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Journal of Retail Analytics

Volume VII, Issue I **First Quarter 2011**

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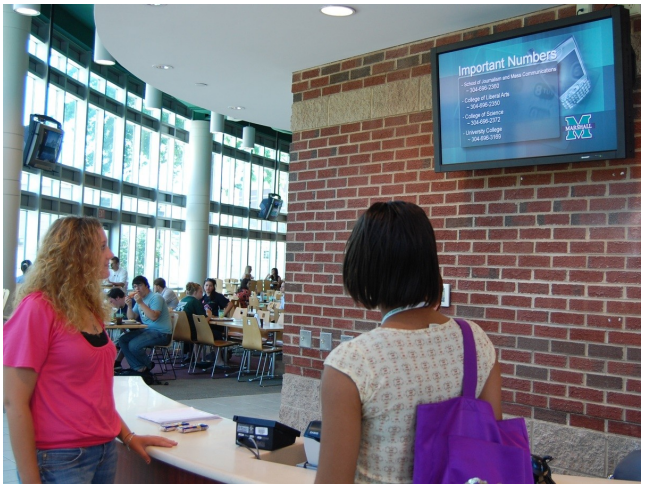
Learning the Value of Digital Signage at Marshall University

by Eric Himes, Director of Digital Media Services, Marshall University

Many university administrations offer significant resistance when it comes to approving the installation of a digital signage network. Often, they look only at the bottom line and not the far-reaching benefits provided by a well-maintained signage network. However, the administration at Marshall University, located in Huntington, West Virginia, saw the value in a distributed network early and consistently worked toward that goal.

Digital Signage is nothing new to Marshall University. In the early '90s, two departments, seeing the need to be able to get messages out to their students, used CRT monitors and a character generator on the university's closed circuit cable system. In 1998, with the opening of the John Deaver Drinko Library, a budget was set up to purchase and maintain kiosks that would provide way finding and informational services for students entering the new facility. The kiosks were managed by the university's IT department. There were attempts to develop the kiosks into a signage network. As the original kiosks aged past their lifecycle, they were replaced with 55-inch plasma screens, then refreshed again with 55-inch LCD monitors and powered by Scala software. Still, the "network" remained two signs located in a single building.



Fifty-five-inch LCD monitors are placed in areas where students have easy access.

As with many universities, a heightened interest in effective communication occurred after the tragedy at Virginia Tech in 2007. An emergency notification system was proposed that utilized 47 signs located in key areas around the main campus. However, there was neither a sustainable model, nor the personnel or budget in place to sustain such a network. This required the university to rethink its approach to how it was going to create a network that would be an effective communications tool to reach the campus population.

The following year was spent researching various products and visiting tradeshows to see what was available. In 2009, a growing campus community that wanted digital signage became evident. Staff at the newly constructed recreation center wanted to purchase signs for their building, various colleges wanted signs in their lobby areas to promote their programs, and the campaign of the newly elected student body president even included a promise to bring digital signage to the student center. Many factions were forming and it became increasingly evident to central IT that an enterprise digital signage solution was needed.

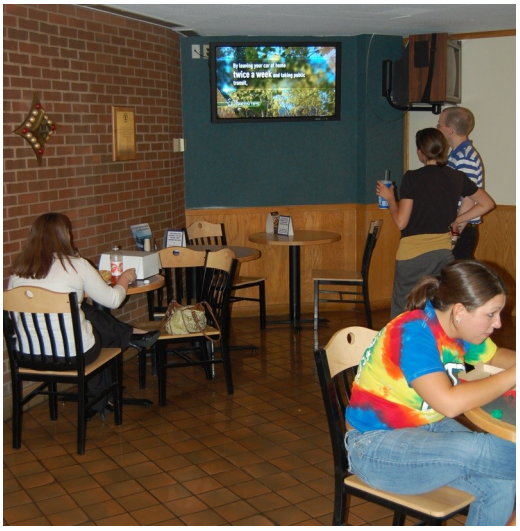
There are many benefits that come from a campus-wide signage implementation, including:

It provides an easy way to keep the brand and look of the university consistent.

Instead of each department or college creating its own templates, Marshall decided that IT would work with the communications/marketing department to protect the brand. This consistent branding, from recruitment material to the website to the signage, helps potential students and campus visitors to recall marketing and recruiting material they have seen. As people are bombarded with messages each day, they tend to remember quite a bit of what they saw but need a trigger to recall the information.

It can reach out to faculty, staff, students and visitors with dynamic rich-media content.

