

DIGITAL SIGNAGE

by matt villano

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

Looking at
digital signage
solutions?
Before you
invest—or even
if you already
have—make
sure you
maximize your
outlay with
these five
smart tips.



THERE'S NO QUESTION that in airports, train stations, and student unions alike, digital signage solutions have become efficient and effective ways of communicating important information directly to broad bases of users. The solutions are affordable; they're eco-friendly; and they're growing in popularity every year. Still, particularly in the world of higher education, the question remains: How can colleges and universities get the most out of the money they spend on this technology?

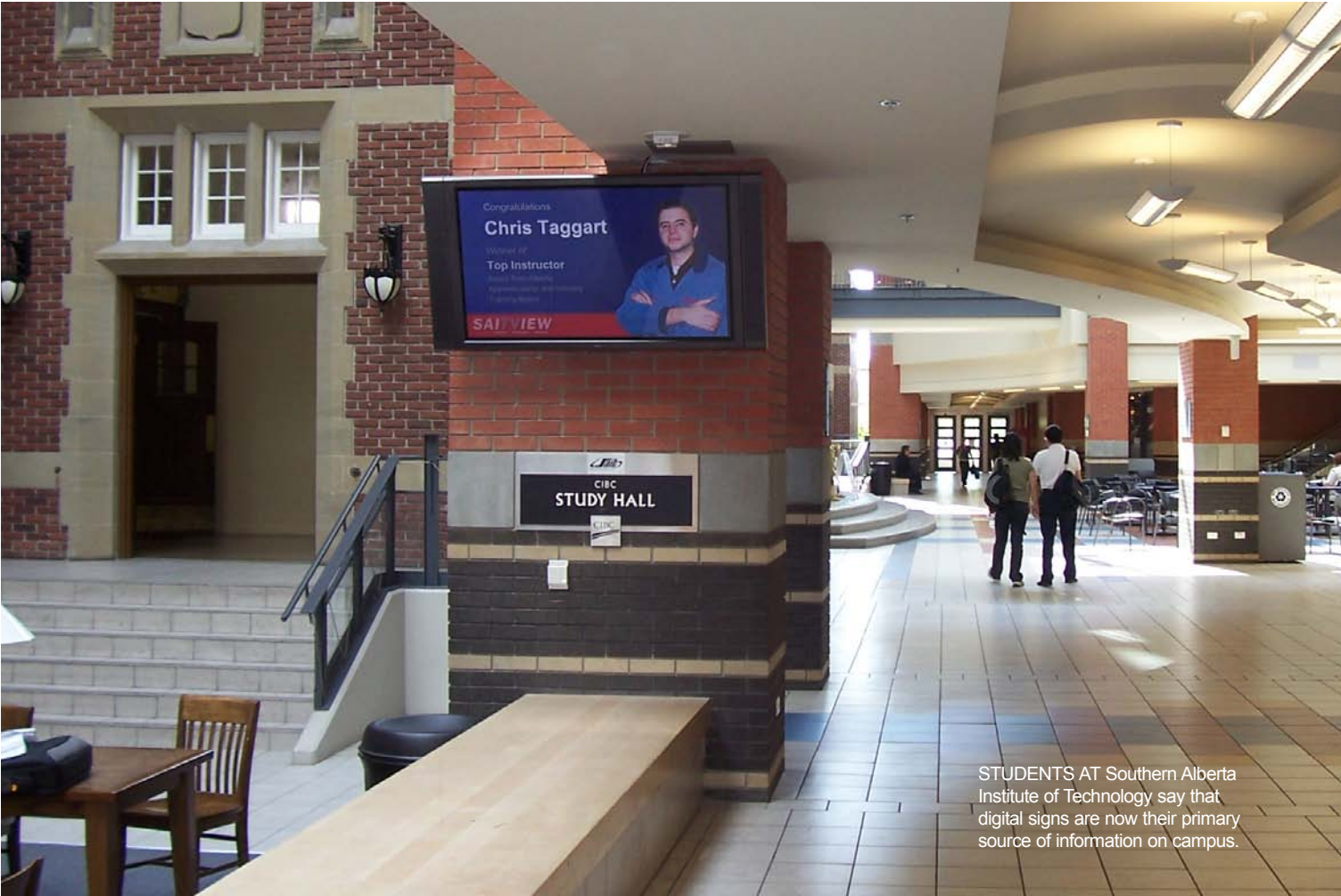
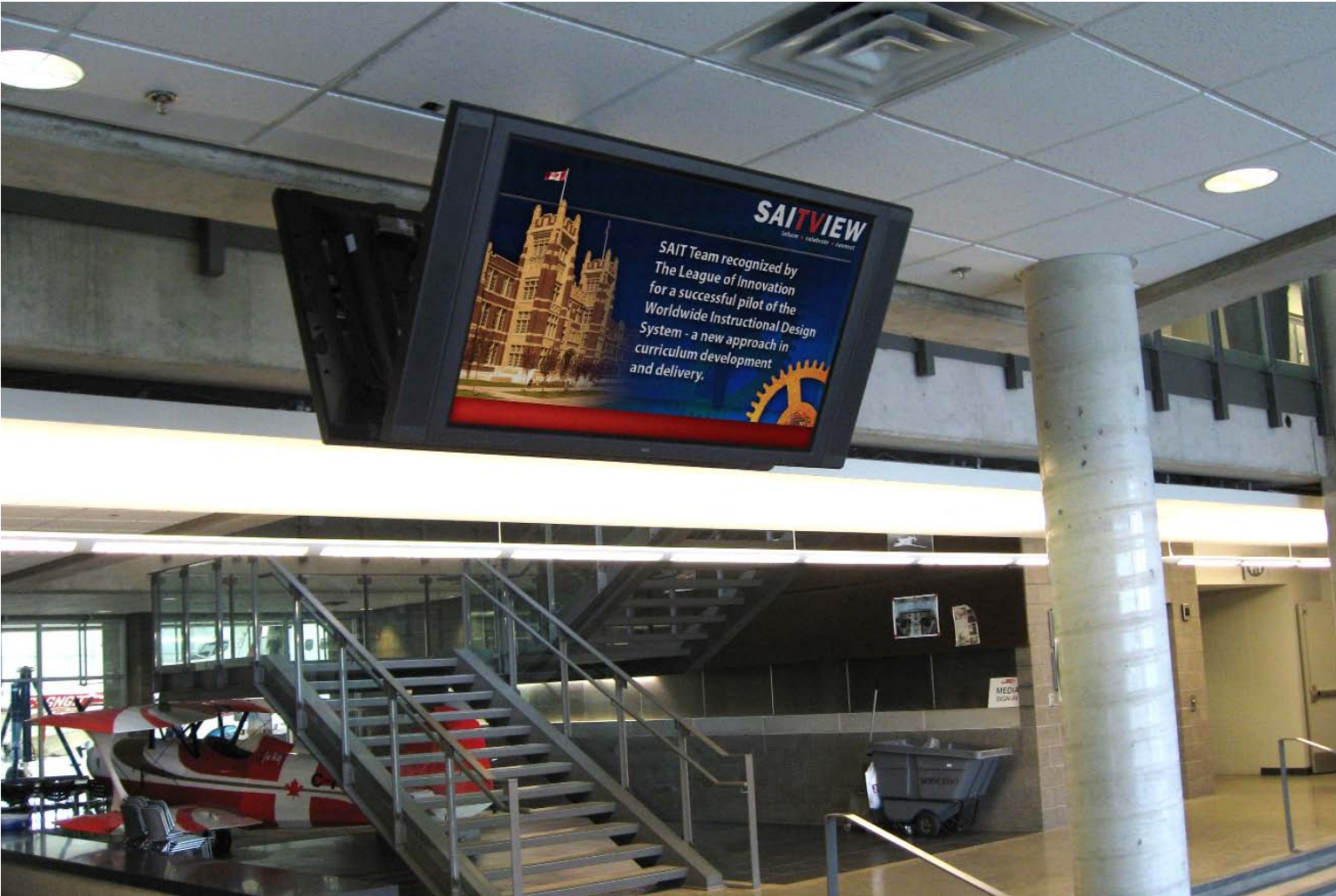
Here we provide five smart tips to maximize that outlay—all best practices from digital signage pros and academic technologist peers at **Purdue University-Calumet (IN)**, **Northwestern University (IL)**, **Southern Alberta Institute of Technology**, and **The Ohio State University**.

