



Digital Signage Delivers on Campus

Affordable wide-screen digital signs are finding multiple uses on campuses, and may even generate revenue.

By Jean Marie Angelo

The millennial generation was raised on the moving image. HDTV, MTV, flat-screen PCs, PDAs and other electronics have created a generation with high expectations of media and its messages. No wonder digital signage--a new presentation technology--is making its way onto campus.

If there's a sale in the bookstore, a new cell phone plan for students or a concert on campus, a digital sign can deliver the message. Even better, that message can be punched up with animated logos, photos, video clips, and text messages that change every few seconds. No print poster can do that.

"Digital sign" is another name for an electronic, flat-panel screen. They are also appearing in more retail outlets to inspire impulse purchases, and in restaurants, hotels and conference centers. Now they are making their way onto campuses, where they are being used for promotional, and even academic, uses. The intention is to have a digital newsletter that keeps students posted about events

Some digital signs are only several inches wide, allowing for flush wall mounting. The sleek design of a digital sign, or flat screen, makes it easier to mount than a bulky TV monitor.

And notably, digital signs are becoming more affordable. Affordable prices are what convinced administrators at Bellevue Community College (WA), to install three plasma screens in March. The college's student government drove the project, asking the media professionals on campus to create a new messaging system with a modest budget. BCC paid \$3,000 for each of its 42-inch Gateway screens. The digital signs are placed in strategic campus locations--the cafeteria, the student programs office and the campus coffee shop. "The intention is to have a digital newsletter that keeps students posted about events," explains Roger Ewald, BCC media engineer. Case in point, the signs kept students abreast of building closings and schedule changes after a rash of flooding in the Bellevue area in late summer.

Student groups create their own slide presentations to promote their events or groups. These, in turn, are submitted to administrators in the Student Programs Office for review. Once accepted, the text and images of each presentation are uploaded into software and broadcast on the screens. Administrators also maintain the broadcast schedules, selecting



when the messages will be displayed. Scheduling software feeds data to digital signs, and ensures that messages are "looped" to replay as often as desired. Information is dynamic and colorful, and created with the goal of cutting through visual clutter and attracting viewers

So impressed were students and administrators that they have opted to add more screens this month to the area that includes the campus business center and satellite bookstore, a locale used largely by working professionals who take classes.

The plasma screens provide details about campus activities to passersby--a key point considering the Cornell bookstore is located in a basement. Two screens on the lowest level, which are placed in close proximity to each other and to the store's entrance, usually run identical content promoting campus programs and student activities. These screens might also inform students about textbook buy-back programs and other store promotions.

Another large screen inside the store, which is actually a video wall made up of four small screens placed together, promotes book titles. Presentations might run biographies of Cornell faculty members who have authored books, and provide historical facts about the university.

Technology Plaza

The University of Central Arkansas created its own "technology plaza" to showcase its digital sign, which measures 13 feet wide and 9 feet high. Completed at the beginning of 2004, technology plaza is meant to be a co-curricular area: an outdoor classroom, an open-air movie arena, and information center.

"This vision was driven by academics," he says. The screen is viewed as a tool to improve teaching and learning. At times the screen is used as an interactive whiteboard, displaying academic presentations as part of a class.

"We can change the message instantly. It is a great advantage over standard signage," adds Toll. Retailers and pizza shops can place their message in front of 10,000 students.

Benches in the plaza will comfortably seat 80, but more viewers can stand on the balconies of other academic buildings and easily see the screen.

Toll also wants the jumbo screen to have commercial applications. To date, the new screen has only been used to promote campus events and groups, but he plans to sell advertising messages. Toll expects local retailers and pizza shops will want to place their



messages in front of UCA's 10,000 students who walk through campus. National retailers and tourism companies could be potential advertisers as well, he adds.

As for managing the screen, an existing technical support staffer was asked to take on the additional duties of scheduling messaging and scheduling the screen. Although the screen is technically part of Toll's science and mathematics' department, other departments and extra-curricular groups are encouraged to use it. The department has provided training to faculty and students. To date, 40 percent of UCA's faculty has been trained to use the jumbo screen.

The jumbo screen is an example of Toll's overall vision for education. "Teaching and learning take place everywhere," he says. The screen provides a tool that brings education to the outdoors. Toll, who is helping in the effort to make UCA a completely wireless campus, envisions a constant flow of information from the classroom, to technology plaza, to a student's laptop. "We want to empower faculty to create better outcomes."

Wall Street on Campus

A handful of colleges and universities have created mock financial centers on campus, and have counted on digital signage to give these learning centers a working-world feel.

At St. Joseph's University (PA), each business student uses the Wall Street Trading Room in the Erivan K. Haub School of Business to get stock quotes and follow financial news.

The trading room, completed in late 2003, includes a Trans-Lux Ticker Board and Trans-Lux Picture and Data Wall. All are used to display stock prices, exchange rates, financial news, and the specific portfolios the students are managing. Any information that appears on the wall can also be displayed on a monitor in front of the classroom.

"We built this to give students a feel for what a trading room would be like in a professional investment organization. This type of technology is what they will find there," says Joseph DiAngelo, dean of the business school.

Tulane University (LA) also opened its trading center in the A.B. Freeman School of Business in fall 2003. The center, which can fit 28 students, sports nine display wall cubes made by Christie Digital Systems. These are mounted in a 3x3 array to create a large data wall for projecting one large image, or to take feeds from different sources.