

public services

(pūb'īk) (sūr'vīsīs)

AKA INTERVIEW : Jeff Collard, President of Omnivex 'There's No Such Thing As A Captive Audience'

27 Nov 2009

We speak to Jeff Collard, President of Omnivex, and Digi Awards Winner of the Best Premise Based Content management Software for it's newest software suite, Moxie.



Moxie introduces the concept of intelligent content - the ability for the software to decide what to present on the screen based on internal and external information using pre-defined business rules (artificial intelligence). This is the third consecutive year Omnivex has won a DIGI Award.

What do you do and in what markets do you operate?

We're a software company based in Toronto. We produce software for digital signage systems. We've been in business since 1991, and we service just about every market where people need to communicate. So you'll find Omnivex software driving major exchanges, in corporations, manufacturing floors, retailers, hotels, hospitals and just about anywhere you can think.

What's the biggest customer you have?

Our business is distributed in different verticals, its' surprisingly even. Corporate is probably the single biggest market and they are pretty protective about their business processes so they prefer that we don't say much about them. The retail sector is a pretty close second, there is a list on our web site of those customers we have permission to reference. What's interesting is most businesses are in a point of change right now. As an example, the airport industry for many years was pretty well dominated by a few major players who provided services for them. Airports are now changing their business models. They are under a lot of pressure to cover their operating costs and can't rely on governments for support. This now means they are looking for better, more efficient ways to do things and more expertise. And companies like Omnivex provide that for them.

Can you give us a specific example of something you've done for a customer that really reflects what you do?

The thing that's unique about Omnivex is that everything that we do is about real time data. It's how you use information strategically. How data drives everything you do and data can be part of your content. Data is the main driver. And it isn't just a component of the content it actually decides what and how content will play. The example I like to use is Bell Canada who have retail stores across the country. Their challenge is a lot of individual models, distributed over a large geography and a constantly changing offering. So they're need not only to engage their customers, but also to make it relevant and up-to-date for them. Because their digital signage system can integrate with their database and look at a POS system, we can pull out information, change a price, or pull out a new model. And if something happens at any given store, the system can instantly update and pull it off that same day. Data is driving that content. At the same time as people pick up phones - that drives the content on the screen and provides feedback on what customers are looking at long before they make a purchase. So that helps them plan better promotions, stock their inventory better, and ultimately service the customer in a better way So at every location they have a unique experience based on what's happening with the particular customer who happens to be in front of the screen at that time. Digital signage is a lot more than just putting up electronic posters - it's really about putting information in the hands of people to help them do their job better, and help them service their customers better. Smart companies know how to do that.

How do you measure success?

The analogy I like to use is that of an iceberg. When people focus on sales lift - they're only looking at the top part of the iceberg . They totally ignore the stuff below the bottom line and that's where the real benefit is.

How do you drive costs out of the business how do you make a business more efficient?

By looking at the data - in real time. It facilitates better decision making, automates and optimises processes. It has the power to drive huge costs out of the business. I'd take a 50% reduction in cost over a 10% or 15% increase in sales any day.

What advice would you give someone who's just about to enter the industry?

In the past, there have been a lot of people trying to enter in to digital signage because it was very easy to get in - there was no real expertise. We're long past that point. The industry is consolidating and leaders are starting to emerge. It's becoming very obvious as to which companies provide the best value - and customers have specific targets they're trying to achieve. They want real ROI on the business. You don't get that with some of the weaker systems that are out there. So we're starting to see some really good products starting to come to the forefront.

What sort of things should people take into account when they're choosing software?

I think you have to start with understanding who the viewer is. You really have to understand the profile of person you're trying to affect, what it is you're trying to do, and where the information they need comes from. My big problem with digital signage is it's a horrible name for what we do. We're in the business of visual communications. Everyone has information - companies have reams of data. The challenge is how do you take that information and get it in the hands of the right people to facilitate a decision - to get them going in a certain direction. If done well you can influence behavior and ultimately develop new habits. One example is in corporate environments. If you took over a company and wanted to make some changes to revitalize the organization, you would need to communicate your vision to every employee to change their behavior. Installing digital signage would be a smart way to communicate to the entire organization. You would display business metrics, the KPI's for the business and put them in the hands of people that can actually affect the business. You don't just put the information in front of a manager - you give it to people who actually have impact and let them see (in real time) how their actions are making the business better. It's amazing how you can change the way people operate how people work with each other. Because now, all of a sudden they feel some involvement and ownership in the business. They see how they are part of the overall organization and what their contribution is. When you give people an opportunity to shine, they will. You just have to give them the information they need and opportunity to impact the organization.

What term would you use to describe the industry?

