

# Signage: A Vital Element in Design for People with Dementia

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## Introduction

Signage is a critical element of environmental design that can support the daily function and wayfinding ability of people with dementia (PWD). However, there is little evidence regarding what signage is useful and appropriate. In residential care homes, signage is frequently determined by regulatory authorities without clear understanding of the effect it may have on PWD. We describe a qualitative investigation that lays a foundation for development and evaluation of signage.

## Methods

Research comprised two phases: Two interactive world café type workshops (Slocum, 2005) were held in Australia and the UK (n=32). A purposive sample of PWD, family, design and health professionals was used. Aims were to develop a shared understanding of factors to consider when designing and placing signage in environments used by PWD and explore effective ways of evaluating signage. Second, three electronic rounds of a Delphi study (n=38) refined thematic data into a series of consensus statements (>70% agreement) to form a taxonomy of signage and provide a preliminary framework for evaluation.

## Results

Five major themes arose from workshops:

- **Factors relating to signs.**
- **Other environmental factors impacting signage**
- **'Know your intended audience'**
- **'Enabling function and wayfinding'**
- **Approaches to evaluating signage**

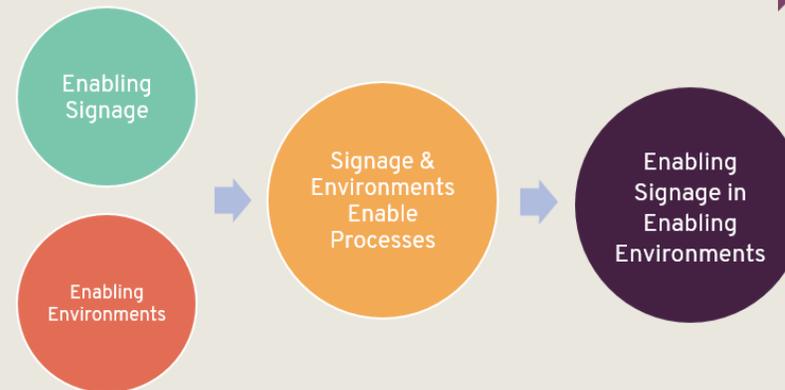
Workshop themes were refined into a series of consensus statements through the Delphi process. Statements were summarised into a four-part taxonomy (Table 1). The taxonomy highlights that signage needs to be considered in context of the wider environment, and the wider environment needs to be considered as a form of signage in terms of the cues and other information it provides. The two need to be considered as interdependent. Evaluation was framed in terms of the processes it supported for PWD (such as reduction of anxiety and wayfinding). Preferred methods of evaluation of the success of signage were primarily observational and participatory.



**Table 1: A four-part working taxonomy of the evaluation of signage.**

Factors Relating To Signs	Factors Relating To Environments	Processes Enabled By Signage & Environments	Preferred Approaches To Evaluation
Words and realistic images should be used	The whole environment should be considered as having signage potential	Wayfinding and navigation	Audits, especially to reduce incidental and 'staff only relevant' signage in residential settings, assess placement of sign, lighting etc.
Signs should be understood by anyone	Lighting levels, especially around signage, need to be appropriate for older people	Making sense of the environment	'Walkthroughs' with people naive to an environment to assess ease of wayfinding
Signs need to be familiar and consistent in look and content	If a sign relates to particular person/s, it should have personal meaning	Sense of well-being and competence	Observational methods used to measure emotional responses of people with dementia, ability to way-find, evaluate how/if people with dementia interact with sign
Clarity is more important than aesthetics	In residential settings, signage is institutional. Balance need for signs with domesticity	Reduction of anxiety	Involve people with dementia in evaluation
Signs should be easily 'read' by people with dementia and low vision	Consider the needs of the person with dementia first, organizational and staff needs second		
Signs should be visually uncluttered	Building designs should be prosthetic and reduce need for additional signage		

Evaluating and developing signage, environments, processes and impacts



## Conclusions

Our participants were clear that evaluation of the effectiveness of signage needs to include outcomes that relate to the degree to which signage supports PWD to move about, make sense of, and derive a sense of well-being from their environments. Considering the evaluation of signs and how the broader environment provides signage requires multiple methods. Participants were eager for PWD to be integral to any evaluative process. The output of the project provides a practical approach to evaluating the efficacy of signage for people with dementia, and a platform for further research.

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## References

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