



Signage

Description

Signage helps direct visitors, guides visitor behaviour and provides interpretation to visitors. Sign sizes and content vary considerably: from one letter or symbol conveying considerable meaning (such as the simple but ubiquitous “i” denoting a source of visitor information) to signs displaying large amounts of detailed information. Signage is a subset of the general [interpretation](#) tool.

Signs are commonly used to attract visitors to an area or site, and to help them find a particular tourist operation or site. They are also used to manage visitor behaviour, including behaviour that could affect the environment or cause risks to the visitors themselves. Signs are also used extensively to convey information and interpretation that enhances the visitor experience.

How and when the tool is used

A wide range of signage is used in New Zealand tourism. The following are most common:

- Signs for marketing and providing directions to destinations and activities - these signs, including road signs, are ubiquitous and have become increasingly standardised, with colour coding, including yellow AA destination and distance signs; green and blue highway signs indicating places, distances and location of facilities such as eating places, accommodation and toilets; brown signs for heritage sites and other visitor activities; and signs for road-based trails including scenic, heritage, craft, wine and food trails. There is also a wide range of commercial destination and activity signs with no standardisation but subject to Transit NZ and local council regulation.
- Signs for marking of trails, tracks and points of interest - usually found at access points off a road or trail, or in car parks and trail ends, and used for marking features such as tracks, waterfalls and beaches. These signs are far from uniform in nature, although Department of Conservation (DOC) signs - the major group of signs in New Zealand natural areas - is becoming increasingly standardised, being subject to internal policy and standards for colour, wording and presentation. Most councils also have some degree of standardisation of signage in their jurisdiction.
- Signs for warnings - these signs are used for warnings of danger and risks to visitors and the environment and are increasingly prepared to international standards of symbols and colours.
- Signs for managing behaviour and lessening impact - used to advise people how to behave around natural features including wildlife and to manage a wide variety of behaviour such as disposal of rubbish and toilet waste, driving on beaches, keeping a distance from wildlife, control of dogs, where and how to fish, and where to camp. Some of these signs use widely recognised symbols.
- Signs for interpretation - these signs are found commonly at points of interest and to provide information around a site such as a heritage site, and along trails, explaining the environment, and its cultural and historic significance. Signs for managing behaviour and lessening impact can also be a type of interpretation.

Monitoring of signs is carried out by the authorities responsible such as Transit NZ, local councils and DOC, as well as by district tourism organisations. Operators and the host community are also involved in monitoring, for instance reporting a sign that is out of date or in need of repair. Indeed, regular monitoring is essential to keep on top of maintenance and to avoid shoddy, disreputable appearance and inaccuracy. Much monitoring, however, is by exception, when things go wrong.

As with interpretation in general, regular evaluation of signage is required. This evaluation involves assessing whether the sign is appropriately sited and suits the context, how visitors are interpreting the information in signs, whether the information is appropriate and whether management objectives are being met. Other questions include are signs getting the desired message to the audience, and are they still accurate? Visitors remember well the sign that sent them driving or walking in the wrong direction or into an unsafe position.



Application

Increasing visitor numbers, tourist activities and products, and considerations of public safety, have seen a proliferation of signage. While signs are vital to the visitor industry they can also reduce attractiveness of the destination environment. There are key roles for local government, DOC and Transit NZ in the management of signage. New signs need to follow council bylaws and Transit NZ rules. Concerns of these agencies include size, position, materials, colours, lighting, terminology, use of symbols and design, particularly relating the number of words to the size of the sign. Early communication with and between agencies and local tourist groups is essential in developing signage plans.

In designing signs the following points need consideration:

- information is best layered from brief to complex and familiar to new. For instance a title followed by a subheading explaining the issue or topic, and possibly an example or explanation to follow;
- conclusions should reinforce messages;
- information should be accurate and up to date;
- content should be thought provoking.

Research shows visitors respond positively to simple explanations with sensible reasons: Don't go close - they bite. Control your dog - dogs kill penguins. Danger - drowning. People find it easy to receive information in a direct form like signs and, once their attention is caught, they are more likely to read on for more detailed information.

Placement is important to attract the visitor's attention at the most useful time and place. A clutter of signs can reduce the message. Warning signs should be clearly visible. It is particularly important to place warning signs away from interpretation and explanation signs, and to avoid mixed messages. Combining recognised symbols and words is effective. Warning signs usually begin with the word danger, warning or caution defining the risk from severe to less severe. The usual order is that the hazard is identified, consequences stated, and methods to avoid the consequences are clearly stated.

In all signs the following language and design issues should be taken into account:

- concise, clear and direct language, with catchy titles;
- illustrations that match the content of the text;
- balanced layout with sufficient space;
- the needs of people with disabilities, children, the colour blind and sight impaired;
- durability, maintenance and cost when choosing sign material; wood, fibreglass, metal, stone and plastic are used often;
- appropriate use of humour - instructions in cartoon form are often effective, for instance a cartoon sign of low growing flowers smiling saying "Thanks for not stepping on us" is received more positively than signs saying "Keep off the plants" or "Keep on the paths".

Our evaluation

Signage is an important tool in tourism management. There are a wide range of signs used and a number of strengths, weaknesses and opportunities are evident.

The great strength of signs is that they deliver succinct messages and information to visitors on the spot, providing direction, identifying risks to the visitor and the environment, and modifying behaviour. They can also enhance the visitor experience with appropriate information. However, signs are costly to both build and maintain. Many existing signs are poorly designed and their message is often unclear. There is increasing signage clutter. Overall, there is a need for clearer signage policies, more monitoring of signs that are damaged or no longer relevant, and more consistency between agencies and tourist areas.