



# Canadian companies major players in digital signage

By Dave Haynes

Lowered costs and shifting media spending are resulting in the long-incubating new media technology sector known as digital signage finally getting some real traction-and Canadian companies are well positioned as innovators and leaders in this emerging industry.

Digital screens are steadily replacing printed marketing, advertising and informational material in everything from retail spaces to corporate lunch rooms, for the simple reasons that they can reduce costs, make communications more efficient, and with retail and advertising, very likely drive more revenues.

Up until now, for a Canadian chartered bank, a typical retail branch will have seasonal promotions for new service offers that are put up in poster frames and swapped out several times a year. Someone has to plan that out well in advance, get the posters printed, shipped to each branch site, and then hope they are actually put up and taken down as instructed. The resource costs to make that happen properly are high, and there is a strong likelihood that a percentage of the branches will not get the posters up and down as instructed because of human factors.

With PC, display panel and software

costs all dropping sharply in the past few years, it's now possible to make a business case for replacing such posters with LCD panels and PCs, and use the Internet, instead of courier services, to move the messages around. They start and stop exactly on time, and instead of one message planned out and finalized weeks in advance for print, spots can change by time of day and be dynamically tied to fluctuating information like currencies. Marketing compliance is at or near 100% and more compelling, dynamic and targeted digital messaging drives more impact.

In other words, putting a flat panel in a public place is no longer novel and is now a logical, optimal marketing tactic for Canadian businesses.

Canadian companies have long been known as innovators in that space, and that continues. At a major trade show this fall in New York, called Kioskcom/The Digital Signage Show, there were 19 awards handed out for innovation and excellence. Ten of those DIG I Awards were won by Canadian companies, in everything from software to content creation.

That same week, a few blocks away, a crowd of environmental graphic design experts

gathered for an annual conference got a special sneak preview of entirely new display technology that may change the way we all see big motion visuals in landmark stores and large public areas. The MicroTiles product revealed by Christie Digital was invented and developed in Kitchener-Waterloo, and is already being schemed into plans for venues all over the world, because of the quality of the visuals and the attention to detail in the engineering.

The company, for decades a leader in projection-based technology, saw a rich market for large format visuals characterized by compromises. Christie developed a new solution that lets motion visuals fit the physical characteristics of a large environment and not be restricted to figuring out where to fit a big rectangle.

Most of the visuals for the MicroTiles launch project were done by a Montreal-area content firm called Arsenal Media, and the interactive gesture-based demonstrations -

many faces look at screens and how long they look, even breaking viewers down by male and female, providing better metrics for advertisers and brands in retail.

Much of the promise and attention afforded the sector has had to do with the opportunity to put advertising right at the point-of-purchase in stores, instead of in living rooms and on billboards far removed from the shopping experience. Toronto based Adcentricity has, in less than three years, become an acknowledged North American market leader in providing a media planning platform that bridges the gap between advertisers and ad network operators.

While Southern Ontario and Montreal are the hubs, there are active companies coast to coast such as Volt Media in Halifax and 2C Visual Communications in Vancouver. Larger media companies have also stepped into the space, with both Astral Media and the Pattison Group running ad-



Above left: Christie's MicroTiles. Right: GestureTek.

that allowed such things as virtually wiping frost off a massive display and being left with beads of virtual moisture-were done by another Montreal company, Float 4 Interactive.

Casual observers who know the industry would likely have thought the interactive work was supplied by GestureTek, a Toronto interactive digital signage company that is the acknowledged global leader in sensor-based visual display technology. If you have been in a shopping mall, and seen kids happily kicking around balls on a virtual soccer field projected on the mall floor, you've probably been looking at a GestureTek-driven installation,

On the concourses of the Air Canada Centre in Toronto, fans are now treated to more than 330 LCD panels, many in clusters and promoting the sports teams, events and facility sponsors. The project was put together and executed by another company, Digital Display and Communications, and the software driving all those screens is by Omnivex, a suburban Toronto company known for a particularly sophisticated platform that plays back content based on data, instead of simple menu instructions. The building owners, Maple Leaf Sports and Entertainment, approved the project after deciding that the technology would pay for itself in two years.

CognoVision Solutions, also in the Toronto area, works in the emerging area of audience-counting, in which biometric technology is paired with simple cameras to count how

driven networks on big digital highway billboards and in venues like airports and public buildings. Outdoor Broadcast Network has large LED digital screens in Toronto's Dundas Square and across the country, Zoom Media in Montreal has expanded internationally with print and now digital properties focused on advertising.

It's an exciting space, and these and many other Canadian companies are a huge part of it. But it is also a sector with many challenges, and lots of evidence of missteps. Just putting screens up is no guarantee people will look or care. Ad sales is a tough business. And with at least 250 companies globally selling very similar software products, that side of the business is extremely competitive.

The biggest challenge facing companies who decide to get into the sector is sorting it all out and minimizing the early, and what could be costly, mistakes. If you ask just about anyone active in the sector, their core advice to newcomers is to enlist people who know what they are doing.

Canadian companies have been doing that, and it shows in the success they see in awards and the bottom line.

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