The IA You See When You Can't Read the Language

by Laura Creekmore

EDITOR'S SUMMARY

A trip to Mexico and being surrounded by airport signs in Spanish highlighted the importance of the information architecture of travel for the author. Indicators of airport terminals, trains and trams were less than clear for those with limited language skills. Airport arrivals and departures were not designated or organized in familiar ways. Using one's own phone on another country's network was complicated. The confusing differences created stress, forced decision making despite uncertainty, and prompted a desire to hide ignorance with a confident appearance. Emotion became a significant factor navigating through the unfamiliar environment of both textual and nontextual cues. Information architects should be mindful of the information they present verbally and graphically and consider the potential for confusion and emotion interfering with their message.

I traveled recently to Mexico for a meeting. I speak just a tiny bit of Spanish – I took the language for three years in school, and I always enjoyed it and had a decent facility for it. But since then, I've only had a few occasions to use it. I knew that my trip would be a fun time to refresh my Spanish a little bit, at least on some routine conversational interactions.

But I didn't expect to spend my time thinking about the information architecture of travel. Yet that's exactly what was glaringly obvious to me the moment I stepped off the plane in Mexico City.

When you strip away the information provided by understandable language, the architecture sticks right out at you. I don't mean the design of the building, of course. I mean the design of the information. This feature begins to become obvious at an international airport, where you may find signs in multiple languages. My own home airport in the United States has some signs in Spanish, but I pay little attention to them (or to the signs that aren't translated) since I'm looking at the English words.

At the Mexico City airport, with the situation reversed, I realized immediately how much the architecture of the information could give me hints – when it was analogous to the way I'd seen it handled in U.S. airports – or confuse me, when it was different.

I knew we had arrived at Terminal 2, and for a while, we were trying to figure out how to get to Terminal 1 to meet some friends. My companions and I stood in a large hall with at least five exits. Three went outside, in different directions. Two went to long interior hallways. I saw no icons for trains, yet we knew there was some kind of train or tram that led to the other terminals. I didn't see any numbers that appeared to represent the other terminals either.

Fortunately, we solved that problem by contacting our pre-arranged driver and asking him just to come over for us, instead of vice versa. I wouldn't be at all surprised to learn that there were signs that explained exactly what we needed to know, but we didn't see the cues we needed. If we hadn't been able to contact our driver, we'd have had to find an English-speaking employee (of which there were certainly many – but part of the fun of international travel is seeing what you can come up with on your own).

I also had trouble getting my phone to work, despite having contacted my carrier prior to travel and ensuring I had the appropriate plan. I decided the thing to do would be to get on wifi once we arrived at the hotel and talk to my carrier to resolve the situation.

While we were waiting at the airport, I noticed a sign referring to free wifi. I could tell enough to figure out the network name and the password. But I couldn't read Spanish well enough to tell who provided the service – so I

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felt unsure about whether I should trust the security. I decided to give it a try but do nothing other than contact my carrier via their app. A dumb move or a smart one? I'll tell you when I get my next bill. But again, I realized that being familiar with brand names and knowing how official government programs are named are very important to establishing trust. We've all seen scams that use a near-miss, official-sounding brand or government type name. Frankly, I've judged people who fall for them. After my trip, I realized how sophisticated your understanding has to be to know whether or not you can trust information.

When we returned to the airport to leave a few days later, I found even more ways that the Mexican airport architected its information differently. We started at the airline ticket counter to check in a bag, and there were no arrivals or departures listed there. In fact, we had to walk all the way down to the security line at the other end of the hall to find flight information. We weren't sure that was the right way to go, in fact, because we still didn't know our gate number, but those were the screens we saw. Once we arrived, we learned we were in the right spot.

The other really useful reminder to me: I realized I made a lot of my decisions in the airport based on whether or not I thought I would look foolish. I'm not a person who spends a lot of time thinking about what others think about me. But I realized that when I was very uncertain of the right choice, and I believed I was surrounded by people who I felt must obviously see the right choice themselves, my desire to appear confident in the face of my ignorance was especially strong. Now surely no one was wasting their time to notice whether I had to double-back or was otherwise confused – but add a little stress to an already increased cognitive load and see how rational your decisions are!

When we're managing IA problems, understanding the context and the emotions our audience bring to the table is so important. Sometimes it may help to put yourself in a situation where things are confusing to you to see how much your audience depends on the non-textual cues you create with your information architecture.

What information are you conveying (or hiding) with your architectural decisions? ■