Are your signs delivering the right message?

We’ve all had the experience of walking into a public building for the first time and trying to figure out where to go. One of the first things we do is look for a sign.

What happens when you can’t find one—or if the message is unclear? How do you feel? Annoyed? Confused? Most likely, you don’t feel welcome.

Now, place yourself in the shoes of someone who has a disability.

Signs play a key role in a congregation’s “welcoming culture.” That’s why it’s important to review them periodically and make sure they still deliver the message that you intend. Times change and, in some cases, so should your signs.

Start with a tour

The easiest way to assess your signs is to tour your facility, inside and out. Invite others to join you, especially new staff members or congregants, so you get different perspectives.

At Temple Sinai in Brookline, about eight members—including several from the Inclusion Committee—participated in a sign audit in 2016. They approached the signs from different angles, took photos, and paid attention in a way they hadn’t before. They noted, for example, if an outdoor sign was equally effective on partly sunny and partly cloudy days.

“The exercise was simple, it was fun and it taught us a lot about our signs,” says Elaine Ober, co-chair of the temple’s Inclusion Committee and secretary of the Board of Trustees. The group learned, for instance, that some signs had the right words, but the words were too small. Some had words, but no arrows. Others blended into their surroundings and, therefore, were difficult to see.

What to look for during your sign audit

Directions and information. Do your signs clearly point the way? Equally important, do they provide the information people are most likely to need, e.g., the location of accessible entrances, restrooms, the sanctuary, social hall, the main office?

Lettering, language and height. Can your signs be easily read by people of all abilities, from multiple directions and at different heights? At Temple Beth Shalom in Needham, signage needs were assessed as part of a recent redesign and expansion. All new signs include Braille, English and Hebrew. Before the
signs were permanently installed, mockups were made and hung to test the proposed locations and make sure the signs are legible—whether guests are young or old, standing or sitting.

**Restroom options.** Are restrooms clearly marked as family-friendly, unisex, or for men or women? If you have men’s and women’s restrooms, do nearby signs also let guests know where they can find single-user gender-neutral facilities?

**ADA compliance.** Do your signs comply with Americans with Disabilities Act guidelines? (See *Signs of Our Times.*) Are you using the updated accessibility symbol?

**Opt for maximum impact**

New signs can be expensive. Keep in mind, however, that a greater number of lower-cost signs might be more effective than one or two more expensive signs chosen primarily for aesthetic reasons. Accept that you might have to tackle your sign project in phases—and even settle for some temporary signs in the short term. You don’t want to miss an opportunity to deliver that welcoming message to a new member.

As part of its recent sign audit, Temple Ohabei Shalom in Brookline identified which signs are “must haves” for inclusion purposes and which might have to wait. Temple representatives worked with a sign company on setting priorities and determining locations, and are pleased with the results.

“We’re more confident, now, that our guests are able to find what they need,” says Naomi Gurt Lind, executive director. “It’s one more way that we’re making our space welcoming, comfortable and as much like home as it can be.”