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Facilities (Learning Spaces)

The Vital Role of Signage and Digital Displays

By **Catherine Dalton** February 1st, 2017

Meet Generation Z — the new class of academic disrupters. Their size alone demands our attention: demographers estimate this group to encompass roughly 60 million children, almost 1 million greater than the preceding Millennial generation. They are the most culturally diverse and socially aware generation to date, and will magnify the tech-savvy and multimedia-eager qualities of their earlier peers. At the same time, this group will have more choice in education than ever before, as the proliferation of School Choice Programs, Magnet Schools, Charter Schools and other alternatives make attendance at the “neighborhood school” no longer a given.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY JONATHAN HILLYER, COURTESY OF PERKINS+WILL

So how do forward-looking institutions adapt in order to create inspiration, drive awareness, build character and establish a sense of community? To effectively engage this new generation — one which efficiently absorbs information across multiple platforms, discarding it just as quickly — and to maintain their own future viability, some schools are integrating branded experiences into their educational environments.

Inspiring Community-Mindedness: Martin Luther King, Jr. Middle School

In a 2015 interview with The New York Times, Millennial Branding’s Managing Partner Dan Schawbel described a shift in how Generation Z absorbs messages, noting that “if they

[advertising partners] don't communicate in five words and a big picture, they will not reach this generation." School designers can embrace this change, incorporating supergraphics, color and text to achieve great visual impact without spending an extraordinary amount of money.

Educators have seen how purpose-driven learning can encourage higher order thinking in the classroom, so it stands to reason that higher order thinking can likewise occur in corridors and meeting spaces. At MLK Middle School, Perkins+Will developed multiple graphic touchpoints to highlight cultural identity and inspire purpose-driven engagement. A "freedom wall" featuring a diverse group of leaders and associated positive messages runs along the main circulation, while each learning pod is branded with a likeness of Martin Luther King, Jr. and a thought-provoking phrase such as "what are you doing for others?". Although the design team used paraphrased quotes to build a conversational language, all text was carefully selected to address questions frequently asked by Gen Z such as "why do I have to be here?", "who will I become?", and "why do I need to learn this?"



PHOTOGRAPHY BY JONATHAN HILLYER, COURTESY OF PERKINS+WILL

School Brands. One element of the renovation of the Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School, in Atlanta, is the inclusion of supergraphics, color and text to achieve great visual impact that will appeal to the newest generation of students.

The communication benefits of signage are not restricted to interior environments. Although traditionally, the school name is an afterthought of pin mounted letters hosted to the least significant wall of the front elevation, MLK features prominent exterior signage to celebrate the school's name, projecting the culture and identity of the interior outward to the community at large.

Building Character: Zan Wesley Holmes Middle School

Zan Wesley Holmes Jr., the middle school's namesake, is a Dallas pastor and political activist who influenced lasting change benefitting all future generations. To translate his ongoing legacy — and the character of resilience, compassion and integrity he embodies — into the students' physical environment, the design team created signage that includes Holmes' likeness and reflections from his sermons. This connection of person to place, in conjunction with favorable character examples, forms a foundation for the school's culture.

Each of the school's Small Learning Centers (SLC) has distinctive colors, quotes and icons,

creating a set of graphic landmarks by which students, parents, and volunteers can map their way through the building. Yet, these wayfinding elements serve a larger purpose: inspiring curiosity, grit and an appetite for learning. Like resilience, compassion and integrity, these essential traits for success (in any generation) are not easily found in a textbook, and are particularly challenging to teach in an increasingly test-driven curriculum. By elevating these concepts in the physical environment, the school design aims to enrich youth with strong moral character, just as Zan Wesley Holmes Jr. enriched society.

Curating Motivation: Bishop Lynch High School

While external influences change from generation to generation, schools can offer internal influences to provide a positive, motivating message. At Bishop Lynch High School, that opportunity was afforded by the school's own history — more than five decades of academic and athletic legacy. Bishop Lynch, like most schools, has no staff devoted to the preservation and careful curation of history, therefore years of student accomplishments were “lost” in crowded trophy cases and dusty yearbooks. To make their own history accessible — and motivational — to current and future students, the school installed a two story tall experiential trophy case featuring famous alumni and their accomplishments, as well as a feature wall highlighting athletic achievements. Walking those halls, Gen Z can be inspired to set goals of adding their name to the list of all-state players or college scholarship recipients; likewise, the celebration of student triumphs enhances Bishop Lynch's recruiting strategy and deepens the sense of school pride.

Engaging Socially: Little Elm High School

Little Elm High School's suite of displays originated as a signage solution to a branding challenge. Using the school's mascot, the lobo, as inspiration, the design team developed large



*PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHARLES DAVIS SMITH, AIA
Zan Wesley Holmes Middle School, Dallas, Texas*



*PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHARLES DAVIS SMITH, AIA
Bishop Lynch High School, Dallas, Texas*

format graphics and crafted names for social spaces. The positive family-like connotation of a “wolf pack” was emphasized to create a sense of community through messages such as “Little Elm, Big Pack” and “Your Pride, Our Pack” and spaces labeled the “Alpha Café” and “the Den”. Beyond signage, digital displays were added to enhance the user experience and extend the sense of community beyond the walls of the school. These highly flexible displays can be altered to reach different user groups (students, teachers, parents), can evolve with every new generation, and can be reactive to global issues in real time.

Little Elm High School includes several tiers of digital integration. Upon entry, a selfie wall featuring the motto “Engage, Equip, and Empower” encourages students to post images to apps such as Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat — a type of sharing which is intuitive to Gen Z and facilitates a social community that mirrors the traditional physical community. The next level of digital integration consists of monitors with one-way communication from administration to students strategically placed at the entrance to each educational department. These digital moments aid in wayfinding and display department-specific notifications and achievements. Little Elm’s highest level of digital integration occurs at the main gymnasium entry, where a bank of ten monitors enable two-way communication: in addition to school-produced content, individual students and attendees can send live feeds to the community at large.



PHOTO COURTESY OF PERKINS+WILL
Little Elm Interior, Little Elm, Texas

So why should schools consider incorporating a branded experience for their students? Empowered by School Choice Programs, Magnet Schools, the recent boom in Charter Schools, home schooling and increasing financial assistance for private schools, tomorrow’s generation of students will have more choices than ever when selecting an educational environment. Simply put, schools are the manufacturers, education is the product they are selling, and branding merges product with place. Generation Z will select an educational environment with a specialized infrastructure that enables its unique forms of communication, with emphasis on graphics, technology and highly social connections.

About the Author

Catherine Dalton, AIA, RID, Interior Project Architect, works out of the Dallas Office. She has 10 years of educational innovation, planning and architectural design experience spanning over 50 projects in the state of Texas, Catherine offers unique expertise to help foster innovative design strategies to better enhance the student learning environment. Catherine can

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