



Inclusive Washrooms: A Solution Through Signage

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The Opportunity

A popular topic of conversation these days, inclusive washrooms are providing valuable opportunities for public discourse and education on inclusivity and acceptance. Recently, a neighbourhood school board proudly announced it was the first to ensure the availability of inclusive washrooms for the upcoming school year, while other groups, such as the Canadian National Exhibition (CNE), have used the opportunity to make a statement about their political stance on the issue (King, 2016; Wilson, 2016). As similar stories emerge, we are finding that the subject has a lot to do with communication and the sign on the door.

Searching for a Standard

Socially, we are becoming more and more aware of individuals and groups, such as members of the LGBTQ community, who may not conform to conventional gender norms. As a result we are strategically shifting our public assets and services to be more accessible and inclusive. Until this shift has occurred, we, as communication and signage consultants, are dealing with four principal scenarios:

1. Single-use washrooms containing a single toilet and sink in a lockable room.
2. Multi-use facilities with individual enclosed toilet stalls that share a common sink area.
3. Multi-stall washrooms with urinals, which have traditionally been designated male.
4. Multi-stall washrooms without urinals, which have traditionally been designated female.

The question is, how do we resolve communication around these various scenarios using a universally recognized and understood approach that accommodates basic rights to gender identity and expression? We have assisted the Canadian Standards Association (CSA) in doing just that as they work to publish a new standard for signage in healthcare facilities. For the purposes of this paper, we are recommending best practices and a signage standard that responds to inclusive washrooms – single-use washrooms containing a single toilet and sink in a lockable room, and multi-use facilities with individual enclosed toilet stalls that share a common sink area.

A Societal Shift

Current conversations, developments, and legislation tell us that we are at the edge of a transformation that will change the way we think about, and communicate, gender. This year in Canada, Bill C-16 was introduced; it ensures “Canadians will be free to identify themselves and to express their gender as they wish while being protected against discrimination and hate” (Mas, 2016). Many provinces in Canada have already updated their Human Rights Legislation to include protections against discrimination, gender identity, and gender expression. Similar legislation has been at the forefront in the US and internationally.

The familiar gender-specific washrooms have been discussed in relation to their gender binaries, and for many organizations the solution has been to introduce a third option – inclusive washrooms, intended for any identity or expression. These single-stall washrooms already exist in many facilities, and the public is simply being made more aware of their availability. Both the University of British Columbia and the University of Toronto have been compiling and distributing lists of available single-stall, multi-gender washrooms on campus (Kane, 2015). Museums are following suit – the Royal Ontario Museum has introduced additional inclusive washrooms and associated signage (Jones, 2016). As more and more of these washrooms emerge, the need for correct and consistent signage is imminent.

The Design Challenge



The common signage currently used for inclusive washrooms are a step in the right direction, but could be improved to ensure accuracy and inclusivity.

Design as Representation

This is not the first time washrooms have been a focus of political debate, and today's discussions reflect those that occurred during the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. As segregation was outlawed and began to fade away in public assets, change-rooms and washrooms remained a major barrier to desegregation in many workplaces (Gershenson, 2009).

Nor is it the first time graphic design has helped to solve social and political challenges. At the root of this subject is the messaging used on washroom signage, in this case the verbiage and pictograms. Though some believe that the pictogram on a washroom door is not important or does not have psychological effects on individuals, we know now that pictograms are powerful tools for the cognitive system. Vezin, one of the first to argue this position, found that the descriptive nature of a pictogram is such that it “provides high quality pictorial representation facilitating memorization and association; and since a pictogram can be used to represent a category, it can provide broad information exceeding the specific items it portrays” (Tijus, 2007, p. 25-26). Put simply, signage is powerful. It is much more than words and symbols placed on material – it is the way we communicate and engage with our society.

Finding the Answer

The design industry is currently at a point of confusion, as many clients are looking for best practices to incorporate the needs and preferences of a wider community. Common questions include: What is the right pictogram to use? How does this fit in with other pictograms (accessibility, directional etc.) and our overall environmental branding? Is there a standard that can provide clarity?

Proactive LGBTQ communities, who are highly affected by inclusive washrooms and their signage, pose a clear objective. The aim is to set a precedent and standard that is representative of an inclusive environment and requires little explanation. The purpose is not to highlight differences, but rather to create a system that does not need to bring these differences into the equation.

So how, through signage, can we satisfy the need for a common solution and a response to these ideals? In true design-thinking fashion, we asked various organizations about their challenges, explored the many options that have surfaced, and spoke with the communities most affected by inclusive washrooms and signage. Through this research and our work with affiliate organizations we have created a recommended standard and five guiding principles.

