Education Industry Roundtable Focuses on Content Generation and Management

The tipping point for the deployment of digital communications networks in university settings may have come in the aftermath of the tragedy at Virginia Tech in April 2007. Universities scrambled to improve emergency communication on their campuses, and digital technologies are an effective means for disseminating emergency messages. As universities continue to adopt digital signage to meet a broad range of communication needs, it is important to understand how schools manage the digital signage content creation process, including who pays for content production, who controls the content that goes on the screens, and whether the messaging is making an impact.

Universities are using digital signage to meet a variety of communication needs including emergency messaging, event schedules and helping students, staff, and faculty find their way on campus.

In July 2011, Platt Retail Institute (PRI) conducted a roundtable discussion with representatives from four universities that have active digital communications networks. Sponsored by Digital Signage Expo, the wide-ranging conversation was designed to reveal how universities are using digital technologies. PRI's Director and Research Fellow Steven Keith Platt acted as moderator for the roundtable. The panelists represent the University of Denver, Emory University's Rollins School of Public Health, Marshall University, and Wayne State University.

There was universal agreement about the importance of content to the success of digital communications networks. Given that frequent content changes are important to retain viewership, one significant part of the conversation was about the different ways that schools finance content production. While the first costs that come to mind related to a digital signage network deployment likely include software, hardware, installation, and maintenance expenses, sufficient funds for effective content production and management are critical to network success.

According to T.J. Tremblay, Event Technology Coordinator for the University of Denver, because individual departments produce a majority of the content at the university, each department is responsible for paying the costs associated with content production. The exception to this rule is the "library, which pays for the content management software as well as a graphic designer who is paid hourly from a content-specific designated budget" says Tremblay. Other schools take a similar "decentralized" approach such as Marshall University, where departments pay a fee to "cover maintenance, content creation, or whatever else they may need."

The decision to either centralize or decentralize a university network is a critical one. In fact, this is a decision that the roundtable participants said that universities need to make before a network of screens is installed. David Fleig, Project Manager for the Computing and Information Technology Division at Wayne State, said that he found, "It is easier to centralize before several departments adopt their own standards. It is pretty hard to undo what folks have done locally and convert it to a centralized operation after the fact."
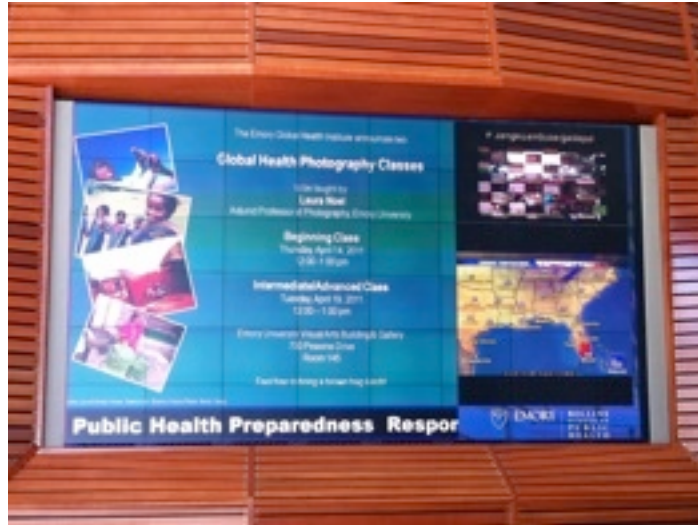
One reason for this is that many schools allocate ownership of screen space like real estate. The centralized, controlling department (such as IT) might own 75 percent of the screen where they can display general content that would be of interest to the entire university as well as school branding, while an individual department may own its own space on the screen where it can insert department-specific information. This gives the more experienced, centralized department a level of quality control, something that would be very difficult in a completely decentralized operation. In most cases, university Marketing or Communications departments are involved in the content development and approval process in order to ensure consistency with branding, look and feel, and messaging.

The panelists noted that they each give varying levels of control to their respective university's departments, but one thing was unanimous. As Mark Conde, Director of Information Services for Emory's Rollins School of Public Health, puts it, "content is absolutely what drives the success of this" and "they'll end up being bored and disliking it if we can't continue to keep it fresh and more sophisticated."

At Emory University's Rollins School of Public Health, screen space is divided between campus-wide messages and school-specific messages.

All four roundtable participants state that their networks are effective as there has been an overall positive qualitative response by students and faculty to the screens. With that said, it is interesting to note that all four universities have only gauged the value of their networks through qualitative student and faculty response, not quantitative research.

PRI will soon be conducting a major research study that quantifies the value derived from a digital signage network on a university campus. (See story on page 6.) Because university content is so varied (emergency information, event promotion, way finding, branding, and more), it adds a level of complexity for network operators. This is one of the reasons why this roundtable and future research have value, both for universities with established digital communications networks and for those considering future deployments.

To see a full transcript of the Roundtable discussion, click here.

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