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Digital Signage: Three Keys to Uptime

In order to have a properly functional digital signage network, businesses need to make the right choices with their platform, network and hardware.

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The goal of a good digital signage network is to get messages across to an audience. It may be corporate messaging, it may be educational content, or it may be advertising content. The goal is to communicate. Because digital signage is so ubiquitous now, businesses are focusing a lot of energy on how to create content that will stand out. However, businesses should first and foremost make sure that the technological aspects — the platform, network, and hardware — are first-rate before moving on to content. After all, if the network shuts down, the screen dies, or the system crashes, then the content can't reach the customers at all.

Choosing the right platform

The first step is to pick the right platform. Cindy Lai, marketing manager at CAYIN Technology, says an embedded platform is better than a desktop operating system. Embedded systems are advantageous because they are designed for one primary usage, so they do not need extra software installed (e.g. anti-virus software).

"Embedded software is designed specifically for digital signage applications," Lai said.

If a customer uses a consumer grade desktop system, then the digital signage network will be subject to the same updates as a personal computer. As most computer users know, when system updates occur, it often necessitates a restart of the computer. For an individual, this can be just a minor hassle, costing them a few minutes of their time. But for a business running a digital signage network, this is much more problematic. The time a system spends rebooting is time that could be spent getting messaging out to customers. And as the old adage goes, time is money.

Photo courtesy of Flickr: Kai Hendry

Digital signage networks may experience temporary shut downs or error messages if the right platform is not in place.

The other factor is that the business looks less than professional if the digital signage network is temporarily shutting down to reboot or has a message flashing across the screen. These types of content disturbances and interruptions stop content from being displayed. Such a display might make the customer think the technology is amateurish and not worth their time to look at, meaning that even when the signage is working well, the customer might not look at it in the future.

Choosing a stable and secure network

Much of the information sent across digital signage networks are live, real-time data. As a result, a stable, secure, and efficient network with a strong Internet service provider is needed to transmit this information.

While some companies use wireless networks successfully on stationary content, wired networks are still generally more reliable than wireless. Wired networks are often faster than wireless and are not prone to picking up on outside interference as in the case of wireless networks. In addition to speed, wired networks have the advantage of better security over their wireless counterparts.

Wireless does have advantages, such as the ease of installation and lack of cables. Lai says if a business still chooses to go the wireless route, the user should choose a product with the ability to automatically reconnect if the network or server goes offline. Without this ability, someone at the company would need to be alerted to the outage first, and then would have to take the steps to fix the problem. If the network has the ability to automatically reconnect in the event of an interruption, the network downtime is reduced and customer satisfaction is increased.

Businesses often make the mistaken assumption that the consumer-grade screens will save them money upfront.

Choosing the right hardware

When businesses are investing in digital signage, they face a decision: Should they buy industrial-grade or consumer-grade screens? Many companies make the wrong choice and buy consumer-grade screens. Because of the increasing popularity of large, flat-screen TVs, many businesses think that this kind of consumer-grade technology is all they need for their digital signage network. Since consumer-grade technology now looks state-of-the-art, businesses assume it is state-of-the-art for all uses, including for an all-day digital signage network.

But this just isn't true. Consumer-grade televisions are designed for home viewing, not for digital signage. Consumer-grade screens are built to be on four to six hours a day. At the very least, digital signage networks run for the length of a business day from eight to twelve hours. Many networks will run even longer than, with some running as much as 24 hours a day.

Businesses often make the mistaken assumption that the consumer-grade screens will save them money upfront. In a difficult economy, many businesses might be afraid to make the initial investment in industrial-grade screens. But buying consumer-grade can prove even costlier in the long run.

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"Too often, people look to save $50, $100 or $200 with consumer-grade," said Mike Zmuda, director of business development for NEC Display Solutions. "They don't have the extra money for commercial-grade, but they have to spend it later to replace the consumer screens. At the end of the day, do you want to be in the maintenance business or the digital signage business?"

Industrial-grade screens are built to be on 24 hours a day. It may cost more in the short term, but businesses will save money in the long term. If a consumer-grade screens goes down, the business doesn't just lose the money, it loses viewing time while the screens are down and it gives customers the impression that the screens are ineffective. A customer who walks past an out-of-order screen might not bother looking at it again, even after it's been replaced.

Lastly, businesses looking for the right choices in hardware are best suited to choose embedded hardware instead of PC hardware. If a business uses PC hardware, there will be downtime due to necessary upgrades (e.g. anti-virus software). Embedded hardware is designed specifically for use in a digital signage network, unlike standard PC hardware.

About the sponsor: *CAYIN Technology, based in Taipei City, Taiwan, provides dynamic digital signage solutions designed to convey pertinent information to targeted customers in a variety of industries including retail, education, hotel, government and healthcare.*

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