While newsletters and bulletin boards can only deliver static information, digital signage can make use of many media types to keep the information current and attention grabbing. Most digital signage systems are able to take advantage of dynamic content pulled from RSS feeds or other information systems. By linking Marshall's Resource 25 Calendar for event scheduling, the data that is entered into one system can be repurposed in real-time by the signage network without needing additional staff to extract the data and schedule it on the network. Digital signage messages have the ability to catch your attention and help you discover new information while websites and emails require you to log on to your computer or use your smart phone.



Information is displayed on monitors for students, faculty, staff and visitors to read. Information includes campus updates, emergency messages and much more.

It provides a means to send emergency messages.

Numerous signage software packages have the ability to integrate with a university's emergency response plan. All signs or a specific group of signs can be controlled from a single point. Emergency messaging can often be triggered remotely by email, web or text messaging. Warning systems such as fire alarms or security systems can trigger a prepared message and RSS feeds can be monitored for keywords. For example, an RSS feed from the National Weather Service could be monitored for a severe thunderstorm warning and when triggered, could display a warning on the signs. This integration can be a major justification for digital signage, however, a comprehensive emergency response plan is required. Often times it is not the technology that is the hindrance to emergency messaging, but the lack of a plan as to what will happen and who is responsible for taking action.

It reduces printing and paper costs, as well as the waste created by disposing of out-of-date posters and other static signage.

Many signs that are posted by students around campus can be unsightly and require personnel resources to remove the material. Static signage is often outdated and the digital signage provides an easy method to keep these communica-

tions clean and updated. It allows for a much faster dissemination of information across campus by allowing each sign to take advantage of campus-wide information, in addition to any department or college-specific announcements, without the expense of printing.

There is cost savings by having a central team manage the network maintenance with distributed content creation.

This model introduces cost savings on many fronts. First, each department does not have the overhead of maintaining different software and the annual maintenance cost associated with it. With an enterprise installation, the overhead can be distributed resulting in a substantially lower per unit investment. Also with a central team, training and support of the network is part of the team's job responsibilities. This team approach eliminates the knowledge of a system being lost when the employee who installed the system leaves the organization.

One of the main challenges was to convince the various groups of the benefit of a campus-wide network over a smaller, building-specific implementation. Many of the departments did not see how a sign across campus could benefit what they were trying to do with signage in their buildings. In the fall of 2009, Marshall had the opportunity to participate in a free pilot with Blackboard, Inc. In the pilot, Blackboard was testing a hosted ad-supported network model. They worked with the university to identify 11 high traffic locations where as many students as possible would be able to see the signs. These locations included the recreation center and the student center, both of which were already investigating signage solutions for their spaces. During the pilot, a maximum playlist length of 10 minutes was used. Half of the playlist time would be used by Blackboard to run advertising and the other half would be used by the University to run its content. Each department was given permission to update the signs in their areas and central IT worked with communications/marketing to schedule campus-wide information to the network. This distributed content model helped to keep the signage content current without the addition of extra staff to maintain the network. It was quickly realized by the pilot group on campus that they were able to reach a much broader audience because of a sign located outside their domain advertising their event.

As part of the pilot agreement, Marshall allowed Arbitron to conduct a survey that would allow both Blackboard and the university to determine the effectiveness of the signage network. The results of the survey proved that signage efforts at the university were successful. Not only did 96.2 percent of the respondents notice the sign, but also 66.4 percent were able to recall one of the ads.

	TOTAL	Noticed the screen	Watched screen (most or some of the time)	Opportunity to see for 10+ min.	Did not notice screen	Recall any ad	Recall Butterfinger ad	Recall Suzuki ad	Recall T-Mobile ad
TOTAL # of resp	231	222	153	218	9	153	61	57	93
Row %	100.0%	96.2%	66.4%	94.4%	3.8%	66.4%	26.3%	24.5%	40.4%

Arbitron survey. Base: Marshall Students Only

Blackboard ended the pilot in December of 2009; due to a poor economy, they had decided not to pursue the higher education market for their model. At that point, the momentum had been built and it was decided to move quickly and set up another pilot to start in January after winter break. Students knew to watch the signs and the content providers knew how effective the signage network was for them. The university has since purchased a campus-wide license from Four Winds Interactive and is experiencing an increased interest in the signage network. The signage will be used extensively during freshman orientation including a possible digital scavenger hunt and interaction with Twitter to answer questions and get feedback while waiting in line.

Currently there are 10 signs installed across campus from academic areas to recreation centers. Nine additional signs, four that will be touch screen, will be deployed during the summer of 2010 in administrative buildings and new student areas. Future plans include: expanding the network to run as the screen saver on computers in IT-controlled labs; adding signs at remote campuses; and, building out the way-finding aspects of the network.

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