

Beyond the Sign

How cities can create the ideal recipe for wayfinding success.

By GRANT HAYZLETT

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PLACEMAKING. Quality of life. Civic engagement. The list of buzzwords that surround civic branding and wayfinding campaigns, as well as economic and community development, is never ending. These terms exist, in part, because of the increasing demand for cities to provide greater resources to their citizens, but these terms can also force many civic projects into a dead end. How many civic projects in your community have hit a developmental snag at the conclusion of the conceptual design phase?

Impact studies, public outreach, and conceptual development are requisite pieces of a puzzle that help to shape a city's brand relative to economic and community development. These actions lay the foundation on which everything else is built. But what happens when the build phase never takes place? These developmental efforts amount to little more than practicing for a game rather than playing in one.

We all understand that apathy is rarely the cause for stagnation in project development. So what prevents us from reaching our goals? Funding, staff turnover, lack of prioritization, and changing economic conditions can often lead to developmental bottlenecks. But there is one much more common bottleneck that can just as easily derail or delay your civic projects; happily, you have complete control over this one. Failing to define a project's goal will almost certainly lead to a change in the project scope or general incompleteness.

There is a linear connection between your planning projects; they are not developed to be "one-off" products. Urban planning initiatives will eventually filter down to what an individual thinks and feels about your city; overlooking that connection is just one example of how failing to define your project goals can make the project ineffective.

Consider wayfinding systems and other elements



This Elevate Digital wayfinding installation on Michigan Avenue in Chicago allows users to get directions, transportation schedules, maps, and information on shopping, dining, and attractions—and send the information to their mobile device. They can even take a photo to send home. Elevate's partners include Choose Chicago, World Business Chicago, and the Chicago Transit Authority.

of environmental graphic design. All of your projects are connected and your civic brand is at play when your city begins developing a wayfinding system. Properly designed and strategically planned, a wayfinding system will help to facilitate your civic brand and reinforce your positive brand messages. However, if you have a negative brand image, developing a signage system will not change how people feel about your community. If the goal of your wayfinding system is to increase economic opportunities for existing businesses, you'd best make sure that your city has developed an environment that motivates businesses to stay.

Concept to completion

The process of creating a wayfinding system that addresses your existing planning agendas starts with defining the project scope and developing your request

for qualification. Your RFQ should be issued at a time when funding has been recognized, after you have identified the members of the steering committee, and when the project coincides with the completion of associated projects. The project scope should take into consideration the plans that your city is currently developing as well as those that are slated for the future.

Streetscaping, parking, and pedestrian- and bike-friendly environments will all have an effect on how the wayfinding system is designed, planned, and built in the real world. Residential development, parks, and open spaces should also be considered. These planned environments will require different features than a downtown urban setting. Most cities have a standard RFP/RFQ form that will govern the creation of the final document, but to ensure capture of your project goal(s), the project scope outlined in your RFQ should include:

A DESCRIPTION of the associated planning agendas

A DEFINITION of the end-user(s) that the system will engage

THE HIERARCHY OF MODALITIES

A CIVIC BRAND STATEMENT that illustrates the “why” behind the project

A SCHEDULE FOR COMPLETION of the design/planning phase and connectivity to the fabrication/installation phase

The last item, while potentially the most important developmental step of the design/planning phase, is often not included when a city issues an RFQ for the creation of a wayfinding system. To ensure success, the design and planning of a wayfinding system should also be completely integrated with the actual creation of the system.

Research, funding, feasibility, branding, support, and proposal review require an astounding amount of time, energy, and money. Doing it twice requires even more! By developing a project scope that includes fabrication and installation as a qualifying feature, your city will ensure that your goals are built into the fabric of the project from day one and you will avoid the transition problems associated with locating another qualified vendor.

Making it all work

The concept of connectivity between planning agendas is probably not foreign to anyone reading this article. So what should be done after you award your wayfinding project? First, you must have all members of the steering committee tuned in to a project kickoff, and you must be able to engage the wayfinding consultant in a balanced conversation.

