

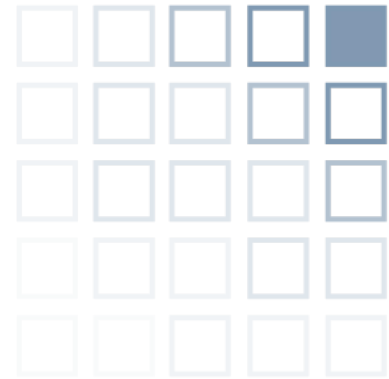


THE BUSINESS OF SECURITY™

WAYFINDING AS A SECURITY TOOL

THE POWER OF BETTER SIGNAGE

WHITEPAPER



In the maze of a modern hospital, clear signage isn't just a nicety—it's a critical factor in patient satisfaction *and* safety. A 2023 study found that patients who can easily navigate a healthcare facility report significantly higher satisfaction with the quality of care received.¹ On the flip side, confusing or missing signs leave visitors stressed and anxious² at a time when they are already vulnerable. Worse, poor wayfinding can even compromise security. Wandering visitors, unsecured entry points, and confused patients ending up in restricted zones are all scenarios that show how something as simple as better signage can have serious safety implications in healthcare.

However, wayfinding signage is often overlooked in security planning. This is a missed opportunity: signage is one of the most cost-effective – and underutilized – tools available to hospitals for improving both patient experience and protection. In fact, clear hospital signs are considered a basic safety requirement by many regulators. The Joint Commission, for example, expects hospitals to maintain adequate signage as part of its Environment of Care and Life Safety accreditation standards³, underscoring signage's importance for both compliance and patient well-being.

Corporate Security Advisors (CSA) has observed in physical security assessments of major hospitals that inconsistent, unclear, or missing signage frequently contributes to several critical issues:

- **Negative perceptions of safety:** A chaotic, hard-to-navigate environment erodes confidence. Studies show that clear signage significantly influences staff's perception of patient and visitor safety, and patients who get lost or see lax security signage may feel the facility is disorganized or unsafe.

- **Unauthorized access by non-staff:** Poor or absent “Authorized Personnel Only” signs make it easy for unauthorized individuals to wander into sensitive or restricted areas unnoticed.
- **Delays in emergency response:** Inadequate directional and exit signage can slow down evacuations and hinder emergency personnel during crises. Properly placed, visible signs (e.g. illuminated exit routes, fire extinguisher and shelter location signs) ensure people can move to safety quickly and first responders can navigate efficiently.
- **Undermining of other controls:** Even the best access card systems or surveillance cameras can be undermined if signage doesn’t reinforce them. Without clear warnings and directional cues, visitors may unknowingly bypass checkpoints or “tailgate” through secure doors – risky behavior that prominent signs (e.g. “Authorized Personnel Only – No Tailgating”) could help deter.

Effective wayfinding isn’t just a facilities concern or a patient experience nicety – it’s a core component of physical security, quality care, and risk management. For C-level healthcare executives, investing in better signage yields strategic benefits across the board: enhancing patient satisfaction, mitigating duty-of-care failures, strengthening emergency preparedness, boosting operational efficiency and profitability, reinforcing security protocols, and building a consistent safety culture across multi-site systems. Below, we explore each of these angles in depth.

Enhancing Patient Satisfaction and Confidence

Clear wayfinding directly improves the patient experience. For patients and visitors, the ability to easily find their destination translates into feeling cared for and less stressed. In one survey, 67% of patients said that being able to find their way easily in a hospital is very or extremely important⁴. When people get lost or disoriented in a hospital, it adds frustration and anxiety to what may already be a stressful visit⁵. Conversely, intuitive signage and maps help patients feel more comfortable and in control of their situation. Research confirms this: patients who can navigate healthcare facilities with ease report higher satisfaction with their care⁶. They perceive the hospital as more competent and patient-centered when signs and directions are clear.

A well-designed wayfinding system also boosts public trust and the hospital’s image. A facility that is easy to navigate gives the impression of a well-organized, safety-conscious organization. Patients are more likely to recommend or return to a hospital where they felt at ease rather than lost. On the other hand, if visitors routinely struggle to find departments, it can tarnish the hospital’s reputation. Problems with hospital navigation have been linked to lower patient experience scores and even decreases in revenue for the institution⁷. In an era of value-based care – where patient satisfaction scores influence ratings and

reimbursements – this becomes a bottom-line issue. Simply put, happier patients lead to healthier finances. High satisfaction means better online reviews, stronger word-of-mouth, and potentially higher scores on surveys that matter to Medicare and accreditation bodies. By making wayfinding improvements, executives can simultaneously enhance patient goodwill and protect the hospital's revenue streams⁸.

