

# It must be a sign... to start thinking clever signage

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**Current consumer trends demonstrate that we are undergoing a revolution** in the way people gather information and interact with one-another. It is clear that people are migrating from traditional print media towards digital formats that are delivered via mobile technologies and the internet. This digital migration means that businesses must communicate with consumers and employees in a way that is visual, relevant, time-oriented and location-oriented. Digital signage is the chosen medium that companies are rapidly embracing to achieve this.

AV integrators recognise digital signage is a powerful medium that is increasingly in demand. They have become familiar with how companies are embracing the technology as a platform to promote their brand, enhance the customer experience and advertise their goods and services. As the number of digital signage deployments grow, the AV Integrator must ask themselves: "Where is digital signage going?"



## Immersive interactive exchange

"Interactivity" is a rapidly emerging digital signage trend. Modern digital signage deployments are providing an experience that extends far beyond the traditional static presentation of content into one that supports an immersive interactive exchange between the viewer and the signage. But, what are the components of a successful interactive deployment?

## Smart Thinking. Clever Signage

Successful Interactive digital signage deployments are much more than hanging a display on a wall and piping content to it. A successful interactive solution embodies an entire eco-system that consists of software, hardware, content, a network and services. AV integrators need to understand this eco-system and become familiar with the components involved and the companies that can deliver each component in a way that is synergistic and cohesive. These are as follows:

**The Software** – Content management software is the backbone of an interactive digital signage system. It not only manages the collection, presentation, scheduling and delivery of the digital content to the electronic displays, it is also responsible for defining and administering the level of user interactivity. The design and scheduling component of the content management software defines the rules by which content elements will interact with one another and the ways in which the viewer will interact with the content elements on the screen.

In addition to support interactivity, the content management software must also be flexible enough to accommodate a broad range business segments and industries. The software should work equally well in a hospitality venue as it would in a retail outlet, educational institution, healthcare facility or corporation. It should also be scalable and capable of supporting one screen within a single site or thousands of screens across many locations.

AV Integrators should look for software that is technically adept. The software should be able to support a wide array of graphical and video formats and should be equipped to receive, synthesize and deliver real-time data. It should allow content to be easily compiled, manipulated and updated, whilst also accommodating sophisticated scheduling. The software should support a broad array of display solutions, which may include everything from LCD displays, interactive kiosks, large outdoor LED displays to mobile devices. Even if an Integrator's customer does not plan to deploy the full range of these display solutions immediately, the software should be ready to accommodate them should the need arise in the future.

It was mentioned that the software should support mobile displays. Mobility is an emerging trend in interactive display solutions that is rapidly gaining popularity and should not be ignored. 59.3%

of respondents that took part in a recent industry study said that interaction with mobile devices will impact digital signage the most over the next two years. In the same study 30.8% of the businesses that currently employ digital signage said they plan to add interactive displays to their current solutions in the next two years. It is therefore essential that any digital signage software platform that an Integrator considers must support the distribution of interactive content to a mobile device.

**The Hardware** – A key hardware component for any interactive digital signage system is the media player. Media players receive content from the content management software, store it and then prepare it for presentation to the electronic displays. When evaluating an interactive digital signage system, the AV Integrator should consider media players that are not only powerful enough to drive and support a range of rich media across a multitude of environments but are also able to support a two-way interaction between the content and the viewer of the content. Players should be fast, easy to deploy, networkable and equipped to support remote administration. They should be capable of playing dynamic content, storing content locally in order to reduce network traffic and equipped to only pull down content elements that have changed versus pulling the entire inventories of content following a change.

**The Content** - No interactive digital signage system is complete without content. Content is the petrol that drives the digital signage engine. A viable content management system must be able to interface with a wide range of content sources, including live data feeds, so that the viewers are presented with compelling, relevant and timely information. Examples of live data sources include meeting/event information, business performance metrics and general information items (e.g. news, sports, weather, etc). In addition to live data, an interactive digital signage solution should present content that also includes text, graphics, photos, videos and animations. It should be noted however that there is fundamentally no difference between content of a static implementation and the content of an interactive implementation. Interactivity simply defines the method and timing by which content is presented as a user engages with the signage. These rules are defined within the content design portion of the content management software.

**The Network** – A modern interactive digital signage solution is networked. This means that content is delivered on a real-time basis from the content management software to the media players via a data network. A networked interactive digital signage system allows content to be centrally managed, scheduled, delivered and monitored – all from a remote location. It should be noted though, that some digital signage systems run “behind” the customer’s network firewall and some run outside of the customer’s network firewall. The more secure digital signage systems run behind the customer’s firewall, but these systems must be designed to be network and

bandwidth friendly. This means that the software should minimise the use of the network by employing sophisticated bandwidth and content delivery techniques.

**The Services** – A typical digital signage solution requires an AV Integrator that possesses both a detailed understanding of the core technology and the skills to deploy a solution. These skills include the competencies required to define a customer's needs, design a solution, install the solution, develop the content, integrate the data sources (e.g. ERP systems, Inventory Systems, POS systems, information feeds, etc.) and provide on-going technical/help desk support. A modern, interactive digital signage system increases the complexity of a typical digital signage deployment and adds a layer of difficulty to the support thereof. The design of an interactive solution is more difficult because one must consider the mechanics of the user interaction as opposed to limiting the design parameters to just the aesthetic of the solution. The deployment is more complicated in that content interactions increase the time and skills required to design and develop the content. Deployment is also more complicated as debugging display and user interface issues can be more arduous.

## Final Thoughts

In summary, a modern, interactive digital signage solution requires a thorough knowledge of leading edge content management software as well as a deep understanding of state-of-the-art media-handling hardware. It also requires a broad portfolio of skills to effectively scope, deploy and support the solution. If an AV integrator desires to capitalise on this new digital signage opportunity without investing the time to evaluate software, analyse hardware and acquire the necessary skills, the answer is for that Integrator to team with a partner that has a proven record of experience in each of these areas. Some, but not all, digital signage providers and visual solutions companies are equipped to provide these support services and skills. If the AV Integrator has chosen to take advantage of interactive digital signage as a growth market, then it would be to their advantage to seek out an experienced visual communications company with which to team.

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