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DIGITAL SIGNAGE *Content Gets Smart*

Hospitality operators take digital signage content to the next level with real-time updates, customization, interactive displays and more

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The concept of digital signage is nothing new. In fact, more and more industries are turning on the technology and consumers are coming to expect it. From interactive televisions at the gas pump to LCD screens in the grocery checkout line, digital displays are popping up everywhere.

Monetizing digital screens by selling advertising space and customizing content to reach the right customers at the right time can contribute to the bottom line. Thanks to advancements in content management software, hotel and restaurant operators are doing this, and much more.

"I think we are hitting a point of exponential growth in the digital signage space," says Chris Dill, CIO of the Portland Trailblazers at Rose Garden Arena in Portland, Ore. (www.rosequarter.com), who is using digital signage with Omnivex Corp.'s Moxie management system (www.omnivex.com) at roughly 17 concession stands throughout the arena. "Not only is the cost of an LCD screen more affordable, but there are a lot of vendors in the content management space now, and we are moving quickly from static to dynamic advertising. I think the segment is on the verge of an explosion."

Depending on company size, there are many roads operators can travel down in order to enter the digital signage arena, including software as a service (SaaS), where content is managed remotely by a third party. However, for larger companies, taking the management completely in-house allows them to own the software and hardware, and deploy the content themselves.

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Pictured:

At the Atlantis Resort in the Bahamas, the staff uses digital signage to promote resort events and programs that haven't yet sold out, and are reporting an increase in sales and attendance as a result.



"One way some companies chose to manage content is through an aggregator, which is when a vendor runs the ads or content for them."

PAUL FLANIGAN, FOUNDER, THE PRESET GROUP

manage content is through an aggregator, which is when a vendor runs the ads or content for them," explains Paul Flanigan, founder of The Preset Group in Minneapolis (www.presetgroup.com), Minn., a consulting firm specializing in digital signage. "The vendor gives a company the hardware for free, installs it in their location, and helps manage the content for a cut of the revenue."

For larger organizations, however, having control over their content is the growing trend. Flanigan sees

increasing customization of content and measurement of advertising effectiveness as the next phase in digital signage, and in particular the move toward putting content control into the hands of individual operators.

"For a restaurant chain in particular, specials running in Florida may not be the same as New York because seasons, prices and dwell times are different," he notes. "By providing local locations with template-based solutions, they can create content specifically for their customers."

Got Space? Sell it!

Another opportunity made possible by digital signage is the ability to monetize the space by selling advertising to local and national vendors.

At concession stands at the Rose Garden arena (shown below), 15-second ads run on the screens and since installing last August, eight of the 20 spots were sold, displaying on the right side of each screen. The company uses Omnivex's reporting feature to provide advertisers proof the ads ran, says Chris Dill, CIO at the arena.

At theWit Hotel in Chicago, partnering with area venues to offer ad space provides a revenue stream, particularly The Chicago Theater directly across the street from the hotel. "We partner with them on marketing because we are their host hotel," says Darrin Pinkham, CTO at theWit. "The lower third of our screens is for advertising space, and while we advertise our own offerings, we go outside to vendors that compliment the hotel. We get revenue from it, and they get the benefit of getting information to guests who may not know about them."



Targeted content

The ability to customize content, -whether by time of day, season or special event, is a big benefit of using digital signage, and with the right content management system, hotels and restaurants can see a direct return on investment.

At the Atlantis Resorts in Paradise Island, Bahamas (www.atlantis.com), content and management is handled internally using KeyWest Technology's MediaXtreme MediaZone (www.keywesttechnology.com), enabling display changes within minutes, according to Glen Kelly, senior director of marine and water park operations at the resort. Kelly manages the content for the water entertainment category, which includes 10 different offerings.

"From my PC, I can make minute-to-minute adjustments, so if we have programs that are not selling well, we can push them out onto the signs over our network," he says. "For example, it's harder to book the dolphin interaction packages in the 8:30 a.m. slot, so we will play advertising for it in the morning to catch people while they are up and awake."

Kelly says sales have gone up, and he believes it's partially due to the digital signage, which is also used by the conference services and public relations departments at the resort. The ease of manipulation and instant ability to make changes is what makes the technology worthwhile, he says.

"If marketing sends us a message that a large group is here from one company, we can send a message across the bottom of the screen welcoming them," Kelly notes.

Instant updates and customization, made possible via the Omnivex Moxie solution, make the 250+ LCD menu boards at Portland Trailblazers Rose Garden Arena powerful marketing tools. "We stop selling beer in the third quarter of the games, and we are able to change the menu and take beer off within seconds," says Dill. "Also, if one of the stands runs out of an item, it can be taken off the menu." They even use the screens to flash motivational messages to employees before the area doors open to patrons. "We display inspirational messages about what our employees can do to make sure the guests have a great experience," says Dill.

The person in charge of concession stands has access to an on-site computer and can make changes on the fly, but the company also created a new position to handle the trafficking and scheduling of content in advance.

Hotel displays become interactive

In the lodging sector, integration with a hotel's various management systems can allow for real-time, automated updates, which is how theWit Hotel in Chicago (www.thewithotel.com) is handling its conference schedules and messaging. Using Four Winds Interactive (www.fourwindsinteractive.com) technology to manage the content on LCD screens throughout the hotel, including a 60-inch display in the lobby, the software is integrated with the company's Delphi sales and catering management system from Newmarket International (www.newmarketinc.com). Now, if a group holding a conference changes its schedule, the screens are automatically updated.

"The Delphi feed is live, so no human intervention is necessary," says Darrin Pinkham, CTO at theWit.

Integrating the content into the property's other systems lets the displays become interactive. When opening last June, owners of theWit Hotel knew they wanted digital signage, and chose to install touchscreens connected to the Internet from Four Winds Interactive, allowing guests to check event information, flight status and more.

"Making the screens touch and interactive is so critical because people can touch and feel your brand, and by tying it into the Internet, we can offer RSS feeds and allow guests to check the weather or information about the area," explains Pinkham. "If a guest is in one meeting room, and wants to check the event timeline or check flight status they can."

The hotel will also be piloting new wayfinding software from Four Winds, which will work like a GPS to create a map for guests needing directions from one location to another. The information can be downloaded using Bluetooth or sent to a cell phone number or email.

"Interactive digital signage will eventually become a must-have technology, and I think we will see it become huge with the introduction of the new iPad from Apple," notes Pinkham. "The screen will be big enough to be mounted in a hotel lobby, and guest can use it to order room service or turn down service." ■