

Signs of Success

6 QUESTIONS YOU MUST ANSWER
TO CREATE A SUCCESSFUL DIGITAL SIGNAGE SYSTEM



BY JOHN LAUGHLIN

A digital signage system should be the best thing that ever happened to your communications program.

It can provide a fast, easy and extremely effective way to get important information to people who visit your premises—your customers, students, staff, or members of the public. It's inexpensive, too. Once you've invested in your infrastructure and set up your software, you will pay zero dollars per day for printing and nothing for airtime.

But success isn't automatic. You have to provide useful information and update it frequently. If you don't, you will train people not to bother looking at your signs. It's a real danger, but one you can avoid with some careful planning.

After years of designing and installing digital signage systems for our customers, we have found that answering six simple questions can make all the difference to the success of a signage program.

WHO ARE YOU TRYING TO REACH?

1 Perhaps it's an obvious question, but the more detailed your understanding of your target audience, the more likely you will be to create messages of real interest and value. Some organizations do a great deal of market research to understand their clients; others rely on their front line people to keep them in touch.

Whatever your approach, the signs you create must be relevant to the people who will read them.

HOW OFTEN SHOULD YOU CHANGE YOUR MESSAGES?

2 There's no hard and fast rule about changing digital bulletins, but if someone walks by one of your displays four or five times and they haven't changed and are not still relevant, you may have a problem.

Some organizations can change their messages once a month, because that's how often their clients visit. Others need to make updates every day. That's especially true for systems meant to communicate with students or staff members, because those people are on premises constantly.

One way to keep your system fresh is to rotate



The Energizer
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lobby in Missouri



multiple messages. Another is to stream RSS news feeds onto a section of the screen or as a text crawl at the bottom. We have set up several systems to display news, weather and traffic as well as our clients' bulletins, and of course those feeds change constantly. If you can find out what your audience wants to know, you can make your system an important part of their day.

HOW CRUCIAL IS THE INFORMATION YOU WILL COMMUNICATE?

3 We find the need for strong graphics, appealing colors or motion video is inversely proportional to the need your audience has for the information you're sending. Airlines can use plain text for flight information at the airport, but the rest of us need to dress up our messages, at least to some degree. An informational sign at a university may not need quite the punch of sales message in a bank or retail store, but it does need to look attractive and professional.

WHO WILL PREPARE THE MESSAGES?

4 While some organizations put their marketing or video production staff in charge of their signage systems, the majority of digital signs today are created by people who are not production specialists.

If that will be the case for your system, make sure your authoring software is simple enough for reception staff, teachers, or sales people to use.

Some organizations go so far as to open up their signage systems to everyone on staff, even to students and other outside stakeholders. There's a lot to be said for an approach like this. Your front line people know your target audience. They know what's going on, they know what's relevant, and they know what the people they deal with care about. Giving them direct input into the system

almost guarantees its relevancy and timeliness.

If you open up your system this way, it may be helpful to choose a system with some safeguards built in, in particular an approval process where someone you trust signs off on the messages before they go live.

Whether you open your system to everyone or just a few members of your staff, a simple-to-use system can be very sophisticated. We have, for example, installed a number of signage systems using software and components from Tightrope Media systems.

With Tightrope's Carousel software, almost anyone can create finished bulletins from a browser-based authoring program; they can import photos, Flash or video files; the system can put the new bulletins in queue for a supervisor to proofread and approve; someone with more skills or training can create custom templates for the organization;

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and the system can combine messages into final layouts with multiple bulletins on each screen, including live video and RSS feeds. It can even have interactive touch capabilities.

Other signage systems have their own strengths, and for that reason we represent Scala, BroadSign, and X2O Media at CTI as well as Tightrope. Whatever system you choose, it's crucial that you match the skills of your staff and the needs of your organization with the ease and sophistication of the software.

WHO WILL BE THE CHAMPION FOR THE SYSTEM?

5 We have noticed that the CTI clients having the most success with their digital signage systems have at least one person on staff who not only is responsible for the program but who is enthusiastic about its success.

If your group is small, your champion may be the person preparing the signs, but in larger organizations he or she may be more of a facilitator than a message creator. Your champion may be a member of your IT



staff, but what's important is not technical ability but excitement about content and communication.

For example, we know one university who employs a full-time signage coordinator whose job it is to visit the various departments, encourage them to use the signage system, train and support them. This university used to spend tens of thousands of dollars yearly on the printing of poster-sized signs as well as handouts. They justify their coordinator's salary on the savings in printing, but their return on investment comes mainly from the benefits of better communications.

WHO WILL BE YOUR SYSTEMS INTEGRATOR?

6 Finding an integrator for a digital signage system is harder than it looks. Almost any AV dealer can figure out how to install the monitors, tie into an IP network and install software on a server, but matching the software platform to the needs of your staff is an entirely different skill set.

Make sure the integrator you choose has experience with digital signage systems and is truly paying attention to your questions and concerns when you meet. Ideally, your integrator should have a production department as well, so he or she can help you set up the software and get started with one or more design templates appropriate to your organization.

Remember that the most expensive digital signage system is one that's never used. If you build a good system with an appropriate user interface and involve people on your staff who know and care about your target audience, it will pay for itself quickly.

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