

INTERACTIVITY

By Simon Robinson, Editor, AKA.tv

Interactive digital signage represents a massive shift in the digital signage industry, one that is likely to increase its commercial potential exponentially and one that will allow the screen to become an information tool to the consumer, not an obtrusive piece of unwanted furniture. Traditional signage takes a single message and disseminates it to as many parties as possible; interactive signage takes a dynamic message and tailors it to one specific audience member.

On a practical level, this shift necessitates the creation of an entirely new body of message content. “It has to be entirely different,” said Nikk Smith, director of creative agency Pixel Inspiration. When you have someone’s focus, you have to present much more detail.”

“Interactive communications allows the retailer to target their messages to a specific time, place and customer,” said Wayne Ruttle, vice president of sales for ADFLOW Networks. “It’s not just a static one-message-fits-all anymore. Now you can talk to customers on a one-to-one basis, and tailor that message to a particular buying pattern, demographic and time. And interactivity gives the customer a voice and a means to communicate back to the retailer. “Being able to interact really gets the customer involved. And when that customer is exposed to a message personally customised to what they’re looking for, when they’re looking for it, the odds of making the sale increase dramatically.”



YDreams New Toyota Showroom, Lisbon

For an interaction to take place between a customer and a digital sign, a tool must act as an intermediary and at present three methods have emerged so far: integrated touchscreens, standalone kiosks and handheld devices. Touch is the simplest and most effortless of interactions so far. A well-designed touchscreen interface can be completely self-explanatory, easily navigated by even the least tech-savvy consumers and is ideal for a number of interactive applications.

Alternatively, the addition of one or more kiosks to a digital signage network allows an unprecedented amount of control over the experience, both from the business and consumer standpoint. The flexibility offered by kiosks means any number of customer data points can be captured. For instance, the ease of adding a keyboard makes it possible to capture information that would be cumbersome to enter on a touchscreen. Wireless networking also makes it possible to separate the kiosk from the screen, allowing for some very creative applications.

One of the most exciting frontiers in digital signage is the potential for interaction between screens and mobile devices — and there is no mobile device more popular than the cellular phone.

Several companies have launched marketing initiatives built around SMS interaction, that is, systems where consumers are urged to send a text message to a certain address. That message might prompt any number of replies — a custom message displayed on a digital sign, the purchase of a digital product or the instant delivery of an “m-coupon.” “This allows retailers to communicate targeted messages with customers while they’re in the store. The possibilities are tremendous,” said David Roscoe, president of ADFLOW Networks. “Imagine a customer in a mall. She could be walking past a clothing store and receive a phone coupon customized specifically for her from that store, at that time. It’s very effective.”

It becomes even more powerful when it is coupled with live video customer assistance. In a perfect world, each retail environment would have an expert on hand, ready to answer consumer questions. This was how it worked not long ago, when life was simpler and choices were fewer. Today, “an expert in every store” is simply not an option. There are too many locations, too many products, too many options and too few qualified experts. This is a problem, but one that technology is beginning to address. The growth of broadband penetration, coupled with the reduction in the price of digital screens is making it possible to find expert advice at the touch of a button.

For several years, pundits and analysts have heralded the coming age of the cellular phone as all-in-one personal information and payment device — a replacement for the wallet, one that not only makes phone calls but keeps track of appointments and contact lists, and takes the place of debit and credit cards although the latter has not yet come to fruition.

Last year, SeeSaw announced that it had added built-in functionality to its digital signage network to allow clients to deliver interactive campaigns targeted at cell phones. Customers send a text message to a number shown on screen and receive some sort of perk in return — an “m-coupon,” perhaps, or access to exclusive content.

For instance, a retailer could run a contest by showing a series of questions that the customer answers with his cell phone; if he gets enough of them correct, an m-coupon is automatically delivered to the phone. That coupon can display an actual barcode on the phone’s screen that can be scanned at check-out. Frank Olea, whose company Olea Exhibits/Displays Inc. recently built cellular-enabled kiosks for Sears and H&R Block, said the adoption of cellular interactivity could be just as beneficial for retailers and deployers as for the public.

“Using my cell phone to buy tickets, pay bills, wire money, receive coupons and other transactions will enable the deployer of kiosks to do it on a much more cost-effective basis, because they’ll eliminate expensive items like cash handling equipment,” he said. And if “American Idol” is any indication — the show received 64 million text-message votes during its fifth season — customers are already comfortable with the idea of using their phone to make things happen.

Hardware and software, make it possible to keep a team of experts in one location and “telecommute” them into the retail environment. “Live-assist” devices also multiply the work that an expert can do. In the case of STAPLES Business Depot Canada, two employees can provide service to 10 locations. This not only greatly increases customer service value, it creates major personnel cost savings.

How live-assist works: imagine walking up to any kiosk in any department of the store you are visiting. You select what language you want to be served in and the machine routes you to a live, on-screen expert. That expert can answer your questions, work with you on design, personalise the service and actually close the sale. Once you get the product home and are trying to figure out how to put it together, you can go online and get that live on-screen expert help in your home. This changes the whole nature of retailer-customer relations, from one driven largely by price to one driven largely by the level of service provided.

Revolution is waiting in the wings and Interaction is going to transform the lives of both customers and the retailers. With mobile becoming the key to opening up an interactive world, the shopping experience should become much easier with expert information on hand to guide you through the maze of products that are on offer to us in the 21st century. For retailers, or indeed any company that needs to promote products and services, interaction will help to reduce costs and speed up the buying process. All retailers want large footfall but they need to ensure that the sale process works efficiently and interaction will definitely help that process.

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