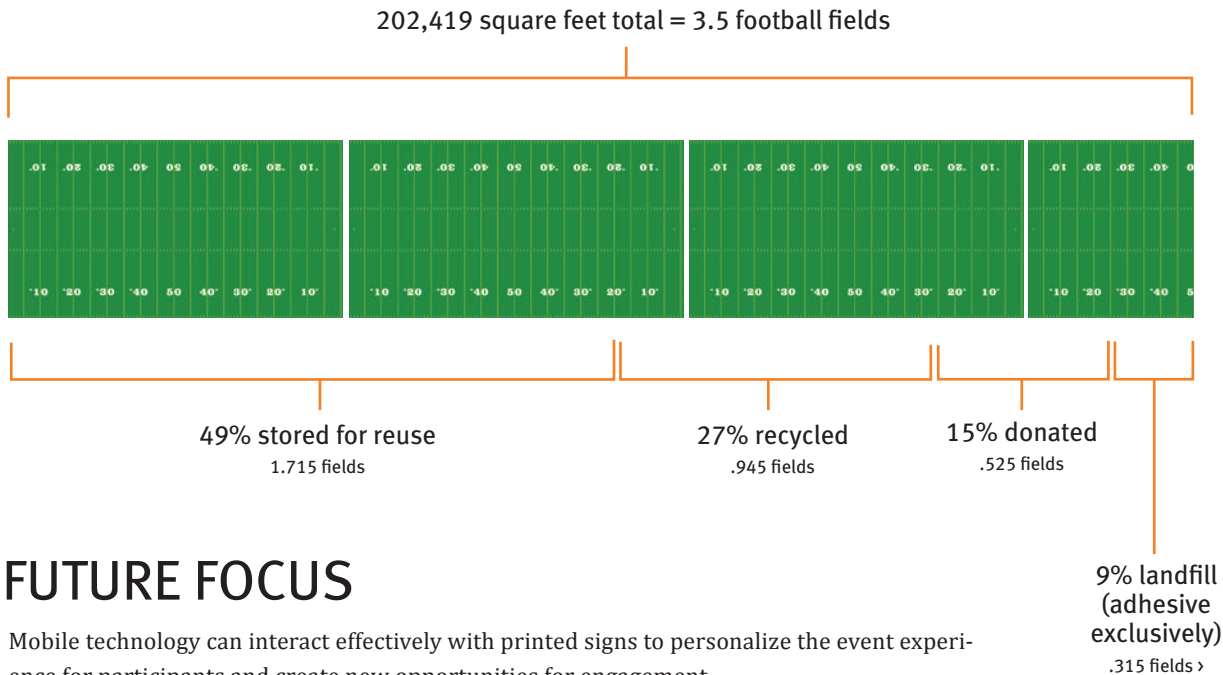


SUSTAINABILITY: IT'S A SIGN

Making sustainable choices for signage products means balancing effectiveness, display environment, durability, manufacturing processes and disposal. Shawna McKinley, director of sustainability for MeetGreen, offers the following recommendations.

- Invest in durable signage that can be reused from year to year and plan for storage.
- For single use, select substrate materials that can be recycled and are made from post-consumer, renewable materials, such as cardboard or wood fiberboard.
- Limit the use of non-recyclable materials, including adhesive vinyl and foam board.
- Use post-event materials, including banners, to create upcycled consumer products or donate them to charitable organizations.

A case in point: For a large corporate event, MeetGreen's client used more than 200,000 square feet of signage (18,580 square meters), equivalent to approximately 3.5 National Football League fields (see graphic below). By using durable, reusable materials, almost half of this was stored for reuse. Of the remainder, MeetGreen recycled 27 percent, donated 15 percent and only sent 9 percent to landfill. The organization plans additional sustainable practices to improve these numbers in future years.



FUTURE FOCUS

Mobile technology can interact effectively with printed signs to personalize the event experience for participants and create new opportunities for engagement.

"Signage is an important component of an event communication strategy and needs to be looked at strategically," says Trevor Roald, mobile event technology evangelist for QuickMobile. "It needs to be looked to to create sense of place and community and consistency with the brand. Signage helps participants navigate their physical journeys, their education journeys, their emotional journeys, their brand journeys and, in some cases, their buying journeys."

Simple technology, such as check-in or QR codes printed on event signs, can be used in conjunction with a mobile app to add a dynamic element and serve as "another touchpoint to personalize the experience," he says. These codes can track continuing education units (CEUs), or be part of a gamification plan for the event. Some events are embedding RFID chips or beacons into doorway signs to not only track CEUs, but to personalize push notifications for surveys. Large touch screen signs, often built into an event-branded kiosk, are also used and can be pre-loaded with the event's mobile app.