Mitigating Duty-of-Care Failures

Healthcare leaders have a duty to protect vulnerable patients, such as those with dementia or children, who may wander. Clear signage helps fulfill this by marking boundaries and warning signs to prevent incidents. For instance, 'Do Not Enter' signs and unit markings can deter confused patients or alert staff. In one hospital, multilingual 'Authorized Personnel Only' signs at key doors prevented unapproved access to areas like operating theaters and ICUs, reducing risks.

From a legal and reputational perspective, hospitals must ensure patient safety through reasonable safeguards like clear warning signage. Failures, such as patients wandering off or accidents due to poor wayfinding, can lead to liability and damage the hospital's reputation, especially if they gain public attention.

Good signage also supports vulnerable patients' safety on a daily basis in less dramatic ways. Imagine an elderly patient with mild dementia who ambles away from their room: prominent color-coded zone signs and clear arrows might guide them back or at least prevent them from entering staff-only zones where they could get injured. In maternity or pediatric units, strict signage ("STOP – Infant Area, Authorized Staff Only") adds a layer of defense against infant abduction or unauthorized entry. While signs alone cannot replace human vigilance or electronic security systems, they reinforce the duty of care by passively guiding people where they should – and should *not* – be. In short, investing in better wayfinding is an investment in patient safety that reduces the chance of preventable tragedies (and the lawsuits or public outcry that would follow).

Enhancing Emergency Response

During emergencies, quick and clear signage is vital. It helps staff, patients, and visitors find exits, shelters, and emergency equipment swiftly, potentially saving lives. Proper signage, like exit signs and evacuation maps, ensures faster responses and safer outcomes.

Consider a lockdown or shelter-in-place scenario in a hospital. Without consistent signage, a panicked visitor or staff member might unknowingly open a door that shouldn't be opened or run toward danger instead of away from it. Well-designed signage, even under duress, can make a critical difference. For instance, highly visible, standardized signs can:

- Highlight safe routes and exits clearly (including well-lit “EXIT” signs that remain visible in smoke or darkness).
- Point toward designated shelter areas (e.g. arrows and symbols indicating tornado shelters or “Area of Refuge” rooms for immobile patients).
- Warn people against opening or propping certain doors during a lockdown (“Secure Door – Do Not Open During Lockdown”).

Likewise, during fire drills and code enforcement inspections, clear signage is frequently cited as a key factor in smooth, safe evacuations. Hospitals must maintain signage systems that quickly guide people to emergency exits, evacuation routes, and life-safety equipment and meet not only internal emergency preparedness protocols but also external code requirements (e.g. NFPA life safety codes for exit signage).

For first responders and code teams, clear wayfinding is crucial. Confusing signs can delay their response, risking major incidents. Clearly marking emergency routes, fire extinguishers, and defibrillators helps responders act quickly, improving crisis management at minimal cost.

When patients, visitors, or vendors lose their way in a hospital, the impact isn’t just about inconvenience – it directly hits operational efficiency and even the bottom line. C-level executives may be surprised at how much staff productivity silently bleeds away due to poor wayfinding. Research shows that more than 85% of hospital patients and visitors end up asking staff for directions, and about 30% of first-time visitors get lost inside the facility⁹. All those interruptions and delays add up: one study found that chronic wayfinding issues were costing a hospital over \$220,000 per year in wasted staff time spent on directing lost people instead of delivering care¹⁰. In fact, hospital staff have been found to spend an average of 40 hours per year just giving directions to visitors¹¹ – roughly a full work week of productivity per employee, per year, essentially lost. This is a silent drain on resources that executives might not notice day-to-day, but it accumulates to substantial costs.

