

Show Me What's for Dinner

Making Digital Signage Work in Community Applications

Jeff Pepper

President and CEO
Touchtown Inc.

201-B Ann Street
Oakmont, PA 15139

1-866-TOUCHTOWN
www.touchtown.us
inquiry@touchtown.us

Digital signs are popping up everywhere. There were 1.1 million digital displays shipped in 2008, an increase of 37% in the last year alone, according to MultiMedia Intelligence. By 2012 the market is expected to double again, to 2.3 million displays per year.

Nearly all of these digital signs are supported by advertising budgets, and their primary purpose is to deliver commercial messages, either exclusively or as an accompaniment to entertainment content.

But while these commercial applications in stores, airport terminals, restaurants and bars have the highest visibility, there is another, hidden world of digital signage. Community digital signage serves a wide variety of organizations, clubs, and residential communities, but unless you're a member of one of these groups or visiting someone who's a member, you'll never see these signs. It's a huge market segment, and nearly invisible.

For example, consider senior living communities, possibly the largest component of the community digital signage segment. These are places where older adults live together and include a broad spectrum of services, from skilled nursing facilities that serve the elderly and infirm to high end retirement resorts that cater to active, healthy and well-to-do seniors. Believe it or not, there are over 44,000 senior living communities in the United States alone, serving 4.7 million full time residents. Add another 4 million people who live in congregate care (senior high rises) and personal care homes and you have a population of nearly 9 million people, all of whom really want to know what's for dinner, who's having a birthday, where the tai chi class is being held, and what time the bus leaves for the mall.

Many other types of communities have similar needs. Think of all the places where people live together or visit together regularly. Churches and synagogues. Schools. Summer camps. Senior centers. Veterans' homes. Correctional facilities. Large government buildings. Military bases. All of them can benefit from digital signage, but their needs are unique.

Special Requirements

With such a large potential market, you'd think there would be a dizzying variety of hardware and software solutions to serve it. But it turns out that very few digital signage tools are designed for community applications. Let's consider a few of the special needs of this market segment.

Focus on Activities

The primary difference between community applications and commercial applications is just that: the focus is on keeping people informed, not on selling them stuff. For example, a retirement home resident is intensely interested in the daily program of events in their community, and that information changes every hour or so. There's a bridge game in the card room every Tuesday at 2pm. So the announcement for the

bridge game has to start showing, say, at midnight that Tuesday, stay in the rotation until the game is over, then go away until the following Tuesday. Unlike commercial signage where the same ads run in a steady rotation, community information must be kept current and relevant to the viewer's immediate needs, and announcements must be only shown when they're wanted.

Integration with Print and Web and Personal TV

Digital signage is not enough to satisfy a community's need for information delivery. For example, consider a church's activity calendar. Clearly that activity calendar is better displayed on an attractive LCD screen instead of on a cluttered bulletin board in the hallway. But that same information also needs to be printed on hardcopy for parishioners to pick up and take home with them. It needs to appear on the church's website. And the church secretary needs to be able to email it as a PDF to people on their email distribution list. So we're looking at three or four different applications that all rely on the same underlying information.

Residential communities have an additional requirement: delivery on personal TVs in the resident's living quarters. These in-house TV systems are similar to digital signage but have different technical requirements, because the program needs to be produced as analog video format and inserted into an existing cable or satellite TV bundle for distribution throughout a building or campus.

Most commercial digital signage products aren't much help at all here. Sure, they can help you create an attractive slide show for your LCD screen. But if you want a calendar, you've got to go to another application, say Microsoft Publisher. If you want to deliver on an in-house TV channel, you'll need a specialized product for that. And if you want to deliver on the web, you'll need yet another application. Now you've got multiple methods for delivering the same information on different media, and we all know that's a recipe for trouble!

What's the answer? Look for a tool that keeps activity information in an underlying database and delivers it in whatever form is required. With such a tool, you enter the information once, and deliver it in a variety of ways: digital signage, hardcopy calendar, emailable PDF file, and on in-room TV screens.

High Quality from Unskilled Content Creators

This may sound obvious, but you generally cannot find a graphic artist on the staff of a retirement home, a correctional institution, or a church. And it's equally unlikely to find any of these organizations willing to pay a graphic design consultant to maintain their content for them.

