In Search of HOVBY: Informational Markers and Materials at IKEA

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Abstract

This research project examines how shoppers at IKEA navigate their progression through the store. The study used field-study techniques to track the way one shopper used locational and directional information, also known as wayfinding behaviours, in order to find items on her shopping list. The author seeks to understand how IKEA assists its customers with finding their way through the store, and considers the informational materials and markers that IKEA provides for their shoppers and how the shoppers use that information.

This research project examines how shoppers at IKEA navigate their progress through the store. I am particularly interested in how these individuals use the informational materials provided by the institution to guide themselves towards their goal – in this case, the piece of furniture they wish to purchase. The process of information seeking behaviour, that is: “the purposive acquisition of information from selected information carriers” (Johnson, et al, 2006, p. 570), is an integral part of this navigation process as shoppers rely on locational and directional information which will guide them to their desired product(s). Without such information, shoppers may resort to wandering aimlessly until they come across their item by chance. Wayfinding behaviour examines how individuals seek out information that will help them navigate through a physical space in order to locate a specific object. This project asks two key questions to establish how IKEA assists its customers with finding their way through the store:

1. What kinds of informational materials and markers does IKEA provide for their shoppers?
2. How do people use the informational materials and markers provided by IKEA to find the item they wish to buy?
Literature Review

According to Titus and Everett, wayfinding is “a problem-solving activity that requires individuals to define the problem space (i.e. identify the range of possible actions) and select the appropriate course of action” (1996, p. 266). In order to navigate through a complex environment and locate a desired object, the authors indicate that individuals will undergo a series of basic mechanisms that allows them to comprehend their environment and to make a connection between what they are looking for and the direction they wish to travel. Titus and Everett are particularly interested in the way wayfinding is used in commercial environments. They note that very little research has been done in this area (Titus and Everett, 1996, p.226). In their study, the authors had 63 participants engage in a simulated grocery shopping experience in a suburban supermarket. Each subject was given a list of 21 different products to locate. As they “shopped” for the products, the subjects used a digital voice recorder to log their descriptions of where they were searching, why they were searching there, and what features they were using from the shopping environment to find what they needed. Titus and Everett used these descriptions to establish what types of information the subjects used to orient themselves in the store and to select routes to their specific destinations.

Gale Eaton (1991) employed a similar study in order to establish how the physical construction of a library (including signs) affected the way users navigate through the space. Her study included 41 subjects who were asked to locate six books in the stacks of an unfamiliar library. The chosen library was built in the 1970s and consisted of a large open space that included few directional and locational signs. She believed that for a first-time user it would be very difficult to locate the desired texts, particularly because there was so little information for the subjects to use to orient themselves and to navigate routes. Although she notes that signs cannot solve all problems related to orientation and route uncertainty, they do serve an important role in wayfinding practices. In order for signs to be effective, they must be clearly visible to the user, strategically placed, coordinated (i.e. in terms of colour and size) and offer simple, yet precise information. If the information provided by the sign conflicts with informational cues offered by other special elements, such as the placement of furniture or the way an area is lit, the value of the sign’s information is diminished. The confused user must look elsewhere for direction.

In her essay entitled “Wayfinding in Action,” Beth Dempsey describes how wayfinding is an integral component of library design and use. She examines four libraries, located in America and Singapore that, cognisant of the importance of wayfinding systems, have used various informational tools to make their libraries as convenient as possible to patrons. These libraries, she writes, have recognized that libraries should be oriented to the consumer – the patron – and not the staff. With this in mind, they have organized their materials and placed signage so that users can easily access and navigate whichever route they
need to retrieve the information or item that they are looking for.

Methodology

I employed constructivist, cognitive, and ethnographic approaches in my research as I wanted to examine how individuals actively seek and respond to informational markers in a space (IKEA). I used a variety of field techniques, including observation, documentation, and interviewing, to collect data. This paper meets the ethical standards as prescribed by the University of Toronto Ethics Review Committee.

My fieldwork was situated in one IKEA store: IKEA Etobicoke, 1475 The Queensway. I decided to limit my research to the Showroom and the Self-Serve Furniture Area in order to focus my study. The second floor of IKEA Etobicoke houses the Showroom, which includes: soft furnishings, such as sofas and armchairs; wooden/laminate/metal furniture, such as tables; chairs, and chests of drawers; and structural kitchen accessories, such as cabinets, sinks and faucets. The Self-Serve Furniture Area is located on the ground floor of the store and contains the flat-packed, ready-to-assemble furniture items. In order to gain access to the IKEA store, I contacted the general manager for permission to take photographs inside the store with assurance that my interest was solely the store’s floor plan and other informational material within the store, not salespeople.

The population I examined was not limited by age, gender, education level, or previous knowledge of the store; the only restrictive factor was that the population must be in the process of shopping at an IKEA store, and possess a clear idea of what item they wished to purchase. Due to time and project restraints, I focussed on IKEA Etobicoke, which is located in the west end of Toronto. My research pool consisted of one female IKEA shopper.