The operational fallout of bad signage manifests in multiple ways:

- **Patient delays and no-shows:** Outpatient clinics report increased missed or late appointments because visitors can’t find the correct department. (One study showed roughly **30% of patients arrive late** for appointments, and no-show rates remain high– navigation difficulties are a contributing factor.)
- **Disruptions to clinical workflows:** Doctors, nurses, and support staff are frequently interrupted to assist lost visitors, pulling them away from their primary duties. This not only delays those staff members’ tasks but also breaks their concentration, which can impact quality of care.
- **Increased staff frustration and burnout:** Constant wayfinding inquiries (“Excuse me, where is the X Department?”) add stress to already overloaded clinical roles. Staff can feel torn between helping lost visitors and attending to patients, which over time

contributes to burnout. Even employees themselves can struggle with navigation in large campuses – one survey found 25% of hospital staff couldn't find some locations within their own hospital complex.

- **Ripple effects on operations:** When patients are late, schedules derail. A chain reaction ensues – physicians and equipment sit idle waiting, then may have to rush later, and subsequent appointments are delayed. Overall patient throughput and flow decrease.
- **Direct financial impacts:** Delays and inefficiencies lead to overtime costs, underutilized billable time (empty slots when patients miss appointments), and generally lower revenue capture. Missed appointments alone cost the U.S. healthcare system an estimated \$150 billion annually in lost revenue, so every avoidable no-show or delay carries a price.¹²

Effective signage can significantly improve productivity by guiding people and reducing the time staff spend giving directions. For example, a hospital upgraded its signage, which decreased nurses' walking time and saved costs. Each minute nurses or security spend escorting someone is a minute back for patient care or surveillance. Clear signs help patients arrive on time, reducing reschedules and overtime.

Compared to expensive IT systems or adding extra staff to improve throughput, better signage is a relatively inexpensive, one-time investment – yet the returns are concrete. Smoother operations, higher productivity, and even improved patient satisfaction (patients on time and less frustrated) all flow from something as basic as enhanced wayfinding. In short, efficiency and profitability get a boost when your facility is easier to navigate.

Reinforcing Security Protocols Through Passive Enforcement

Signage is an often overlooked tool that quietly enhances security by reminding people of rules and boundaries around the clock, much like a tireless security guard. For instance, signs like “All visitors must check in and wear a badge” set clear expectations, while directives such as “No Unescorted Visitors Beyond This Point” or “CCTV Monitoring in Use” provide unambiguous instructions. These visual cues leverage behavioral psychology, encouraging compliance especially in environments like hospitals.

Such passive enforcement greatly enhances other security measures. Consider how signs interact with technological controls:

- **Strengthening access control:** Electronic badge readers and locked doors are more effective when paired with bold signage that states “Authorized Personnel Only” and **warns against tailgating**. The sign reinforces that the doorway is a boundary; it

reminds both the authorized person not to hold the door for others and deters an outsider from following through. It essentially puts would-be violators on notice.

- **Empowering staff compliance:** When policies are posted visibly, employees find it easier to enforce them. A staff member can simply gesture to a “No Unescorted Visitors – Stop and Check In” sign rather than personally confront someone, taking pressure off the employee. Signage normalizes security-minded behavior (for instance, a sign “Please Close Door Behind You for Security” encourages staff to do so without feeling rude).
- **Amplifying surveillance deterrence:** Security cameras have a greater crime deterrent effect when accompanied by **visible notices**. A sign announcing “Area Under 24/7 Video Surveillance” alerts potential trespassers that they are being watched, which may dissuade impulsive wrongdoing. It serves as a proactive nudge toward compliance (many will choose not to test the camera’s reach).
- **Acting as a low-cost force multiplier:** In all these ways, signs influence human behavior and magnify the deterrent effect of high-tech systems – without requiring additional manpower or expensive hardware. A \$50 sign can sometimes prevent an incident as effectively as a security officer’s intervention might.

Consistency and placement are key. To truly reinforce behavior, signs must be strategically placed at all relevant locations (every entry, every restricted door) and convey a unified message. When done right, signage becomes a form of “territorial reinforcement,” clearly delineating public vs. private spaces and asserting the organization’s control over an area. People instinctively respect a space that looks claimed and well-marked. Security experts note that signs are an easy way to designate territory and signal acceptable usage of an area¹³. For example, a delivery person is far less likely to wander through a back corridor if prominent signs say “Service Personnel Only beyond this point.” By contrast, if there are gaps or inconsistencies in signage, it creates gray areas that can be exploited – say, a door to a restricted wing that lacks the usual warning sign might invite an intruder to slip through unchallenged.