Tip 1: Place Wisely

You've probably heard the old saw: If a tree falls in the forest but nobody is there to hear it, does it make a sound? Well, that same kind of question can be applied to digital signage: If you purchase a solution but place most of the signs in inappropriate spots, are you really investing in digital signage? Unfortunately, the answer to this question is yes; you're investing in signage that the wrong people are seeing. With digital signage, more than ever before because of the rocky economy, location is everything.

David McLees certainly wouldn't argue this point. McLees is technology administrator for the School of Technology at Purdue University-Calumet, where last year in Calumet's Anderson Building, school administrators decided to implement two digital signage terminals from Westinghouse. The big conundrum: where to put the screens.

At the outset of the implementation, McLees and his colleagues performed their own environmental assessment—they watched students go about their normal days, moving about the building. They also surveyed student groups, and asked them



STUDENTS AT Southern Alberta Institute of Technology say that digital signs are now their primary source of information on campus.

where they'd like to see the signs, and where they would actually take notice of them.

In the end, this process revealed some unexpected results. While most of the school's students entered the building through the front door (an obvious place for the signs, the administrators had thought), an even larger number of students seemed to gravitate toward two spots: a lobby in front of student adviser offices on the second floor, and the student lounge on the first. What's more, the students were less likely to be moving through those areas quickly, would be more apt to have their attention attracted by the signs, and would have more time to stay through content loops or cycles. For McLees, these discoveries made the placement of the new signs a virtual no-brainer.

"If we had gone ahead and done this without the necessary research, there's no question that we would have put the signs in the wrong spots," says McLees. "Taking the extra time to see exactly where this technology would have the biggest impact made our expenditures that much more valuable.

Tip 2: Cash In

Surprise: Digital signage solutions don't have to be a drain on the IT budget-- they can be a boon for it. Such is the situation at Northwestern University, where every quarter a relatively new signage implementation in the Norris University Center is generating real revenue for the organization that owns and operates the facility.

In early 2008, Marketing Manager James McHaley and other Norris staffers deployed a number of 40- and 46-inch LCD digital signage screens throughout the facility. On each of the signs, center technologists installed AxisTV, a content delivery system from Visix.

The system breaks content into different blocks on each screen, enabling Norris officials to broadcast three different pieces of information at the same time. With this advantage, McHaley opted to do what any enterprising marketer would do: He started selling ads. Space is sold in weeklong blocks, running Monday through Sunday. While university departments pay \$20 per block, student organizations pay only \$10.

"We try to extend goodwill to the students by letting them have a 50 percent

discount," notes the marketing manager, who adds that if departments don't have their own ad campaigns, for an additional fee Norris will design campaigns for them. Usually, the ads are created in programs such as Adobe Photoshop or Illustrator and imported into AxisTV as JPEG files.

McHaley discloses that revenue from the ad program has increased each academic quarter. "We know it's popular based on the increasing number of ads we receive," he says. "It is definitely a unique way to advertise and it reinforces the other forms of advertising out there."

Tip 3: Get Students Involved

Here's something that every savvy CIO knows: Constituents respond better to technology initiatives when they are included at the planning and creation stages. This is why the simple act of involving students in a campus digital signage initiative can make a tremendous difference in the way those students feel about the technology.

Case in point: Southern Alberta Institute of Technology, a Canadian polytechnic school, where last year, school officials worked with vendors NEC Unified Solutions, TTUFF Technologies, and mount specialists Peerless Industries to deploy SAITView, a digital signage network comprised of 20 displays in nine different locations across campus. Once the network went live, technologists augmented the solution with software from Omnivex, to provide a way for the students themselves to create the content that would cycle through signs over the course of a given day.

Under the new signage program, John McConomy, the school's new media unit manager, says student groups are routinely invited to create their own content and submit it through a website for upload to the signs. "It's not corporate messaging; instead, it's student messaging, and that makes a huge difference in terms of how the content is received," he maintains. McConomy notes that a school administrator approves the content before it's posted online. "So long as the stuff isn't commercially generated, we'll



TECHNOLOGISTS AT PURDUE studied student behavior patterns to determine specific locations where digital signs would attract the most attention and reach the greatest number of students.

gladly put it up." As part of the program, SAIT technologists also run student-generated newscasts on SAITView four times a week-- once as a live show; three other times as reruns.

