

Higher Education | Executive Summary Marshall University

"The obvious campus-wide signage solution was Four Winds Interactive."

-Eric S. Himes, Director, Digital Media Services, Marshall University



Challenge

The initial discussions for digital signage at Marshall University were spurred by a campus that wanted an effective way to increase awareness of campus events and improve communications with the campus community.

Marshall University wasn't new to digital signage. In the early 1990s two departments installed digital signage that consisted of wall-mounted TVs controlled by a character generator over the campus' closed circuit television system. Additionally, 11 more signs were deployed in various venues using different solutions over the past decade. After dabbling in different forms of digital signage for 10+ years, it was clear to Marshall that their existing solutions would not address their current messaging needs.

Around the time that Marshall started researching new options, more and more departments and organizations were looking to go digital and the newly elected student body president had even included digital signage in his campaign platform. Digital signage was a hot topic, and it was clear to Marshall's IT team that they needed to act quickly to unify all of the interested parties. They knew the university needed a campus-wide signage solution that was scalable, could share information both departmentally and campus-wide, and ultimately meet the university's needs of improved communications. Other important components were ease of use, interactivity, and the establishment of administrative controls on content and branding.

Solution

The decision to move forward with a campus-wide digital signage solution ultimately came from Marshall University's IT team.

The team kicked off a pilot project with BroadSign so they could test both their audience — students, staff and faculty — and their prospective vendor. *"We knew that several departments wanted digital signage but wanting and doing are two different things. Keeping content fresh and maintained shows commitment, and we also needed to measure our audience's response to the signs and the scalability of our vendor's solution. Generally speaking, we needed 'proof' of everyone's commitment to this major investment,"* states Himes. In addition, the pilot would also allow Marshall to test how the IT department would provide support and how the project would scale.

As part of the pilot program, Marshall commissioned an Arbitron survey, and the results were impressive. It showed that 96% of the respondents noticed the screens, 66% watched the screens most of the time, and 66% could recall a message from the rotation. *"This information was very valuable and helped us to determine that we should continue rolling out after the pilot ended,"* says Himes.

The first official pilot ended in December 2009, and the results proved that digital signage was the direction Marshall should go, but Marshall's I.T. team needed to find a vendor that could meet their growing needs. *"We didn't want to slow the momentum that was building with our audience and the departments so we knew we needed to act fast to find a vendor whose product was a good fit for Marshall. We had heard positive things about Four Winds Interactive's digital signage solution, so we gave them a call,"* says Himes.

Marshall and Four Winds Interactive agreed to a two-month pilot. *"Today, we are pleased to say that Four Winds is the only signage provider used by the University. It was clear to IT that we needed to unify these projects and have a campus-wide signage solution that was scalable and could share information. The obvious campus-wide signage solution was Four Winds Interactive,"* Himes continues. *"During that pilot, the software was great and service from Four Winds Interactive was, and continues to be, outstanding. We are very pleased with the product."*

Part of Marshall's planning also involved the scalability of their network. They knew that the budget set aside for this project 12 years ago could not sustain a growing network of hardware. It was decided that capital money would cover the initial purchase and the central budget would sustain the support costs of the software. As a result, each department that requests a sign is responsible for the purchase of the hardware and the lifecycle of the equipment. To that end, Marshall IT provides a couple of support options to its departments. One option allows the department to pay per sign and for Marshall IT to make sure everything is working, updated and maintained or they have the option to be self-sustaining and do all the work themselves. As part of the IT agreement a percentage of the loop of each screen is required to be campus-wide content.

Benefits

Once the screens went up, Marshall University saw an immediate result: increased communication visibility. *"It was clear by the number of increased requests that students and faculty noticed the signs because they immediately wanted to use them to promote their events and to communicate with viewers,"* explains Himes. *"The extremely quick recognition, in essence overnight, of the solution's effectiveness by the campus community was an unexpected positive result."*

Effective Communication

"The digital signage can reach out so much more effectively to faculty, staff, students and visitors with dynamic rich-media content compared to our previous paper-based communications," states Himes. *"While newsletters and bulletin boards deliver static information, digital signage can make use of many media types to keep the information current and attention grabbing. Content is updated constantly. We have yet to install a sign that is not pulling part of its information dynamically. Events are constantly updated from our scheduling software, 'Resource 25.' Weather is updated from NOAA. Campus news feeds are updated by RSS from University Communications and the student newspaper. Library hours are updated from a SQL database. If it can be updated automatically it is. The distribution of content creation across campus has provided a system that is up-to-date with fresh and current information,"* says Himes.

Improved Cost Savings

By having a central team manage the network maintenance, each department does not have the overhead of maintaining different software and the annual maintenance cost associated with that. Distributed content creation allows Marshall to keep content fresh. Each request is presented with two options: either provide predesigned announcements or pay a standard rate for IT to create it for you. Most departments design their own material, which is then scheduled across campus.

