

## Should DS Software be a Sales Tool, or a Strategic One?

## Just the Facts, Ma'am

Ruth Rushworth spoke to Jeff Collard of Omnivex Corporation



Jeff Collard is President of Omnivex Corporation, which makes enterprise-wide software to manage all aspects of digital signage networks, including content management, real-time data acquisition & distribution, and remote device management. Jeff has been president since 1998.

**DS EUROPE:** Omnivex have been around since 1991, which is pretty early days for DS. Did the company originally start off in the digital signage market?

**JEFF COLLARD:** Not exactly. The company was founded by Doug Bannister (now CEO) who was working as an electrical engineer selling phone headsets and switching systems, when a customer asked him if he could link this up with a board they had on the wall. That was the start of the software - our original business was trading floors where they used our software to do buy/sell positions and post this onto a display for their employees. Our software had to deal with reams and reams of information from Reuters and other bodies.

**DSE:** So your focus was originally on the management of data, rather than digital signage applications?

**JC:** Yes. What happened next was that when plasma screens first started to come into the market they went into the trading floors to be used for televisions. We went to our customers and said "why don't you let us have access to those displays as well, so we could use that as a monitor." Instead of putting up numbers, we put up graphs, charts and trend lines to make it easier for the traders to make decisions in fractions of a second.

**DSE:** We covered a story about City Index in London using your software in an earlier issue, but I didn't realise how key this market was to the development of your company.

**JC:** A lot of exchanges, such as the Chicago, Toronto and Swiss Exchanges, use our software, as well as banks and other trading houses.

**DSE:** Presumably your software gives these companies much better tools to present the information they are dealing with?

**JC:** Exactly. We were doing a form of digital signage very early on, but it was essentially centred around the problem of how do you take data and make it actionable. From then we worked with a lot of the screen suppliers because

we needed to learn a little about the hardware. They started taking our software to tradeshows to put content and information on their screens at their booths.

**DSE:** Do you come from the content side of digital signage then?

**JC:** We come from the data side. One of our mantras is that *context* is king, not content. For us, it's all about how the information is valuable and how digital signage conveys information, as opposed to simply running a loop of advertisements. Everything we do is about how to provide real-time information to facilitate decision making.

**DSE:** Could you give me an example?

**JC:** My favourite example is an installation we've done for a mobile phone store scenario. Phones are set up linked to digital signage and when someone walks up and picks up one of the phones, our software goes to their database and then displays information on the price and features. If they pick up another phone at the same time, they get a comparison between the two.

**DSE:** What about three phones?

**JC:** Three phones are also fine. The customer can pick up as many as they are interested in, or as many as they can hold!

In this case, the retailer was looking for a simple sales lift through better presentation of content. What they didn't expect initially was the logistical advantages they also gained. If you think about mobile phone stores, they have a lot of logistical problems for stock control, as new models come onto the market and make the old ones obsolete in around six months.

The retailer knows from what they sell what they should stock, but this is, of course, too late to know this. Using our software, they can know how many interactions users have had with the phones and how many comparisons have been made and between which phones. Our software provides this information nationally, regionally and locally. Using this

information, the store can know their customer's preferences and then adjust their stock levels accordingly.

**DSE:** So, the actual ROI of this solution was not so much in the increased revenue from the digital signage, but in the decreased costs?

**JC:** Yes, the solution might create a 15-20% sales lift, but it is having the information on these interactions that can drastically cut a retailer's inventory costs. Digital signage, for us, is more about using data and information strategically to improve business processes than simply being used to display advertising content.

**DSE:** This kind of information, though, can be fed back to define the content, so that appropriate content is displayed to the appropriate audience?

**JC:** This information can be used to drive and tailor the content, as the business would know much better how the content relates to the audience's decision-making or engaging with a brand. The advertising has much more value if it's relevant to the customer.

**DSE:** What new functionalities have you added to your Moxie digital signage software?

**JC:** Multi-PC video synchronisation and GPS tracking is new to version 6.05 of Moxie. If you think about a stadium or arena video wall that has numerous screens running from multiple computers, the content can get out of sync with each other. Our software monitors the data flow from computer to computer, and compares it to check that the screens are all in time. If a screen is out of sync, the system decides whether to speed up, slow down or skip ahead to get it back in time.

For the GPS locator, we have a new application which is good for transportation applications, such as shuttle buses moving around airports. Digital signage at bus stops lets passengers know when the next bus is coming and also runs advertising and local information relevant to that stop. It will even determine what content to play on the screens within the moving vehicle, based on the GPS coordinates, making content passengers are viewing

relevant to the local area. However, we can also use the information we have from the bus to tell operators information like where each bus is located, the fuel economy of the bus, how much fuel is in the tank and when it will need a service.

**DSE:** What differentiates your software from other competitors in the market?

**JC:** We have never focused on the advertising sales model, whereas lots of competitors do. We support advertising sales, but our primary value is in helping businesses integrate the information associated with the installation, or within their organisation, into their digital signage. In the past, this has not been a key issue to advertisers, but that is changing.

Another thing that differentiates us is that our software can generate playlists intelligently through rules, so that content does not have to be manually scheduled.

**DSE:** What operating system does your software work on?

**JC:** It's all on a Windows environment. It will work with Linux databases, but the operation of our software will only work on Windows. We're already compatible with Windows 7 and we are a Microsoft Gold Certified partner.

**DSE:** Are your biggest customers in trading houses?

**JC:** They were 10-15 years ago, but we are in numerous vertical markets today because, when used as a communication platform, digital signage can go into a lot of places. Transportation, retail, hospitality and corporate communications are all big areas for us, but as far as the software's concerned, it's all data.

**DSE:** Where do you see the biggest growth for digital signage in the next few years?

**JC:** Retail currently makes up about 40% of the market, but I don't think it will ever be more than that. Although retail is growing very fast, so are the



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other verticals.

**DSE:** Do you think retail is ahead of the game because they want to be seen as innovative, by incorporating the latest technologies?

**JC:** Actually I'd say that retail is lagging. Retail roll-outs get a lot of press because they're very visible to people, but corporate installations, like on manufacturing floors, which aren't seen, are growing more quickly than retail. It's just that you don't hear about these as much.

One of our biggest problems is that very few of our retail customers will let us talk about what we do for them, because the last thing they want is for their competitors to know how to use the data we can give them to drive efficiencies in their business and save money, so it's difficult to get retailers to sign off on a case study or press releases for us.

**DSE:** You're based in Canada, but is the US the biggest market for you? Or are you finding more success with European installations, in

places like Norway?

**JC:** We have a very good partner in Norway. Most of our sales are through partners, because customers need local support with the whole installation. We do quite a bit in Europe and the Asian market is coming along, but it's not growing as fast as Europe. The US is typically our biggest market, although last year our European business grew more strongly than our US. You wouldn't have known that there was a recession, looking at our sales figures in Europe last year, whereas in the US you could see this.

**DSE:** How do you see this year going? Has the market recovered yet?

**JC:** It's coming back very quickly: A lot of the projects that didn't happen last year are now being reviewed for this year, so we're optimistic about 2010.

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