Digital signage suggests electronic posters that automatically update. It really doesn't influence or talk about what we do. I think "visual communications" is a more accurate description. One of the nice things about using that term is it expands the use of where digital signage applies and how it's being deployed. When people think about "visual communications" they recognize this as part of an overall communications strategy. It ties in to what you do on your website, the internet, all your communications, all your touch points. And it isn't just to your customers, employees or visitors - everyone needs to be involved. You should have a comprehensive strategy about how you're going to use visual communications and this technology is just one of the tools in your toolbox.

Who are your competitors?

It depends what industry you're in. When we talk to retail operations, we would typically see a Scala or EnQii. In stadiums, or more broadcast oriented industries, we might see Cisco or Harris. Hotels is a different group of competitors, and financial services others still. With airports, there are companies like Arinc, SITA, and Intersystems.

In different vertical markets, we rarely see the same people twice. I can't keep track, there's too many people going in and out from day to day, but it's consolidating and hopefully we'll get down to a few players who provide value to their customers.

What differentiates you from them?

Our strength is in delivering content based on data. Everything we do is about real time data. It's been our mantra from day one. We've been doing this since 1991 so we've seen a lot of fads (and competitors) and gone and go. And this year actually we were fortunate enough at the Digital Signage Show to win an award for best software for Moxie, which is a product where we've really changed how data interacts with your content. With Moxie, everything is data - every parameter on the screen is dynamic - everything is live. Based on any kind of event or action, anything on the screen could happen. A video could get smaller or larger or turn right or left or spin based on the person who's standing in front of it. This is because we're actually taking input from whatever's going on around it. So I think that's a big game changer. You can make the content on the screen completely dynamic and completely triggered by the events that are happening locally as well as globally.

Where do you stand on the issue 'Content is King'?

I disagree with it, context is king. It's all about relevance. You have to have good content, and people associate brands with a graphic - a picture or imagery. The imagery has to be good and of high quality. But if it's not relevant to the viewer or to the subject you're talking about - then it has no value. And if anything it undermines the brand, and it undermines the brand's value. You really need to have context that's significant with a connection. If the viewer engages with the content it will be meaningful and it will create action. If they can't engage with it - they'll ignore it. One of the things that annoys me about this industry is that people use the term "Captive Audience". There is no such thing. I might have an iPhone, or an iPod, or even have a conversation with the person in line beside me as opposed to looking to someone's digital signage. If you want to engage me, then you have to put something relevant that I can react with - something of interest to me. Once I'm engaged then I'll listen to your message. But you can't just force it down my throat and think I'm going to respond to it. It's got to be relevant to me. And that's where the value is.

If you had to summarize the market in 2009 in a few words, what would they be?

It's certainly been a market of consolidation this past year. In many ways this recession has been a wonderfully good thing. It has taken a lot of weak and bad products and gotten them out of the market place. It's gotten the customers to focus on value. They're not putting in digital signage systems because it's fancy and fashionable. They're putting it in because they actually have a real ROI. They understand how they have to drive costs. It's sharpened the focus for everybody. So from our perspective it's helped us gain business, market share and recognition. And we can see some really good things happening. Coming out of this recession we have great opportunity in front of us.

If you had to summarize the market in 2010 in a few words, what would they be?

I'm going to come back to data. I think that people are recognizing that context is important, that information has to come from some place, and that the information has to be relevant and live. As they grasp that concept and start to take advantage of it, they're going to see real ROI and real growth coming out of these systems.

What are the critical things that people need to get right in order to survive and thrive in this economic climate?

That's a big question - but certainly from a digital signage visual communication perspective, they need to understand what their communication strategy is. They have to understand who they're talking to, what information they're going to present to them, and where the information comes from. They have to build a strategy into how they're going to present messages, and make sure that strategy is consistent, reliable and ties into their goals as a business. If they don't do planning up front they're doomed to fail. They'll miss the mark and if it's not successful, the projects will die.

Is digital signage green?

Yes and no. It really depends on deployment and how it's done. It's certainly is green in that you can eliminate a lot of paper and shipping. When people print posters, you don't print one poster; you print ten thousand or a hundred thousand posters. And then you transport them all out there. We eliminate all of that stuff, when we do it all digitally. And we don't over produce - we only produce what needs to be on a screen at the time it's being viewed. You can test content in a small but real environment before you deploy it elsewhere. So it gets rid of a lot of waste from that perspective and ultimately is more efficient. Certainly the hardware is becoming a lot more efficient and better at operating but most network operators are not operating very efficiently. Ultimately we are going to reduce a lot of waste. There's still a long way to go.

What's your company vision and what are the next few milestones?

We are a software company who provide the tools that digital signage networks need. We don't supply hardware or operate peoples networks, we provide the backbone to operate those networks. We think we offer the best overall solution for the market place. We focus on making the best software and extending how people can use this more effectively and really focus on driving information to inform and help people. The industry will continue to consolidate and Omnivex will be one of the prime platforms that people run in this industry. We have great ambitions and great hopes but we also think that we're on the right path because it's all about providing value to customers. And we think we're providing people with the right tools to do that.

newsroom@aka.tv