ENGAGING WITH DIGITAL SIGNAGE

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It is time to resurrect a bit of 20th century nostalgia to make a 21st century point. In the 1980’s AT&T used the catch phrase “it’s time to reach out and touch someone” to illustrate how their phones connected people to people. This clear message and call to action effectively transcends the years and by repeating the phrase today makes one think of who you need to call or contact. Back then it was all about keeping in touch person to person. Fast forward and today the concept of connectivity between people has expanded exponentially. To be certain the smart phone is the modern embodiment of the old analog telephone handset, but it is digital signage and its iterations that have transported us into the realm of a fully connected world with the “internet of things” all fed by big data.

This goes far beyond basic person to person conversations and introduces multi-path communication, information mining, and collaboration. For the most part we are now able to engage when we want and where we want, in addition to how we want in a wide variety of formats. No longer do we just observe, we actively engage. Engagement is the process of being involved in an activity. It refers to being occupied or busy, even greatly interested. In the end, it is a commitment to act. Interaction is accomplished through a combination of engaging information that is both informative and entertaining, leaving the viewers wanting more. This may be as simple as having viewers access or download additional information based on their interests piqued by digital signage content or much more complex. In a sense, the process can be self-perpetuating and while you may pause or even change devices, it never truly needs to end.

Digital data technologies facilitate the transmission and flow of information and diverse types and sizes of displays are literally the windows to the world that allow us to instantaneously access information but there is more to the story. Let’s look at how we engage. Today the opportunity to engage is always there in one form or another and three technologies facilitate that engagement: interactive touch screen technology, beacon technology, and NFC technology.

Interactive touch screens:

The concept of interactivity goes far beyond simply touching a screen. Ultimately this is all about connectivity with desired information triggered by the viewer/user. Speaking of connectivity, estimates show that more than 26 billion devices will be connected to the cloud by 2020, five times the 4.9 billion devices currently connected!

Interactivity resides at a level that has become part of our everyday lives. We are coming to expect each screen we see to be a touch screen. In digital signage it provides a fast and intuitive interface for users and can greatly simplify interactions and transactions. Through interactivity, people feel naturally connected, a strong emotion that dominates many people’s lives. From a digital signage network perspective, we can more easily educate and inform the viewers and in more sophisticated systems, offer more accessible options. The viewer can literally choose their own path. In short, they are in touch and in control.
Interactive signage solutions can personalize the experience. They determine preferences that can be used to establish deeper relationships and by design, focus information related only to the products and services in which a viewer/participant is interested. Interactivity delivers dynamic content that can benefit all parties involved. From consumers to marketers, to network operators, it is a win/win/win situation. And, most importantly, network operators are provided with a solid revenue base from which to grow their network and better serve their customers. With a wide range of options from mobile to kiosk to videowalls with proven ROI, it is no wonder that interactivity is growing by leaps and bounds.

**Beacon technology**

Beacon technology speaks to the core of connectivity. It is used to trigger content or messaging on mobile devices as a user simply passes through an environment. A beacon typically uses Bluetooth Low Energy (BLE) proximity sensing to transmit a unique identifier transmitted over short distances (up to 100 meters) and picked up by a compatible app or operating system on a mobile device. The identifier is used to determine the device’s physical location, track customers, or trigger a location-based action on the device such as a check-in on social media or a push notification. BLE is ideal for simple applications requiring small periodic transfers of data.

There are two common types of beacons. iBeacon provides for BLE and triggers Apple mobile devices to perform an action when near an iBeacon device. Eddystone is Google’s open format beacon technology, that functions similarly to iBeacon. Both represent APIs to develop beacon devices, and beacon applications that can receive messaging and perform actions. Beacons offer the potential to target a customer at the most opportune moment to influence buying decisions. Retailers can provide personalized experiences to customers. Brands are no longer limited by shelf displays and point of sale campaigns to communicate their messages. Brands can extend past the sales floor to deliver personalized outreach. Customers often pay more attention to their mobile devices, than anything else around them!
Near field communications (NFC)

Near field communication (NFC), is a form of contactless communication between devices like smartphones or tablets. A user can wave the smartphone over a NFC compatible device to send information without needing to touch the devices together or go through multiple steps setting up a connection. Also, NFC is an opt-in experience for the user, making it a more user-friendly technology (whereas beacon technology pushes info on the user, users must choose to interact with NFC). NFC technology is becoming much more popular in the USA and around the world because it is both fast and convenient.

