Traditionally, hospitals and healthcare centres in the UK have had a 'patchwork quilt' approach to wayfinding, adding signage as and when new buildings are constructed or when additional services are introduced. This piecemeal approach has several drawbacks, not least because, as an afterthought, the signage is often poorly designed, badly positioned and seldom has the impact it could have in terms of helping often anxious and emotional people to find their way around what can be very large and complex estates.

However, the tide is turning and this is largely due to the arrival of PFI/PPP in the 1990s. As a result, a plethora of new-build developments are being created that showcase a long-overdue approach to signage and wayfinding within the sector.

Speaking to hdm, Philippa Brown, sales and marketing director at signage and environmental graphics manufacturer, Modulex, explains: “Before PFI/PPP, hospitals had to grow bit by bit as and when they had the funding. PFI came along and brought with it the opportunity to knock down Victorian hospitals that were not fit for purpose and that has had a major impact on wayfinding strategies.

A patchwork quilt
“We used to visit hospitals where signage had evolved like a patchwork quilt, with a panel added here and there, but with no overarching strategy. PFI has allowed hospitals to really think about how they get people to a building and how they help them to move around it with ease.”

She adds: “Our research has told us that the way people absorb information is very different depending on their frame of mind. Most people do not visit hospital as an inpatient, but as an outpatient or a visitor. Sometimes they are very fraught and they need information delivered in a way that is clear, quick and short.

“PFI has definitely provided us with a really good opportunity to kick-start a new approach to wayfinding within the healthcare sector.”
PFI has allowed hospitals to really think about how they get people to a building and how they help them to move around it with ease.

Along with traditional wayfinding signage, two additional solutions are being utilised – environmental graphics and digital signage.

Environmental graphics are large-scale images or written messages on walls or glass, which can help to both orientate visitors and make often sterile hospital environments seem less institutional. A number of hospitals have used environmental graphics to create themed zones within sprawling healthcare estates. UCLH, for example, has broken up the various floors within its tower block using easily recognisable images of London including red telephone boxes, black cabs and London buses. The wayfinding solution ties in with this so that visitors, staff and patients can easily find their intended destination.

“Environmental graphics have two roles: to aid wayfinding; and to introduce artwork into spaces to make them more interesting,” says Brown.

Also beginning to catch on in the UK is digital signage. While increasingly popular in the US, it has taken time to move across the Atlantic.

Brown says: “With digital signage the capital outlay may be more initially, but when you want to change something it is then only a case of someone altering the wording or images on a computer. “While it is taking time to get this message across, we are predicting that uptake will grow in the coming years.”

With new-build PFI developments, the opportunity to incorporate new wayfinding strategies is easier than with existing estate, but Modulex is also working with trusts that are looking to update systems within older facilities.

Salford Royal Hospital was a PFI scheme, but since completion Modulex has worked with the trust to extend the new wayfinding solutions to retained estate.

Key considerations when deciding on a wayfinding scheme include ensuring it is suitable for all user groups.

Speaking the same language

Brown says: “Healthcare deals with the widest age range, from children through to the elderly and that means you can’t employ a digital wayfinding solution on its own as that excludes the older population who are not as technology savvy, so you may initially have to run traditional signage and digital signage side by side.”

Ensuring all departments use the same language is also vital.

“The first thing you need to consider is how you invite people to a hospital,” Brown adds.

“The journey starts long before you actually reach the hospital site and we have found that in some cases the wayfinding strategy and the literature sent to patients don’t tie up. The appointment card may direct them to ‘radiology’, while the wayfinding signage refers to ‘X-ray’. A good wayfinding approach is one that is holistic and continues throughout the building.”

In addition, thorough research prior to implementing a solution is key.

Guidance exists in the form of a research document by the University of Salford. Entitled Improving Wayfinding in Old and Complex Hospital Environments, it concludes that an effective strategy is one that targets all users, including the blind, foreign visitors, wheelchair users etc, and one that is cleverly deployed so as to guide people through a particular building with minimal challenges.

A five-point plan within the 2012 document advises estates and facilities managers to consider whether their strategy meets the following points:

- right time
- right information
- right form
- right place
- right people.

It states: “Many hospitals have developed over a number of years in a piecemeal fashion. This has resulted in complex environments made up of long, confusing corridor systems with bends, turns and confusing signs. Such settings challenge and frustrate those who visit them.

“This research brings together the disciplines of design and knowledge management to sensitise designers to the varied needs and knowledge levels of wayfinders when designing future wayfinding systems.”

Reference:
Less is more

Springfield Hospital consists of over 30, mainly-Victorian buildings spread across a 98-acre site that makes up the major part of South West London and St George's Mental Health Trust.

Numerous complaints from frustrated patients, visitors and staff, hampered by wasted time, missed appointments and delays had convinced management they had a problem they needed to solve.

Navigational consultants from Wayfinder UK were brought in to identify the problems and develop a strategy that would offer clear and effective direction to all users.

This strategy was not only required to resolve the site’s existing problems, but would have to cope with the dramatic changes expected over the next 10 years, including the development of a new hospital alongside the existing buildings.

A Wayfinder UK spokesman said: “Often less is more; position, content and consistency are our primary concerns, as is longevity, served by the quality of the sign system, its flexibility and ability to cope with inevitable change.

“Wayfinding is not just about signage, it is spatial problem-solving and as such most of our work takes place on the ground. For Springfield this work involved site visits and discussion with the trust and other stakeholders. A full understanding of the spatial complexities of the environment was essential for success.”

The solution enables users to navigate their way to any one of the clearly-identified entrances for the 30 different buildings. Once inside, an intuitive system gives simple direction to internal wards and departments without the use of complex medical jargon.

“Our understanding of information hierarchies helped us to design a strategy that gave the next bit of information to the user as they needed it, rather than overburdening them with too much information early on in their journey,” said the spokesman.

“This approach not only reduced confusion, but meant that the number of signs needed was dramatically reduced. “By depending on far fewer signs the new strategy offers a number of benefits which delivered significant cost savings to the trust.”

These benefits include the cost saving from installing signs that can be re-used and altered rather than just discarded; and the rationalisation of appointment letters into a simple understandable format tailored to all.

In turn, this led to a significant reduction in the number of complaints, better attendance at voluntary therapy groups, a reduction in instances of aggressive behaviour, and a measured reduction in paper and printing costs.

www.wayfinding.co.uk

It’s child’s play

A wayfinding solution was commissioned for The Royal Alexandra Children’s Hospital in Brighton, a £37m development that opened in 2007.

The young patient profile meant Modulex had to come up with a solution that would target the different age groups using the centre, as well as fit in with colour schemes the architects had come up with to differentiate the nine floors within the building.

A Modulex spokesman said: “Bright colours abound in the furniture, in the floor and wall finishes, and in the signage.

“Big animal cut-outs on the walls, cleverly drawn to be charming, but not too childish, enliven the interior and provide the landmarks and visual clues to help people to find their way around. This is not a frightening building.”

He added: “A good system can make a real difference to the user experience.

“At Brighton the signs work. They are in the right places, they are legible, they are consistent, and they have captured the intentions of the trust and its architects, making a real contribution to the environment.”

Roger Blackman, the hospital’s project director, concluded: “The graphics work particularly well and have become a distinctive feature of the hospital.”

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