In order to make sure that my subject was aware of her rights and at ease with being photographed and interviewed during the walkthrough and interview processes, I had her read and sign the letter of consent provided by Dr. Jenna Hartel, and also reviewed the observational research section of the Guidelines and Practices Manual for Research Involving Human Subjects as proposed by the University of Toronto’s Ethics Review Office. I did my best to ensure that my photographs did not include any shoppers or salespeople other than my subject. In those shots that did capture images of people other than my subject, I used a photo-editing program to camouflage any identifying marks, including their faces.

I made use of various research-gathering techniques during my fieldwork research, including photography, recording field notes, and interviewing. I visited IKEA prior to the interview to decide which items I wanted my subject to shop for, and to consider what was informational about the space. I wanted to be sure that I was aware of the many kinds of locational and directional information available to IKEA shoppers, so that when I followed my subject around the store I would be prepared to record anything that my subject used in order to find the items on her list. During a second visit,
I followed my subject around, as unobtrusively as possible, and took photographs of her use of informational material as she moved through the store. I also used a digital voice recorder to record my field observations of her “shopping trip,” focusing on how she located the pieces of furniture I asked her to “buy.” I also used my field notes to caption my photographs.

I used Titus and Everett’s study of consumer wayfinding and Eaton’s study of wayfinding in libraries to guide the design of my study. In both of these studies, the researcher(s) provided the participants with a list of specific items that they were to locate. In the case of the Titus and Everett study, the list included 21 predetermined grocery items; in Eaton’s study, the participants received a list of six library books. With these studies in mind, I decided I would also use a simulated shopping experience in order to see what types of information my subject would use to navigate through the store and seek out items on her shopping list. I provided my subject with a shopping list that included the names of two pieces of IKEA furniture. I also provided her with details about the furniture, including the desired fabric and type of wood. As my subject moved through the store, I occasionally asked her to describe what environmental cues she was using to decide where to go in order to find her items. The majority of the discussion, however, was relegated to the interview at the end of the shopping trip. During the interview, I asked the subject about what she thought was “informational” about IKEA, what kinds of informational materials and markers she employed during her shopping trip, and whether she found these materials to be especially useful.

I used a digital camera to take photographs and a digital voice recorder to record my field notes and interview. I felt that using a pen and paper to record my field notes would be too cumbersome, particularly as I was going to be taking photographs throughout the shopping part of the research process. I transcribed my notes into my computer as soon as possible after both trips to IKEA, and used Power Point to organize and caption my photographs. When this research project is completed I will destroy all of my data as per the University of Toronto Ethics Board agreement.

I used my data to establish what kinds of informational materials and markers IKEA provides for its shoppers, and I considered how people use them to locate the items they wish to buy. I compared my findings to studies about wayfinding, to establish how these materials and markers function as informational tools for routing people through a large and complex space.

**Findings**

On my initial trip to IKEA Etobicoke I wanted to explore my first research question: What kinds of informational materials and markers does IKEA provide for shoppers? I decided the best way to answer this question would be to walk through the store and take pictures of anything I considered to be informational. My walkthrough proved to be extremely rewarding, as I discovered 16 different kinds of informational markers and materials (see Appendix A). My list includes
materials such as flyers with maps of the store’s floor plan (offered at the entrance to the Showroom and throughout the store), tags describing specific items and indicating their location (with aisle and bin numbers) in the Self-Serve Area, and catalogues that provide images and descriptions of many of the items sold in the store. The informational markers throughout the store included directional signs with text and arrows, locational signs indicating the contents of a specific area, and groupings of furniture that similarly indicated the contents of a specific area in the showroom.

On my second trip to IKEA, I met my subject, Tracey (a pseudonym protecting the subject’s identity), just outside the front entrance of the IKEA Etobicoke at 2:00pm on Friday, April 10. Tracey did not have any prior knowledge of the subject of my research topic, beyond it taking place at IKEA, and my intention to follow her as she shopped for some predetermined items. Before we entered the store, I provided her with a list of the items I wanted her to “shop for” (See Appendix B.). The list included two items: a RAMVIK coffee table in a beech veneer, and a HENRIKSDAL dining-room chair with a black-brown frame and a black and white HOVBY slipcover. I told Tracey that I wanted her to look for these items as if she was on a real shopping trip, but requested that she describe her search process as she shopped. For example, I wanted her to tell me if she decided to follow a specific directional sign, or identified a marker that helped her to establish her location in the store and her proximity to, say, the dining area, where she believed she would find the chair described on her shopping list. I told Tracey that I would be following behind her at a short distance and would be taking pictures and notes of her while she shopped. I made sure that I spoke quietly into the digital voice recorder with my observations so that Tracey would not hear what I was saying. Despite the fact that this shopping trip was contrived, I wanted to make sure that Tracey’s shopping experience was as unfettered as possible. My observations, hopefully, reflect a relatively natural shopping experience.

