

The Emergence of Social Media in Digital Signage

The convergence of two technologies is increasing customer engagement and enabling more targeted messaging.

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User interaction is part of one of the newest strategies for making digital signage more relevant to viewers. In this age of around-the-clock news, rapid rewards and instant gratification, consumers also want constant connectivity. And they want it in every facet of their lives.

That message is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the exploding popularity of Internet social media and networking sites. As digital signage deployers look for new ways to make the technology more valuable — to themselves and to users — they are setting their sights on feature integration with sites such as Facebook and Twitter.

Social media in digital signage

In just the last year, social communication has become part of the digital signage landscape.

The definition of dynamic signage has changed significantly in recent years. Though digital signage remains in its infancy, it hasn't taken long for those in the field to realize audience engagement is the key to growth in the industry. The push,

now more than ever, is to engage people by getting them to interact with a screen.

After all, what good is signage if it's dismissed or completely ignored?

Social media and networking has become so pervasive in people's lives, software developers see its integration into the signage medium as a logical step forward.

LocaModa, a Cambridge, Mass.-based developer, is one of a handful of companies teaming with signage software designers to fuse traditional systems with social platforms. Approximately 15,000 locations currently use the company's technology, most of them in the hospitality and entertainment industries.

Driving early interest are deployers who want their signage to be relevant and advertisers who want to leverage

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a new form of exposure, says Bill Nast, LocaModa's vice president for business development.

"Attention is currency," he said. "If you can't get attention and break through the noise, the advertising dollars are probably wasted."

Functionality

Social media-enabled screens can serve a multitude of functions. Some bars, for example, are using screens to stage interactive games for visitors who can play against others — whether they are at the same location or elsewhere — by texting answers to the screen with their cell phones. Bars also are using signage to integrate live Twitter streams with messages containing certain key words or phrases, such as the name of the bar or a specific beverage, that would resonate with those inside the establishment. Customers can even send their own text messages and photos to be shown on the screen.

All the material winds through filters that ensure only appropriate content is posted.

In an environment where noise can inhibit one's ability to communicate verbally, the screen serves as a pivotal way for people to connect.

"You could tweet a recommendation from the menu, it will pop up on the screens and all the patrons can view it instantaneously," said Parous Khachikian, marketing coordinator for UCView Media, a Chatsworth, Calif.-based company that has made social networking capabilities available through its digital signage solutions.

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The displays also are set up to reel in advertising dollars. Software platforms can split a screen to allow a company's brand to be anchored in a certain section and its product promoted. At the same time, another section can display feeds from social media sites and another can run TV programming.

Effectiveness

A report from website Retrevo Gadgetology about consumers' social media behaviors shows that approximately 42 percent of respondents use Twitter feeds as their primary source of news in the morning as opposed to traditional news outlets or newspapers. Clearly, social media is striking a chord with users.

But for all the hype and promotion of social media and networking capabilities, relatively few deployers have opted to incorporate it. Companies are hesitant to fully embrace social media in digital signage without proof of its success.

While such numbers don't exist yet, analysts point to the engagement levels among patrons at businesses with social media-enabled screens as evidence that it works.

The Independent Coffee Network, which recently implemented UCView's social media capabilities into its digital signage network, offers one such example.

"The social media applications, like Twitter and Flickr, are catching the attention of customers in the stores," said Dave Shikiar, founder and CEO of Independent Coffee Network. "First they ask, 'What is that?' then they quickly realize they are watching real-time tweets that are relevant to where they are. It's a better news feed than the typical tickers. Then when they see they can participate with their mobile phone, they are hooked."

Initial feedback among businesses incorporating social media features into their signage has been positive. Many have reported that not only have the screens motivated patrons to interact with each other, it also has created social bonds among those frequenting the location.

Social media advertising allows for brands to get into the conversation naturally. The audience can engage with the signage, rather than passively seeing ads.

"This should open the door to a more organic form of advertising," says Shikiar. "Agencies can use this social media to



Businesses who have incorporated social media into their digital signage, such as the coffee shop seen above, are reporting higher levels of engagement with patrons, as well as the formation of bonds between customers.

really get their client's product into the conversation organically, just by using product keywords."

"Audience retention is an important facilitator of growth," Khachikian said. "Social media takes on so many different forms that no matter which feature is implemented, it is bound to make the display stand out."

Potential opportunities

Bars and similar establishments where people congregate socially were initially seen as the most common spots to use this technology. However, signage software designers anticipate expansion into other sectors, some of which are beginning to inquire about integrating the approach into their venues.

Experts aren't sure what features and capabilities [of social media] will emerge in the months to come. What they do know is that the medium will be an important element of strategy for signage deployers, one that resonates with consumers who are looking to be connected at all times.

Physicians' offices are considering integrating interactive digital signage in waiting rooms, stadiums and other sports venues are considering implementation where fans can post comments about a game or their team from inside the stadium and government agencies are weighing how to get residents more ingrained in the functionality of their elected leaders.

But some analysts believe winning widespread acceptance simply will take time, noting that the social media platform is still relatively new to the digital signage industry.

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Social media interaction with brands is on the rise. IDG Research Services' IDG New Media Study mentions 64 percent of respondents interacted with a brand through social networking within the past six months, and this percentage is increasing. People want to engage with

brands they care about, and integrating social media into digital signage makes it even easier for people. This added interaction leads to higher audience engagement, which is a key factor in the success of a digital signage display.

"In any new industry, there are early adopters and those who get it," Nast said. "Those that don't develop a social media strategy will be left behind."

"Social media integration is a differentiator that can set you apart from competitors," Khachikian said.

About the sponsor: *UCView Media is a leading provider of digital signage solutions worldwide, offering digital signage application servers and content management software. The company's mission is to enable the business convergence of digital display owners, advertisers and consumers. UCView, based in Chatsworth, California has installed and supports thousands of players in various markets, including education, retail, financial, service stations, department stores, hospitality and medical, among others. For more information, visit www.ucview.com or follow @UCView on Twitter.*