“Balance” is achieved by owning your project’s goal(s), but allowing the consultant to help define the path. If you have developed a project scope that includes the aforementioned items, then your consultant will have a solid base to start from. Consider how users will interact with the finished wayfinding system and allow the feature designs to evolve around that interaction. Vehicular systems will naturally require different design components than pedestrian systems, and it is important to consider these differences when transitioning between modalities.

Once a motorist becomes a pedestrian, your city will need more than signage to make the system work. Environmental elements that reinforce safety and comfort will secure pedestrians’ interest and encourage them to explore your city on foot. Public art is often used within wayfinding systems not only as way to reinforce com-



fort, but as a method of orientation and environmental reference. Art projects also serve to reinforce aspects of your civic brand and carry that brand message in a variety of dimensions.

Innovative emerging technologies are driving new opportunities for civic outreach through interactive environments; they can serve as a means to consolidate art and information into a seamless experience for the user. As these technologies evolve, so must the wayfinding designer’s use of technology. But how does this all relate to strategic planning? Let’s be honest . . . design is often the fun part of the project that everyone on the committee asks about first. It can feel like you’re creating something out of nothing, but it can absorb a disproportionate amount of the committee’s bandwidth.

While these visual components will often dominate a project’s genesis, it is the planning strategy that will affect the functionality of the system and how well the system will engage the end user. We’re not talking about crowdsourcing; we’re talking about crowd management—and that requires planning beyond directional signage.

Now what?

Let’s fast forward. Your design is flawless, your planning strategy works, and you’ve realized them both in the real world. How do you keep the system developing in line with your planning visions? Unless you plan to push “pause” on civic development, you need to plan for maintenance, future phases, adaptations, and alterations to the wayfinding system that will ensure ongoing use.

As a general rule, maintenance for the system will usually cost the city 12 to 15 percent of their total project cost annually—and this is only to maintain what is in place. If the city is considering future phases, it is likely that these were planned for at the out-



set; however, enacting the subsequent steps requires more than planning. Just as all of the city's planning projects have a linear connection to the ensuing stages of development, subsequent phases of the wayfinding system need to consider changes in the city's branding and economic development visions.

Wayfinding systems do not fall into the "if you build it they will come" category. To ensure that your program will be a successful addition to the civic landscape, the messages and concepts that the system facilitates must be promoted internally and externally. Social media platforms, local hospitality groups, and the chamber of commerce are all great vehicles to get the message out there, but remember, the wayfinding system is not the attraction.

Your city is a product that must be marketed and sold to the end user, citizen, and tourist alike. If these efforts are not in place or if they are unsuccessful, then the wayfinding system may have little positive effect on your city's civic landscape. However, if you are able to sell the "why" and your city is willing to invest in that outreach, then the wayfinding and environmental graphics system will flourish.

Final thoughts

Wayfinding systems are a great method for illustrating everything that your city has to offer. They will enhance and help to evolve

Queen Creek, Arizona's visuals (far left) connect elements once critical to its economy—cattle, climate, citrus, cotton, and copper. The Surprise (Arizona) Civic Center (above) reinforces its brand. Left: A branded sign points to housing developments in Castle Rock, Colorado.

your civic brand, they will assist in organizing targeted community development, and they are conducive to a pro-business environment. However, they must be built upon the right foundation.

When developing these systems, keep in mind that your long-term planning agendas should set the framework for the project's scope and that there is a linear connection between your macro-level planning concepts and the micro-level applications. By working with a consultant that can address design, planning, fabrication, installation, and ongoing

maintenance of your wayfinding system, your city will gain greater control over the project's development and you will avoid developing nothing more than a series of drawings.

Wayfinding systems are much more than a collection of signs; they are most successful when they achieve civic engagement. Organizing these systems organically can seem like an overwhelming task, but as long as you clearly define the system's goals, and you honor those goals throughout the developmental process, you are all but guaranteed success. ■

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