This is why so many community digital signage applications look so terrible. The customer starts off with the best of intentions and purchases a set of tools to create their application. Perhaps it's a low-end solution like a blue-screen character generator, or a moderate-cost solution like PowerPoint running on a dedicated PC, or a high-end solution like Scala. But regardless of the tools purchased, the end result is always the same: the quality starts off at a tolerable level, and degrades slowly (or not so slowly) over time as the staff replaces the original content bit by bit. The original content which was created by professional designers turns into poorly designed content created on the fly by the working staff. Brown text on a gray background, childish clip art, cluttered design, flashing text, there's no end to the ways that digital signage can be done badly.

Rather than blaming the customer, though, let's put the blame on the tools. You simply cannot expect a school receptionist, a retirement home activity director, or a church secretary to have the graphic design skills needed to create a professional looking show.

The answer is not to tell the customer they need to hire a designer – that's likely to insult them and threaten to break their budget. Instead, find a content management system that automates the design process. Touchtown Digital Signage, for example, does this nicely with its SmartLayout, which uses keyword matching and thousands of predefined templates to automatically create really attractive slides with no design effort whatsoever by the customer. Your customer gets a guaranteed level of design quality regardless of who creates the content.

Enterprise Integration

Most communities are not standalone, but are part of a larger organization. Your local Catholic church belongs to a diocese, that assisted living facility is part of a national chain, your high school is one of a dozen schools in a district, and so on. If you're an integrator you'd like to sell to the entire organization. And if you're a member of that organization, you want a solution that integrates local content with content created by the home office.

Let's consider an example. Say you're the marketing director for a 100-location chain of assisted living and skilled nursing facilities. You want an attractive digital signage display in the lobby of each facility, to inform residents about daily activities, dining menus, and so on. But because you're the marketing director, you also care intensely about keeping occupancy rates high, so you want to insert marketing content in that lobby show too.

Things get complicated, though, because you want to vary your marketing message from region to region, and from one type of property to another. You want to deliver one 60-second video message to assisted living facilities west of the Mississippi, and another message to skilled nursing facilities in the Northeast.

So for your digital signage application, you'll want a content management product that lets you easily create a blend of content – some from the local site, and some from the home office. Avoid "point solutions" that don't have that ability to blend from multiple sources.

Low Cost

Because community digital signage is focused on serving members or residents, we've found a great deal of resistance to carrying advertising. Here at Touchtown, we've installed many hundreds of our digital signage and in-house television systems in communities across North America, serving both for-profit and not-for-profit customers. Fewer than 5% of them carry paid advertising! The other 95% are completely non-commercial, and are devoted entirely to showing content of direct interest to the viewers.

Because community digital signage customers have little or no appetite for advertising, that means the cost model is the traditional "buy it for money" one, where the customer writes a check to pay for the system without much expectation of recouping their costs from ad revenue. And that means price is very, very important. You'll want to find a system that satisfies the customer's needs, but at a price point they can tolerate.

What You Don't Need

So far we've listed some of the unique requirements of community digital signage: powerful scheduling tools, integration with print and web delivery, automated design, enterprise integration, and low cost.

Fortunately, there are some things you don't need. First, because content management is done by non-professionals, you don't need really powerful design tools. As

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long as your content looks attractive, uncluttered and nicely designed, you don't need to invest in technology that goes way beyond that. For example, you probably don't need to carry a live TV feed in a window, or create custom screen layouts from scratch, or do complex animation, fades, pans, and so on.

Second, you don't need an advertising content manager, because you won't be running many ads. If you do run advertising, it will probably be a simple "this program has been brought to you by..." sponsorship slide, or a video clip in every 12th rotation. These sorts of ads are easily scheduled in the same way you schedule activities or dining menus, and don't require a sophisticated ad manager.

Making the Decision

As you might expect, here at Touchtown we understand the requirements of community digital signage very well, and our Touchtown's Digital Signage product is precisely geared to meet the needs of customers in that market segment. We have a powerful, easy to use content management system, a very inexpensive delivery system, and great customer care and professional services to make sure you're successful. We also have a 100% customer retention rate – no Touchtown digital signage customer has ever discontinued using our service!

Contact us to learn more. And whatever your decision, best wishes for a successful community digital signage program.



Jeff Pepper is the founder, President and CEO of Touchtown Inc. (www.touchtown.us), a leading provider of technology to bring communities together. Touchtown offers an integrated suite of products: Touchtown TV+ (in-house television), Touchtown Digital Signage, Touchtown Calendars, Touchtown Web Portal, and Touchtown Companion (safety communications).