FUTURE FOCUS (continued)

“As we all become more reliant on our mobile devices, we are comfortable using these for finding our way around in our everyday lives, on vacation or when looking for a new restaurant or a specific store,” says Tahira Endean, CMP, an award-winning event planner. “With the ability now to place interactive maps of venues and trade show floors in our apps and use real-time GPS location inside venues, we are creating a much more personalized way-finding experience for guests. You can pre-map out a path through a show to find the best route to the exhibitors you want to see. You can plan your route from your hotel to the convention center to pass by your favorite coffee shop, or simply find your way between venues. It creates a greater sense of comfort, especially at a large event or in a new city.”

There is also opportunity in augmented reality, says Jim Spellos, CMP, an industry technology expert. “AR can use smart phone apps to display augmented content right on participants’ devices.” For example, session signage can be augmented by a service that links users’ phones to meta content, such as a short speaker video that provides an overview of the session. “What a great way to create useful content on a sign that can help the attendee make the decision as to which session they should attend.”

Spellos sees the IoT (Internet of Things) approach on the horizon. Consider that South by Southwest (SXSW) used interactive Tablet Tables in 2015. Spellos envisions these becoming marquis boards for sessions with which attendees can digitally interact with content and information.

THE WOW FACTOR

Signs can just do “their job” (inform) or they can help an event come alive through branding and storytelling, says Mari Carmen Obregon, CEO of El Efecto WOW! “It is here where you can touch people’s emotions, make them part of a collective experience, give them a sense of belonging and share a story,” she says.

“You can tell people to go right or left with a sign. Or you can add some emotion, and let them know the way to prosperity, to laughter, to joy or to a buddy meeting point. City-wide events can brand the whole city with event promotion, or they can use those same signs to give people tips, fun facts and event or city trivia. The wow factor is all about using what you already have at hand in an extraordinary way.”

Here are a few examples to inspire the imagination:

- **Holographic welcome:** Leverage both motion-sensor and hologram technology to welcome and speak to participants as they enter your event.
- **Helium for health:** Use helium balloons to showcase information about dietary restrictions at food stations.
- **Chalk it up:** Use chalkboards for menu boards, or even room signs. Hire a chalkboard artist to make unique signs for events and later donate them to local schools.
- **A human arrow:** Outfit staff or volunteers with hand-held signs, sandwich boards or flags to provide a great welcome and assist participants in finding their ways.
- **Invest in infrastructure:** Invest in feather flags that can be used for multiple indoor or outdoor events and use symbols for often-used event resources including restrooms, water stations and first aid stations.
- **Timely signage:** Use rapidly installed signs to celebrate special announcements.
- **Self-serve selfie stations:** Offer a selfie backdrop for participants to share on social media.
- **A step in the right direction:** Customize the backs of stair steps, so that a message appears when facing the staircase.
- **Moving pictures:** Affix signs to the outside of elevator doors, or wrap vehicles.
- **A cut above:** Design signs in any shape or size. Die-cut signs can be shaped to reinforce event themes, or to bring in the local landscape.
- **Expect the unexpected:** Place signs on unexpected surfaces, such as mirrors or the bottom of swimming pools.



Bold Branding for Epic Ideas

Design your event with signs and graphics by FedEx Office.

Print with FedEx Office at [fedex.com/conventions](https://www.fedex.com/conventions).

SPECIAL THANKS

Thank you to **Jeff Daigle**, MPI; **Tahira Endean**, CMP, independent meeting planner; **Jayson Haynes**, Managing Director, Hospitality & Convention Operations, FedEx Office Print and Ship Services, Inc.; **Anders Ladegaard**, visual and auditive artist; **Shawna McKinley**, MeetGreen; **Carol Norfleet**, CMP, DMCP, Destination Nashville; **Mari Carmen Obregon**, El Efecto Wow; **Trevor Roald**, QuickMobile; **Claire Smith**, CMP, Vancouver Convention Centre; **Jim Spellos**, CMP, president, Meeting U.; **Andrea Sullivan**, BrainStrength Systems; and **Erika White**, Erika White Designs.

ⁱ Mulligan, Jackie. Future of Meetings: The Bottom Line. Delegate Insights, Future Scenarios and Practical Tips. MPI Foundation. Available from: www.mpiweb.org/research

ⁱⁱ Sullivan, Andrea and Janet Sperstad. Mindful Event Design: The Psychology of Physical Meeting Environments. Produced by PSAV and available from: http://www.psav.com/customer_solutions/research/

ⁱⁱⁱ Lovelock, Christopher, Jochen Wirtz and Harvir Singh Bansal, Services Marketing: People, Technology, Strategy, Canadian Edition. Toronto: Pearson Canada, 2007: 229.



MEETING PROFESSIONALS INTERNATIONAL

© 2016 Meeting Professionals International. All Rights Reserved