



Selling Digital Signage

Why you're not selling it and how you can start.

BY ANDREW STARKS,
CO-FOUNDER, TIGHTROPE MEDIA SYSTEMS

Digital signage is an increasingly popular method for getting crucial information to the public, whether it be in a school, store, office, church, or prison. Every client has a use for a digital signage system, but it's up to you to make sure your team is ready to sell it.

Need an easy way to spot a potential digital signage customer? Try taking your existing customer list and calling every one of the phone numbers on it. Next, ask them what they are doing for signage. Unlike almost every other product that you sell, digital signage works for every single one of your existing clients.

If your clients have people walking their hallways—whether customers, students, citizens, employees, parishioners, or prisoners—then chances are they have something important to say to them.

Your clients have to get crucial information to people somehow, and it's almost always more expensive to do so by other means. We have a university client, for example, who used to print signs and bulletins to make sure students and staff saw announcements, safety notices, schedule changes, information about campus events, and so on. They estimate that they now save over \$100,000 per year in printing costs alone. The business decision can be made very quickly once your customer understands these dynamics.

There's been a lot of hype on this technology, but the great thing is that signage saves tons of money while helping people to communicate. Furthermore, it's a huge campus safety tool and is all but mandatory in many areas, given the new NFPA-72 (National Fire Alarm and Signaling Code) requirements.

THE TYPICAL SIGNAGE CUSTOMER

After 10 years or more of sales only to early adopters, digital signage has finally reached the mainstream market. Some of our dealers knock it out of the park almost every month. For others, every system is an odyssey and they are not building momentum. Why are so many AV integrators having trouble selling digital signage?

I see two kinds of successful signage integrators. The first has a technical specialist that understands sales, the value and potential of digital signage, and knows which vendors make signage systems that work in which applications. No

matter what your customer's expectations, this guy or gal sets them straight, moves their sights higher, puts the right parts on the purchase order, and secures not only the project but the reputation of your business. If you've found this person, you don't need to read the rest of this article.

Successful integrators who do not have a signage guru have found ways to simplify the sales and customer experience. This strategy works because most signage systems are informational and all about saving money, especially in higher education. They are operated by office staff and sold by salespeople who do not have a production background.

The biggest problem, and your biggest risk, is that the typical end users—the Samuels and Sallies in reception and HR—may find the system too hard to use once it's installed. They decide they're fine with their 8.5"x11" paper thumb-tacked to a cork board, thank you very much. That means everything has to be generated by Ted in marketing, and the entire system was a waste of money because it's not connecting people with the public or with their coworkers. It's only creating another

job for Ted who was already overworked. So, he resists it and becomes a road block for anyone wanting to use the signage system.

I've never sat in a presentation where the vendor said, "You know, our system is almost impossible to use. Your staff is not going to understand it." It's not enough to Google "easy-to-use digital signage" because overly complex systems with an "easy" option still require training on the entire system. If administration, template creation, approval, media asset management, and data integration are beyond your customer's abilities and there is no money for a digital signage content designer, you'll be training on that system for free, forever.

Life doesn't have to be this hard. If you will focus on systems intended for informational (not retail) signage, then audition the user interface until you find one that you really like, you'll be in good shape. This is actually the easy part to solve.

YOUR BIGGEST HURDLE

The hard part is making signage systems easy to sell for your sales staff.

Say your guy or gal goes in, guns blazing, and sells something completely inappropriate for the customer. Now they're begging the vendor to make them whole and they'll hopefully walk out not losing money. How motivated are they to bite at that apple again?

You need to decide, up front, which systems are right for your sales people as well as your client base and which are not. Here's how to do that.

First, ask the vendor this question: "What parts do I need to make a system with one channel and one sign that includes the ability to connect to a Microsoft Exchange Server or an iCal feed?" This is a typical installation for those customers who are just dipping their toes in the water.

When the vendor answers, does he or she follow up with more questions? Does he say, "That depends. How many users are accessing the system? Do

they need any other data interfaces or RSS feeds? How many monitors are you plugging into the player? What market is this customer in?”

This is a bad sign. Unless he volunteers to shadow your sales staff with his sales engineer, it is time to move to the next option. You are looking for a quick, off-the-top-of-the-head answer that anyone on your team can understand.

If the answer comes easily, that’s good, but find out how many SKUs end up on your purchase order. Are you buying separate server, user, channel, and connector licenses to go along with the service contract and mandatory commissioning charges? I once sat for 20 minutes trying to pierce through a competitor’s dealer price sheet, only to find that the last page had example system configurations—which I still could not understand. Maybe it was a way to weed out the uncommitted?

If your general sales staff cannot quickly quote a system by reading a price sheet that’s written in plain English, they’ll just spin their wheels and sell what they know instead. Look for a system with server and players and not much else. If what you need is baked into the main product instead of being broken into endless options, all the better.

THE IDEAL SYSTEM

In short, to become a player in the fast-growing informational signage market, you need a system that’s easy for any office worker or secretary to learn and something your sales staff can understand, explain, and easily quote on for most situations.

That’s not to say you need a simple system. You need a sophisticated system that’s easy to use—a solution that automates what can be automated, can connect to information that the customer has in their business or organization, is easy to administrate, and can scale up to more than 100 channels. This is the sweet spot, the core of the informational signage market.

Once you have this kind of system in place, make asking, “What are you doing for signage?” mandatory. Do not wait for your customers to ask about the technology. Always ask them first and you will start selling more systems than you ever thought possible.

Digital signage is a great technology. It works, it saves people money, and done correctly, it gives them lots of reasons buy more. It also leverages the inventory that is already in your warehouse and most of the inventory between the ears of your technical and sales staff.

I think we’ve all come to understand that often, success lies in the confidence to just do it and in finding partners that fit the opportunities that are in front of you. Get a few easy installations under your staff’s belt and you’ll be past the hype and on to the boring task of pleasing your clients and being profitable. [SVC](#)

Andrew Starks is co-founder of Tighrope Media Systems, makers of Carousel Digital Signage systems as well as Cablecast and Zeplay broadcast video systems. You can reach him at (866) 866-4118 or via email at sales@trms.com.