



# DIGITAL SIGNAGE ISN'T JUST PLAYBACK

**It's a Whole New Industry**

*By John Mayberry*

Digital signage is a relatively new form of advertising that typically uses flat panel displays, LED walls or video projectors to digitally deliver dynamic messages that can include graphics, images, text and sound. Digital signage typically provides far greater advertising impact and increased viewership than traditional, printed static signs or billboards, which it may augment or replace. It has applications anywhere that signage, advertising and wayfinding are needed – retail, public venues, attractions and museums, airports and train stations, highways, etc.

Content is typically stored on local flash or hard disk memory storage and reproduction systems. Content reproduction is organized by playlists, which can be customized to fit local audience demographics. The more sophisticated digital signage systems are controlled via remote Network Operations Centers (NOCs).

**Above: The Walker Art Center in Minneapolis uses digital signage on a grand scale to communicate its function as a home for contemporary creativity.**

**Below: Electrosonic provided this digital signage network for United Airlines at Chicago's O'Hare Airport.**

D3 Magazine reports that "Digital signage is helping to merge the industries of advertising networks and point-of-purchase display merchandising."

Digital signage is a growing and dynamic market, with all the attendant ups and downs of a new industry. Our company, Electrosonic, has been working in it for some time and we still encounter

daily challenges. Implementing a digital signage offering is a significant challenge, with significant differences from traditional AV work in terms of concept, design, build, install, commissioning, and warranty project phases. It requires specific preparation, skills, and resources.

Here are some tips on what to look for in a system and a provider.

**1. Performance.** If you are shopping for digital signage, you have different expectations and needs than you would for a static playback system. Signage systems are invariably advertising-based and need to look spectacular as well as change regularly to maintain their impact.

**2. Organizational.** While an AV company may have a great deal of experience in retail, airports, entertainment venues, hospitality or mall systems it does not automatically parlay an easy segue into these markets. Electrosonic found it necessary to add a separate division to handle large digital signage rollouts. Even with the new division, there are many remaining strategic and tactical challenges.

**3. Staffing, Storage and Shipping.** Digital signage systems may involve hundreds of identical equipment racks – as opposed to the individual, custom racks that are built for a one-off display such as a museum exhibit – plus thousands of mounts





and displays needing to be shipped to hundreds of locations. Depending on volume, this may end up requiring an entirely different (lower cost) staff and a considerably larger warehouse. There is a great deal of repetitive work.

**4. Display Margin.** A successful digital signage provider will offer proprietary software and/or hardware in order to compete (and be in a position to provide continuing customer support) in a field where product margins are slim. Electrosonic has successfully parlayed our HD FrEND playback devices and iMediate enterprise software to that end.

**5. Reliability.** This has to be on par with telephony or broadcast systems. There is often a significant investment on the part of the client, who needs very high levels of system performance. Downtime equals lost revenue. Systems must have built-in failure reporting capabilities, hopefully linked to a Network Operations Center (NOC) with the ability to remotely repair systems or dispatch technicians when required.

**6. Build and Installation Schedules.** Digital signage systems generally have much more intense scheduling expectations than traditional AV systems. Usually they are retrofitted within rather than integrated into a building. The customer's marketing needs are immediate. The customer wants installation as soon as possible. Every minute missed is an advertisement not played.

**7. Networking skills.** So far in Electrosonic's gestation we have dealt with satellite, traditional Internet, client's own Internet and Intranets, WiFi, and wireless network cards. Simply put, the client doesn't care how the content gets to their box - only that it's the integrator's job (our job) to understand it and make it work. The integrator will need a highly skilled server, networking, and VPN tunneling staff to successfully implement digital signage.

**8. National and International Support.** Many signage systems are national or international in scope.

**9. Content.** Your digital signage integrator has to be expert in every aspect of digital video playback technology, if for no other reason than to make it work right. The integrator will be dealing with multiple MPEG formatting, RSS feeds, graphic overlays, and related issues every single day. Your provider should have an HD production studio to ensure that your content is properly configured, and a secure content storage facility.

**10. Content Scheduling and Reporting Systems.** Any advertising system has to have a reporting system capable of ensuring that content was successfully reproduced and in a format compatible with the client's accounting system. Suffice to say one would need to have a detailed understanding of commercially available accounting systems and associated database programs. This is an area not to be overlooked.



**11. Sales.** Assessing and filling your needs for digital signage systems requires dedicated, knowledgeable personnel.



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Above left: Digital signage provides visual interest and up-to-date information for customers to read at the checkout point in a department store. Above: On a fashionable street somewhere in Europe, this Kinoton Litefast digital signage kiosk captures the attention of passersby. It plays back material stored on DVD. Photo courtesy Kinoton GmbH.



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