We entered the IKEA at the main entrance and took the escalator to the second floor Showroom. I asked Tracey to start shopping and waited for her to walk approximately fifteen paces before I began following her. Tracey used a number of IKEA’s informational materials and markers to locate the items on her shopping list. For example, although there were no directional or locational signs indicating the coffee table section, Tracey said that she believed this was the coffee table area because there were so many coffee tables collected in one place.

Image 1: The coffee table section lacks a locational sign, but the grouping of so many tables suggests that this is nonetheless a defined display area.
Tracey began her search by looking at the tags on individual tables to see if they represented the item on her list; however, she quickly grew frustrated. She remarked that a catalogue would be very useful because it would help her identify the shape of the table, and she would be able to locate it much more quickly. At this point, Tracey walked away from the coffee table area in search of a catalogue. She found one approximately 40 ft. away in the entertainment-centre area.

The catalogue was laminated and attached to a service desk that included a computer, maps of the Showroom, pencils, and measuring tapes. After looking at a picture of the RAMVIK coffee table in the catalogue, and noting that it has a glass top, she returned to the coffee-table area and promptly located the RAMVIK coffee table, even though it was difficult to find in a dark corner of the display. She wrote down the aisle and bin numbers on a scrap piece of paper and returned to the main pathway.

The dining room area of the store was much more clearly defined, as it included a large collection of dining room chairs and tables. There was also a sign marked “Dining.”

As in the coffee table area, Tracey began her search by looking at the tags on individual chairs, but quickly decided to consult the catalogue at the service desk in the dining room area. The pictures in the catalogue helped her quickly to locate the HENRIKSDAL products in the floor display. She identified the chair on her list by its shape and black-brown colour and wrote down the aisle number for the Self-Serve Area.
Image 6: Tracey locates the HENRIKSal chair.

Image 7: Tracey almost chooses the wrong slipcover, but checks the name on the tag against her shopping list.

Image 8: Numbered aisle and bin signs.

Image 9: Aisles include display models to help customers locate their items.

It took a few more moments for Tracey to find the correct slipcover for the chair. The list indicated that it was black and white, and she became confused because she found a black and white striped slipcover that seemed to match the description on the list, but did not have the same name as the item on the list. Rather than look around at the other slipcover offerings, Tracey returned to the catalogue to see what the HOVBY fabric looked like. She noted on her piece of scrap paper that it was a black and white floral pattern, and immediately set off to find the Self-Serve Area so she could pick up items on her list.

Tracey was frustrated that there were no signs indicating a short cut to the Self-Serve Area and we were forced to walk through the entire Showroom and Marketplace in order to pick up the items. When we finally arrived in the Self-Serve Area, Tracey seemed confused about which aisles she should go to, but she checked her notes and examined the numbered red and white signs at the top of each aisle of shelving.

She used her aisle and bin-number notes, along with the displays of pieces of furniture relevant to each aisle, to locate the RAMVIK coffee table (not available in beech), the HENDRIKSAI chair and the HOVBY slipcover.
During the interview, Tracey noted that the markers she used during her shopping trip were easy to identify and to use because they were located in obvious spots. She appreciated that IKEA had made all the signs the same colour (blue in the Showroom and red in the Self-Serve Area) and with the same font, as this made it easy to recognize that these signs were meant for customers. They functioned to reassure her that she was travelling in the right direction.

She also noted that she did not use a number of the informational markers and materials, such as the maps and floor arrows, because she personally found them confusing and stressful. She agreed that other people might find these types of markers useful, and that IKEA should continue to use them as different people require different kinds of information to navigate through a space. Tracey mainly relied on markers and materials that resembled the items she was looking for, such as groupings of similar types of furniture, catalogue pictures, and floor model displays. She also took note of locational and descriptive signs, such as the “Dining” sign, the tags with aisle and bin numbers, and the aisle numbers in the Self-Serve Area. Tracey indicated that her use of these select informational markers and materials made it possible for her to locate the items on the shopping list in both the Showroom and the Self-Serve Area with very little difficulty. She felt that she had had a very positive shopping experience.

It is evident that IKEA has put a lot of thought into the development of the wayfinding system it employs in its stores. For the most part, it appears to be fairly effective and employs many of the techniques proposed by the articles discussed in my literature review. My research has shown that a customer travelling through IKEA Etobicoke uses a number of the informational markers and materials provided by the store to help her locate the items they wish to purchase. Different customers may use different markers and materials to navigate the space, but by providing so many options, IKEA appears to have addressed most of the directional and locational problems that patrons might encounter in the store. As a result, IKEA Etobicoke exemplifies how a wayfinding system effectively connects information seekers with informational materials and markers.
References