Metrics indicate the digital signage "involvement" approach is working wonders. Every year, SAIT conducts a survey of students to find out how they are receiving their information. Last year, 80 to 85 percent of them said their primary source of information was SAITView. Demand for more monitors was so high that since the initial implementation, the university has invested in an additional 15 signs.

"There's no question that student involvement has driven their interest in this new technology, and that's something we're delighted to support," McConomy says. "As a technologist, when you can make that kind of impact with your primary user base, you know you're doing something very right."

Tip 4: Avoid Burnout

Sure, the LCD screens commonly found in most digital signage solutions are great for clarity and color. But, as with many LCD displays, there is a downside: Leave the same image on the screen for too long and the image starts to burn an imprint in the face of the monitor.

Technologists at the new Wexner Center for the Arts at The Ohio State University

faced this problem firsthand earlier this year when, for a current art exhibit, they implemented a 4-by-4-foot LCD video wall composed of digital signage monitors from NEC. The wall screens-- four in all-- are turned on at least 12 hours a day with the same information. A fifth monitor, near the door, is on 24 hours a day, listing the day's events. According to Stephen Jones, senior design engineer at OSU, this puts all five of the screens in a "high-risk" situation for burn. "It's a subtle problem, but you can see outlines of the words and images when the monitor is not on," he points out. "In an art gallery, it just doesn't look very nice."

To combat the problem, the video wall monitors are routinely shut off at night. But to save the fifth 24-hour monitor from the burn-through, Jones and his colleagues created their own screensaver type program that "burns" monitors in the opposite direction by running gray static. It turns on at night, running static on the lone machine for six hours to reverse the effects of blue and white lettering that doesn't change all day.

"It's not rocket science, but it's working to preserve the life of that screen," says Jones. "Once you make the investment in digital signage, it's important to make sure you take care of it."

Tip 5: Take Full Advantage

Using a digital signage solution to advertise the next student government meeting, fraternity rush, or flower sale is one thing; relying on the solution to broadcast alerts and messages in the event of an emergency or crisis is another.

While a handful of institutions such as Kentucky State University, Boston University, and the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh have started broadcasting emergency information over their digital signage solutions, a recent study by technology solutions hub CDW-G indicates that, surprisingly, a majority of colleges and univ-

ersities are not using digital signs for this purpose yet.

The study, "This Is a Test-- This Is Only a Test: Updating America's Emergency Alert Infrastructure," was published in early 2009, and notes fewer than 5 percent of the 1,448 respondents reported that their city, state, and local

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government or school relays emergency information via modern media. Among the largely unused media the study cited: text messages, e-mail, digital signage, IP sirens, and outdoor speakers.

Yet, Huston Thomas, public safety business development manager for CDW-G, maintains that embracing digital signage as a method of distributing mass notifications works because digital signs are now ubiquitous on most campuses and, inherently, they generate interest in the content they display.

After all, Thomas points out, "The keys to mass notification are ubiquity, redundancy, and making sure everyone knows that the messages are out there. Digital signage is one solution that meets all three [criteria]." What's more, he adds, many established digital signage vendors offer software (or partnerships with software developers) to convert regular digital screens into monitors that can receive emergency messages wirelessly and broadcast them at any time.

The bottom line: If you're going to invest in digital signage, exploit it to its full potential. And keep your eye on this technology as it continues to evolve; who knows what's next for the rich information channel you may already have in place! **CT**

Matt Villano is senior contributing editor of this publication. He is based in Healdsburg, CA.

Resources

Listed below are web addresses for companies mentioned in this article. Each URL will take you to the company's product overview page, where you can find the link to digital signage systems.

NEC Unified Solutions:
www.necunifiedsolutions.com/digitalsignage

Omnivex: www.omnivex.com/products

Peerless Industries:
www.peerlessmounts.com/products/browsecategories.aspx

TTUFF Technologies: www.ttufftech.com

Visix: www.visix.com/axistv.html

Westinghouse: dss.wde.com