Executives should see signage as an integral part of rolling out any security policy or upgrade. Every new security measure – whether it’s a badge system, visitor management procedure, or camera installation – should be accompanied by clear visual messaging in the environment. This alignment ensures that human behavior (shaped by signage cues) and technology work in lockstep to protect the facility. In essence, signs quietly enforce the rules all day, every day, so that staff and devices face fewer breaches to catch in the first place.

Enterprise-Wide Signage Standardization

Healthcare systems with multiple sites face security and compliance risks from inconsistent signage. Patients, visitors, and staff should see a unified wayfinding system across all locations. Differing symbols, colors, or wording can cause confusion and uneven security standards—some facilities may have clear “Restricted Area” signs, while others lack them, increasing risk.

Standardized signage across facilities ensures best practices, reinforces brand values like safety and quality, and fosters trust through consistent fonts, colors, icons, and language. A uniform signage system with standardized terminology, symbols, and placement improves wayfinding and security—making signs like “Authorized Personnel Only” clear and authoritative everywhere. Leading health networks create master guidelines to maintain consistency and avoid gaps.

Standardization also supports regulatory compliance across the enterprise. Safety codes and accrediting bodies expect certain signage to be in place everywhere. For example, OSHA and NFPA standards require consistent signs for identifying hazards, emergency exits, and life safety equipment. The Joint Commission survey process also examines whether facilities have appropriate signage to meet its Environment of Care, Life Safety, and patient communication requirements¹⁴. Adopting one unified signage program helps ensure no site falls out of compliance – a lapse at a single location could jeopardize the standing of the entire system. In this sense, standardized signage is a risk reducer.

Other benefits of an enterprise-wide signage standard include:

- **Protecting system-wide reputation:** A single facility’s failure (e.g. an incident due to poor signage) can reflect poorly on the whole organization. Uniform standards help maintain consistent quality and safety, so no hospital in the network is the “weak link.”
- **Reinforcing brand identity and professionalism:** Consistent signage across all campuses signals organizational competence and control. Patients, visitors, and staff all notice when the visuals and messages are aligned; it projects an image of a well-run system. C-suite leaders recognize this as part of the hospital’s public image and operational excellence.
- **Boosting user confidence:** A well-marked environment reduces chaos and anxiety. People feel safer and more assured when visual cues are clear and familiar. When returning patients or staff see the same signage conventions at each location, they can navigate more quickly, which increases overall satisfaction.

- **Improving usability through familiarity:** Standardizing things like color-coding, iconography, and map design means that once a person learns to navigate one facility, they can apply the same “language” to all facilities in the system. This shortens the learning curve and leads to faster orientation for everyone.

Investing in enterprise-wide signage standards benefits senior executives by reducing risks, improving patient experience, and increasing operational efficiency. A unified signage system is easier and cheaper to maintain and update than multiple disparate systems across numerous sites. During expansions or acquisitions, a standard signage setup allows quick implementation, ensuring consistent safety and security. Overall, such consistency closes loopholes, reinforces corporate identity, and prevents signage-related safety oversights.

Embracing Digital Wayfinding Solutions

In addition to traditional static signs, many innovative healthcare organizations are now exploring digital wayfinding technologies to further enhance navigation and integrate with other hospital systems. Digital solutions can complement physical signage and provide real-time, personalized guidance that was unimaginable a decade ago. Key technologies include:

- **Digital signage and directories:** Interactive screens and electronic signs are becoming staples in modern hospitals. These can display up-to-the-minute directions, department directories, and alerts (e.g. when a route is closed or an elevator is out of service). Because they are centrally updateable, digital signs can adapt quickly to changes – for example, pointing visitors to a temporary alternate route during construction. They also offer a cleaner look and can incorporate multiple languages or ADA-compliant features on demand.
- **Mobile navigation apps:** Smartphone-based wayfinding apps are a game-changer for large facilities. Using GPS outdoors and indoor positioning systems (like Bluetooth beacons or Wi-Fi triangulation), a mobile app can guide a patient from their home to the correct parking garage and then inside the hospital with turn-by-turn directions. Some apps even integrate with hospital appointment systems, so that a patient’s appointment notification comes with a suggested route and estimated walking time built in. The convenience of having a “Google Maps for the hospital” cannot be overstated – it puts a personal navigation assistant in every visitor’s pocket.
- **Touchscreen kiosks:** Strategically placed self-service kiosks at entrances or lobbies allow visitors to search for destinations and print or text directions to their phone. These large, easy-to-use maps can show “You Are Here” and the route to where you need to go. They are essentially an interactive directory and map, which can reduce lines at information desks. Kiosks also promote independence for visitors who might be too shy to ask for directions.