The Solution



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The recommended signage for inclusive washrooms is a toilet pictogram, followed by the word 'washroom'.

1. Focus on the service, not the user identity

When the topic of inclusive washrooms is presented, questions surround the most appropriate way to display gender identities on signage. The simple answer is to not focus on identities. Signage represents and speaks to the service provided. If signage alienates certain groups, the message they receive is that the service does not apply to them, or that they are not allowed to access it. Signage should not emphasize who is walking in, but rather what they are going in to use. For inclusive washrooms, the best solution is to use a figurative pictogram of a toilet. A figurative pictogram is “made up of a direct representation of the object” (Tijus, 2007, p. 29), and this is what the toilet pictogram would do – represent the service provided. There are countless examples of public services that do not require the user’s identity to be on signage. There is no need to identify ourselves on signage when using a garbage can or a bus, and it should not be any different for washrooms.

2. Keep communication simple and clear

It is best to include only what is minimally required to send a message; keeping it simple makes it easier for all individuals to understand. This ensures gender neutrality while accounting for those who may not speak the national language, as well for individuals with impaired vision. A good pictogram should “contain little detail and should be easily distinguishable” (Tijus, 2007, p. 33). In the case of single-use washrooms containing a single toilet and sink in a lockable room, and multi-use facilities with individual enclosed toilet stalls that share a common sink area, along with the pictogram of a toilet, the sign should simply say ‘washroom’. Another important consideration is physical accessibility. For accessible washrooms of this kind, the wheelchair pictogram and associated language can be included on the signage without risk of overcrowding. Along with inclusivity, clearer signage will provide ease of navigation and understanding.

3. Pay attention to detail

Attention to detail is crucial, and to the public this signals a certain level of care. Along with the words and pictograms, the material used for signage is an important consideration. While temporary replacements are a step forward in transitioning to more inclusive spaces, timeliness in the production of permanent signage for inclusive washrooms should be a priority. It is also important to ensure pictograms are well designed and that the font, colours and signage fit well into the branding of the organization or building. Ultimately, signage should be professional and intentional, representing the effort behind it.

4. Make signage widely applicable and consistent

Though inclusive signage is often presented as an issue for individuals who are transgender and members of the LGBTQ community, it is applicable to everyone, and the solution can benefit multiple groups who either feel unsafe or excluded in washroom scenarios. For example, parents with children of a different gender frequently encounter similar issues when accessing public washrooms. It is imperative that we create a standard, so that the same signage is used across all types of locations, and individuals who require inclusive washrooms can locate them easily. Ideally, anyone should be able to walk into a hospital, school, or sports venue and know that they will not encounter non-inclusive signage or services.

5. Educate your organization

While the goal is to eventually shift societal perceptions and reduce the need for education, there will be a transitional phase for a period of time. It is important to educate staff, volunteers, and patrons on new signage so that they understand the social context and benefits – most importantly, how to provide the best assistance to those who are looking for inclusive washrooms. Correct terminology and pronouns are also key to providing this information and should be given careful attention.

Final Thoughts

We believe it is our responsibility as artists, designers, communicators, and people to recognize a change in our societal make-up and the need for key public assets to reflect this. Companies and organizations can only move forward with the best information, based on research and expert opinions. To do this, we should listen to the voices of those who are most affected by non-inclusive signage and lead our industry and our clients to solutions that include these voices. We cannot ignore our understanding of the larger issue at hand, or the impact that signage has on everyone who uses it. While we are on the road to pure inclusivity and accessibility, one thing we can do is change the sign on the door.

This article has been written in collaboration with our industry partners, clients, and Marni Panas, a recognized diversity and inclusion advocate for LGBTQ issues in Alberta. Marni is also a Senior Employee Relations Advisor for Alberta Health Services and has been deeply involved with the Canadian Standards Association in recommending signage standards for healthcare facilities.

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Entro was recently involved in a standard developed by the Canadian Standards Association (CSA) for Wayfinding in Health Care Facilities, that covers best practices related to patient experience. This includes the accommodation of Canadians' rights to gender identity and expression, clear designations for accessibility, and effective language and nomenclature.

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Entro Communications Inc. and Gottschalk+Ash

33 Harbour Square, Suite 202, Toronto, Canada M5J 2G2 T: 416-368-6988 F: 416-368-5616 entro.com

TORONTO CALGARY ZÜRICH