The NFC Standard maintains interoperability between different wireless communication methods. The NFC Forum enforces strict standards that manufacturers must meet when designing NFC compatible devices. Compatibility is the key to the growth of NFC as a popular payment and data communication method.

The technology behind NFC allows an active device or reader to create a radio frequency signal that communicates with another NFC compatible device. Passive devices, such as the NFC tag in smart posters, store information and communicate with the reader but do not actively read other devices. Peer-to-peer communication through two active devices is also a possibility with NFC. This allows both devices to send and receive information.

Both businesses and individuals benefit from NFC technology. According to the NFC Forum, “By integrating credit cards, subway tickets, and paper coupons all into one device, a customer can board a train, pay for groceries, redeem coupons or store loyalty points, and even exchange contact information all with the wave of a smartphone. Faster transaction times mean less waiting in line and happier customers. Fewer physical cards to carry around means the customer is less likely to lose one or have it stolen.” As the technology grows, more NFC compatible smartphones will be available, and more stores will offer NFC card readers for customer convenience.

Another benefit of engagement is analytics. Interactive content engages your audience more directly and more fully, encouraging feedback and participation, while increasing productivity. The “holy grail” of digital signage is enhancing the viewer experience and achieving behavior modification through a call to action. While those are the goals, there are varying degrees of success which depends upon the content and environment and analytical measurement is the only way to gauge the level of that accomplishment.

The most direct method of analytics/measurement is interactivity. The system can directly know if you have followed the call to action or not. It will know what content you have interacted with, and the path you took to get there. It can also gauge how much time you have spent interacting with the screen. If we pair that with video analytics, we have the most information we can reasonably harvest.
Ultimately, interactive signage solutions of all types can play a huge role in determining ROI because they enable the direct measurement of viewer/participant response. It provides network operators and marketers with detailed information on the number of people that view specific content and engage with it. As one noted subject matter expert opines, “With advertiser ROI and real measurements in hand, solid pricing strategies and models can be developed. This will open the door for digital signage providers to develop industry standards and implement performance-based business models similar to those that are now prevalent online.”

CMS the backbone of engagement

The content management system (CMS) is the “brains” behind the scene. It is the network operation program that facilitates the key elements of engagement (i.e. right time, place, location, etc.) It is the CMS that is the interface that manages, schedules, and distributes the content that we see on a digital signage network. It connects the proverbial dots network-wide for interactivity, beacons, and NFC. The final product arrives at the display and then, in a best-case scenario, the content motivates the viewer to interact and engage with the message.

On the surface, CMS programs do similar things but….it is imperative to understand that they do these tasks in diverse ways. Using Capital Networks as an example, we can see that one size does not fit all. It all begins with the name of their platform, Audience. The term actually means participation and engagement, but it goes beyond that. Audience is available on multiple platforms to accommodate the needs of network operators. Capital Networks offers a variety of deployment options including System on Chip (SOC), Android, and Windows solutions. They focus on all three of the engagement options we mentioned. They are one of the few to offer on premises as well as software as a service (SaaS) as a choice. They encapsulate this with a 30-year history and a three years 24/7 service and support feature with no hidden costs. From their core they understand the concept of engagement.
Speaking of engagement, 2017 marked the year that digital signage has gone mainstream and it will be increasingly so in the coming years. It is now widespread, and many resellers and end users alike have dedicated people and teams focused on the segment. Why you ask? It is because digital signage has broken the boundaries and constraints of communication. It is not just about what you see and hear but what you can do with it as you engage. It is no longer limited to an advertising medium in retail or quick serve restaurants. Three of the fastest growing verticals are in corporations, education, and healthcare with employee, student, and patient facing networks and communications. Digital signage has rapidly evolved into providing an overall set of communication tools. If big data is the raw material and the CMS is the manager/distributor of information, then digital signage in one form or another, is becoming one of the primary vehicles to deliver a message. Interactive touchscreens, beacons, and NFC technology allow you to do something with the information. Now reach out and touch someone.