



Making the Leap into Electronic Digital Signage

Is this dynamic medium the next horizon for print service providers?

By Mike Antoniak

They're cropping up everywhere, it seems: attention-grabbing LCD displays, panels, and systems that are shouting for attention wherever consumers meet products and services.

All falling under the umbrella of electronic digital – “dynamic” – signage, these systems share two major common features: They all provide changeable content and do so in a digitally delivered electronic format. Some would argue that they also are capable of producing graphics that are more dramatic and more eye-catching than their print counterparts – but that, like a printed graphic, is largely dependent upon quality of the system's components and its installation.

The question for providers of wide-format graphics is: To what degree does electronic digital signage merit your attention? It's a growing market, to be sure, and most industry consultants will indicate that electronic digital displays probably represent the next frontier for advertising and promotional graphics. But the over-arching concern

for any shop should be whether you have the mindset and resources to make it a viable venture.

Print service providers already have the customer base likely to benefit from electronic digital displays and signage. Capitalizing on those relationships, however, requires a total commitment to a market that's driven by tools and technologies likely to be quite new to you and your staff. If you choose to bring this in-house, you'll be making a decision sure to have an impact on your current company – not only on its product offerings but also for its entire business structure, from staff and skill-set training to marketing and resources in general.

The four print shops that follow all have experienced varying degrees of success with electronic digital signage and display work. They've chosen to treat the medium and its technology not as a threat to their print work, but as a potential additional revenue stream, exploring how they can best derive an advantage to their business.

Visual Impressions is striving to position itself as "not just a graphics or digital signage provider," says Beth Osborne. "I want our customers to think of us as their merchandising-solutions company." At left: LCD panels serve as menus and visual enticers at Papa Johns at Charlotte Douglas International Airport (the first airport site for the pizza chain); Visual Impressions was responsible for the hardware, software, content (which was created with Papa John's corporate), and installation.

Hitting the mark: Visual Impressions

"Right now there are a lot of players in the electronic digital signage business," observes Beth Osborne, director of marketing for Visual Impressions in Charlotte, North Carolina (visualimpressions.net). "They're not all offering the same thing, or doing it as well."

Her company, with its roots in the wide-format graphics business, is one which has apparently gotten digital signage right. Osborne happily reports that dynamic-signage services now represent 25 percent of her company's revenues. "Hopefully, by the end of this year it will represent even more," she says.

It's a welcome return on the "substantial capital investment" the company made in this venture. "We invested well over half a million dollars in R&D to launch the product," reports Osborne (her figure includes servers and software). "This could be a barrier for entry into the market for those who may think it's easy to begin offering digital signage."

With its commitment, the company is certainly doing its part to seed new business and explore new applications for digital signage. This past summer, Visual Impressions ran an experiment at New York's Citi Field, using countertop digital photo frames as the window for P-O-S promotions that fans couldn't ignore. Another field test demonstrated the effectiveness of interactive kiosks with touch-screen LCD panels to allow patrons in restaurants to easily retrieve nutrition information for any items on the menu.

To date, though, most of Visual Impressions' sales have been in digital signage's established norms: networked panels driven by media-players or servers and content creation/management software. "So far, our niche with the digital signage has been in the fast and casual restaurant and cafeteria market," says Osborne. "They have an existing need for this kind of solution."

Four years ago, she says, Visual Impressions was primarily known as a large-format print operation when owners John Forgach and Brian McKenna first began discussing growing their business in a new direction, on the advice of a friend. "They had brought in a colleague who had a technology background rather than a printing background," she explains. "He was very forward thinking and suggested it might be good to diversify in this direction."

About that same time, one of the company's established clients, Compass Group – Charlotte-based specialists in food service management – posed initial inquiries about introducing digital menu boards in some locations.

Soon, Visual Impressions was also in the digital signage business. Ward Wentzel, who first suggested the venture, assumed responsibility for designing the software to run the system, and art director Doug Elliott focused on the visual content that drives the systems.

"All our solutions are turnkey and completely self-contained," says Osborne. "We do everything from building the computers and servers to running the system and developing custom software and installing the monitors."

Site assessment, she says, is critical to developing and deploying an effective digital signage system: "We'll visit the site and look at the architecture and existing signage. That's the best way to decide on the proper placement and size of the screens. We want to make sure those screens are located in the right place, where they will be comfortably and easily viewed by someone standing in line."

Each system is designed to order, based on that assessment and client goals. As far as components go, Visual Impressions cherry picks components from several vendors, combining the best of what's available, based on the latest technology and, of course, the client's budget.

"There's a lot of hand-holding, we have to do a lot of explaining to clients about these projects," she says.

Take LCD panels, for instance: "People don't always understand why the ones we use are so expensive. They think they can just go out and buy any low-priced flatscreen monitor at the electronics store. We have to show them how the requirements in a digital sign system are different and more demanding."

For most systems, Visual Impressions provides initial content development. The software for clients to update and manage content, and training, are included in the bundle. The company's expertise and guidance helped them deliver effective content.

"What really works for restaurants are very crisp and engaging images – it has to look like something you'd want to eat," she offers as an example. The text, easily read info on price, and a terse description of the menu item should be fixed as images move in and out or are rotated to create motion that catches the eye, she says.

The need for those visuals plays to the recognized strengths of providers of large-format graphics. "It's our ability to know how to really manipulate an image, to do color correction, and understand what's going to look best and what works on the printing side that makes the transition to digital signage easier," she says. "If your existing customers have the need to make a switch from static to digital signage *you* can be the one to help them there. Many of our customers are now using plenty of both in their operations."

All of which has Osborne encouraging her clients to see the company in a new way. "I'm trying to position Visual Impressions as not just a graphics or digital signage provider," she closes, "With all we now offer, I want our customers to think of us as their merchandising-solutions company."