- **Augmented Reality (AR) navigation:** Some cutting-edge hospitals are piloting AR wayfinding, where users can point their smartphone camera at their surroundings and see virtual arrows or footprints overlaid on the real world, guiding them to their destination. AR can make navigation almost game-like and highly intuitive, reducing ambiguity in complex layouts. While still an emerging technology, AR navigation has great potential to simplify the experience for those comfortable with smartphones.
- **Real-Time Location (RTL) system integration:** Hospitals already use RTL systems (RFID, Bluetooth beacons, etc.) to track equipment and optimize workflows. These technologies can be leveraged for visitor wayfinding as well. For instance, Bluetooth beacon networks can communicate with the hospital's mobile app to pinpoint a visitor's location indoors with high accuracy. This enables the blue-dot "live navigation" similar to GPS. Additionally, integrating wayfinding with RTL data means the system could guide someone to the nearest wheelchair or tell a family member when their loved one has been moved to a new room, in real time. The overall trend is towards a *smart hospital* that connects people, assets, and information seamlessly.¹⁵

Digital wayfinding does more than just wow with technology – it produces results. Hospitals that have implemented robust digital navigation tools have seen measurable improvements. In one case, facilities using digital wayfinding solutions experienced a 25% reduction in missed appointments as patients were better able to find the right location on time. Surveys also show that 65% of patients and 77% of hospital visitors felt that digital wayfinding improved their experience in the facility. Those are significant boosts to both operational metrics and goodwill. Furthermore, digital platforms can collect anonymized data on visitor movement, highlighting bottlenecks or confusing spots in the layout – invaluable feedback for continuous improvement.¹⁶

For the C-suite, digital wayfinding offers two main benefits: enhancing patient experience and boosting hospital efficiency. It can differentiate your hospital as innovative by improving navigation, such as redirecting patients during delays or guiding visitors to available parking, reducing congestion and frustration.

In adopting digital wayfinding, it's important to remember it **complements** rather than replaces physical signage. Not every visitor will download an app or use a kiosk, so traditional signs remain essential. The goal is to provide multiple, layered wayfinding options – static signs for immediate, glanceable information and digital tools for interactive guidance – all reinforcing each other. This hybrid approach ensures that all user preferences are met and that the investment in high-tech solutions is supported by a solid foundation of environmental design.

The Bottom Line:

Signage as a Strategic Security Investment

Wayfinding signage should be part of every CSO's and COO's toolkit to enhance security, safety, and efficiency. Good signage can reduce risks, prevent unauthorized access, speed up emergency responses, improve patient satisfaction, and foster a safety culture—all at a low cost. Using clear signage and distinct spatial cues is more affordable than high-tech options and complements existing security measures like access control and surveillance. Think of effective signage as a force multiplier for security and customer service efforts.

In the age of doing more with less, leveraging signage yields high ROI in both tangible and intangible ways. It helps hospitals:

- **Maintain compliance effortlessly:** Many safety regulations and accrediting standards require appropriate signage (for life safety, hazards, ADA access, patient rights communication, etc.), so improving it helps meet these requirements and avoid findings with minimal extra effort.
- **Reduce the risk of duty-of-care failures:** By clearly marking restricted areas, egress paths, and cautionary notices, hospitals can prevent accidents involving vulnerable patients (and others), deter unauthorized access, and minimize chaos during emergencies. This in turn reduces the likelihood of adverse events that could lead to lawsuits or penalties.
- **Protect reputation and avoid litigation:** Every preventable incident averted by good signage is one less chance for a costly lawsuit or negative media headline. Consistent wayfinding and safety signage demonstrate an organization's commitment to a safe environment, which bolsters public trust.
- **Drive positive secondary outcomes:** Smoother operations, more on-time appointments, and less visitor frustration all contribute to better overall performance indicators. Staff benefit too – their morale improves when the environment is orderly and they aren't constantly pulled from duties to give directions. Higher patient satisfaction naturally follows when people feel cared for in a well-organized setting.

Wayfinding signage is a strategic tool that enhances risk management, patient experience, and operations. Prioritizing signage upgrades can improve security, reduce lost visitors *and* safety incidents, save costs, and elevate care. Better signage helps create safer, more efficient, and welcoming healthcare environments. It's time to make this a part of your security and leadership strategy.

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