More Consistent Branding

"The Four Winds Interactive digital signage solution provides an easy way to communicate a consistent brand identity throughout campus. We've seen an increase in brand recognition because we can now effectively integrate brand strategies and messaging at every point of contact for consistent and continuous messaging," states Himes. "Before the current system, one of the student organizations installed a small lounge in the business school, which included a digital sign that was running MS PowerPoint. The slides had no oversight which resulted in improper use of logos and other brand elements. With the current system, all branding is done inside the template and approved by University Communications. This approach leaves the digital signs free from branding problems. With the various departments on campus wanting to install their own systems, the campus-wide system provided a sort of preventative maintenance step to protect the brand," he continues.

Improved Recruiting

While it's difficult for Marshall University to pinpoint the value of digital signage in their recruiting they do believe the signs have provided an updated look to the buildings, which may sway some students, or their parents. *"If nothing else, the signs can help visitors see the comprehensive list of activities on campus as they take a tour. This is a powerful tool to showcase what the university offers," states Himes.*

The image shows two digital signage screens. The left screen displays the website www.marshalldining.com and encourages users to follow Marshall Dining on Facebook and Twitter. The right screen displays a 'FOOD COURT' sign with operating hours (Monday-Friday 10:30am-6:30pm) and a 'Cash Equivalency' logo. Below these screens is a 'South Charleston Classroom Listing' table.

Course	CRN	Section	Day & Time	Building	Room	Instructor
Counseling						
COUN 608 Practicum	1947	231	R 4:30 PM - 6:45 PM	KANAC	203	Andrew Burck
COUN 607 PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC APPROACHES	1944	231	M 7:00 PM - 9:30 PM	KANAC	203	Lon Elson
COUN 607 Coun Tech & Human Relat	1944	231	M 7:00 PM - 9:30 PM	KANAC	203	Lon Elson
COUN 604 Group Coun & Tech	1938	231	S 8:00 AM - 6:00 PM	KANAC	103	Harry Dyer
COUN 636 Couple Counseling	1953	231	S 8:00 AM - 5:00 PM	KANGC	135	Heather Hagerman
COUN 673 Coun Child Adol Parents	1956	231	S 8:00 AM - 5:00 PM	KANAC	105	Heidi O'Toole
COUN 605 Theory Prac Human Appr	1940	231	T 7:00 PM - 9:30 PM	KANAC	203	Andrew Burck
COUN 608 ORGANIZATION & DEV OF COUNSELING	1947	231	R 4:30 PM - 6:45 PM	KANAC	203	Andrew Burck
Cultural Studies-Humanities						
CULS 550 Ethics	1984	231	W 7:00 PM - 9:50 PM	KANGC	323	Barbara Nicholson
Curr & Inst Reading Educa						
CRG 102 Seminar II	1723	231	R 4:30 PM - 6:45 PM	KANAC	204	Terrence Stange
CRG 054 Aligning Assess with Instruct	1722	231	W 4:30 PM - 6:45 PM	KANAC	204	Terrence Stange

Marshall University believes much of their success came from the time and effort they put into planning the rollout of a campus-wide solution and the processes they have in place to maintain the solution now that it's live. If you're embarking on a digital signage initiative, here are Himes' comments on the process:

Consider a pilot

"The pilot will provide much of the information needed in the planning process such as: Which department is going to be responsible for the maintenance of the system? How will the system be funded? Who will provide the content, and who will approve and schedule the content? What cooperation is needed between departments? And which IT systems will the signs need access to?"

Go campus-wide

"One of our biggest 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 network across campus could benefit what they were trying to do with signage in their individual buildings. 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."

Content is king

"Finally, as the cliché goes, 'Content is king,' and one of our biggest priorities is to ensure fresh content, make sure it looks good and know your dwell times. If the digital signs are always showing the same information then the audience will quickly tune it out and the investment has lost its effectiveness. Knowing before you deploy where the content will come from, what department is in charge of content, and how other departments will contribute has helped with Marshall's continued success."

What's Next?

Marshall University is not done yet. They have plans to expand the network to their two remote campuses and deploy the tools to screensavers of computers controlled by Marshall IT. They also plan to research different ways to generate revenue with the signage because the Four Winds system will allow tracking of advertising campaigns. In addition, they have plans to develop interactive content with mobile devices.

"The students, faculty and staff love the signs. I usually receive 10 - 12 new message requests a week from various groups and the number of different groups represented continues to grow. We started the first pilot with 11 signs and now have 30 signs around campus. Departments and Colleges continue to see the value of the Four Winds Interactive signage network." - Eric Himes, Director, Digital Media Services, Marshall University

About Marshall University

Located in West Virginia, Marshall University serves more than 14,000 undergraduate and graduate students. The university was founded in 1837, has three campuses and 40 buildings and covers more than 100 acres.