



Evolving doors

Although digital signage is a rapidly evolving sector that has the potential to open doors to a new range of opportunities, not many sign-makers venture into this area. **Brenda Hodgson** finds out why



Digital signage is becoming one of the most powerful sources of display, whether for advertising, promotional, information or way-finding purposes, and has the potential to open doors to a whole range of new business opportunities for sign-makers.

For example, digital out-of-home (DOOH) advertising accounted for 32 percent of total out-of-home advertising spend in 2015 and is set to rise to 40 percent in 2017—according to an Advertising Association/Warc Expenditure report.

In addition, PwC's *UK Entertainment and Media Outlook 2016-2020* predicts DOOH advertising will overtake traditional spend in 2020 as smarter, interactive billboards become mainstream, with a growth rate of 15 percent a year.

However, while some traditional sign-makers have taken digital on board alongside their other offerings, many are still showing some reluctance to engage with this rapidly evolving technology.

Through the keyhole

Crystal Display Systems (CDS), based in Rochester, Kent, is a leading designer, distributor, and value added re-seller of flat panel display solutions, including industrial TFT LCDs, retail displays, translucent displays, touch screens, and video walls. I asked managing director, Chris Bartram, to shed some light on this conundrum.

"It's quite clear that sign-makers are looking to move into the digital space as their customers and vertical markets are demanding this," says Bartram, adding: "The problem is that many of them do not have the expertise internally and see it as a risky investment. As not only do they not understand exactly where the market is going or how large it will be, but also how they will support their clients, as it is clearly different from print and fabricated signage.

"To overcome this, the solution for them is to use expert companies like CDS that can both understand the end clients'

For a national roll-out for Puma into some national sports shop chains, Crystal Display Systems combined digital signage with transparent displays to create a 'wow' factor that increased sales as it attracted visitors to the shops to the Puma brand

requirements and match the correct digital display solutions for that specific application, as well as supporting sign-makers with technical and after sale support.

"The advantage of this is that the sign-makers can keep their fixed costs down and only pay for what is delivered by the expert. Furthermore, using an expert company like CDS gives the traditional sign-maker a better chance of closing such projects, as the end client acknowledges the expertise of the partnership and gains that all important confidence that the sign-maker and its partner can deliver."

Bartram also points out that the benefit for sign-makers in moving into digital signage is largely that it opens up a new rapid growing part of the sign market sector that they cannot afford to ignore.

"They must have the expertise and understanding of the implications of digital signage, where it is going in the future, and what related technology is needed to

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support the actual display as this is critical too," he emphasises.

Speaking of potential pitfalls, Bartram notes that key stumbling blocks are frequently underestimating the importance of site surveys, and insufficient understanding of the actual short and long-term requirements of the client as well as any potential upgrades they would like in the future.

"Whether they want local or remote update, for example, is also critical as to the infrastructure that will be required," explains Bartram, adding: "As there are so many options one has to be careful of the type and size of display. Does it have a built in PC or Android player? Will it be in high ambient conditions, which would mean that a sunlight readable display is needed? Could it be vandalised? In which case a vandal resistant screen may be

needed. Does it need to be touch interactive and if so how many touch points are needed?"

For digital signage novices, Bartram recommends using local update if possible, so that content can be easily updated by simply inserting a USB drive and then removing, as the costs and infrastructure required are much simpler.

"Clearly if a large organisation wants to update content remotely to a large number of sites then a more complex solution would be required," he says, adding: "But CDS can support clients with this also with an easy to use cloud based solution."

For example, Crystal Display's new Touch CMS provides end-users with the opportunity to engage and interact with their audience in just three easy steps.

Bartram outlines the process: "First, you

Crystal Display Systems' slimline digital signage poster, with its elegant rounded edges and aluminium bezel finish, offers an excellent flexible solution that can be updated locally via simple USB drive, or remotely via LAN, WiFi or 3G



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This signboard created by Rainbow Signs incorporates an updatable digital LED information panel

create your custom layouts with our user friendly software that requires no knowledge of coding to use. Then deploy the content from your PC direct to your touch screens in a matter of seconds. Now all that is left to do is touch as you let your content do the talking about your brand, company, service or product."

Door jam

Lincoln-based Allen Signs is a well-established, family run business with over 50 years of experience and service to the sign industry, providing complete sign, display and vehicle livery solutions from concept and design through to final installation and maintenance.

While recognising the potential opportunities offered by digital signage, the company has experienced a number of challenges in breaking into this sector, as director David Allen explains: "Digital signage has been around for some time now and there are an increasing number of companies who offer products, from the smallest plug-and-play system through to large screens. Such companies have generally come from an IT based business and have offered a 'white label' service to sign companies who are willing to 'give it a go'.

"We haven't found it easy to break into this segment and have tried a couple of partners so far. We've found offering this type of product takes you into a different arena from conventional signage as an element of networking knowledge and the ability to make up a presentation are required. However, some partners, including our current one, will do a certain amount of that for you and provide a technical support service on your behalf, which

takes away some of the issues of providing digital signage."

The company also found a degree of inconsistency in the first products it used and Allen advocates sourcing a reliable partner.

Allen comments: "We did initially pass our enquiries on directly to a specialist but this didn't always provide consistent results. So finding a partner you can trust is essential unless you can import the screens directly, which not many sign companies would be able to do."

A further challenge has been lack of understanding by potential end users, as Allen explains: "We've also found that more often than not we run up against the idea that these systems are in reality 'expensive TVs', so it's more cost effective to buy a large screen TV," explains Allen, "Up to a point, TVs will do most of what a digital screen will do but for retail and leisure environments a dedicated digital display will always be more robust."

However, Allen has not been deterred by these set-backs and says that as time goes by, and the more the company is able to sell, it will become more confident in its abilities to support customers with digital signage.

Allen adds: "The market is to some extent, especially in our area, still young. There are plenty of opportunities and with

Advanced Digital LED Trailers, purpose built by Rainbow Signs for indoor or outdoor use, offer an easy way to present a message. These robustly built trailers are available for hire or purchase



Factoid: Digital out-of-home (DOOH) advertising is set to rise to 40 percent of total out-of-home advertising spend in 2017.

careful research and finding the right system to partner with we will grow this area of our business and get over the initial hiccoughs that we've had. It's definitely a service to offer and one we will keep trying to develop."

A foot in the door

Another family run business, and corporate and architectural signage specialist is Rainbow Signs in Belfast. The company had a more positive experience since starting to venture into the digital display and digital LED signage market three years ago after receiving enquiries from both current and potential new clients.

Gareth Greer, director at Rainbow Signs, comments: "We noticed there was a gap in the market that we wanted to explore further. It has been an exciting adventure, which has opened the door to other prospects. By providing digital signage we have got to work closely alongside the customer, not only by carrying out the training on the software but by watching their brand and message displayed in lights."

However, the company has found that exploring this technology driven sector also brought its own pitfalls, as Greer explains: "In comparison to standard signage, the additional electrical components create new scope for problems to arise. And that results in more resource being utilised to investigate and then implement a solution. We are also highly dependent on the climate, which can sometimes work against any plans made for installation."

As an established signage company, Rainbow Signs has been able to draw on its existing facilities and expertise to source components and manufacture at its own premises, allowing the company

to develop its own products, as Greer outlines: "This, however, would not be possible for all firms wishing to explore this sector. A simpler and faster route would be to partner with a firm and re-sell into the market. Some simple research would open opportunities to resell quality products," he advises.

Breaking in

In conclusion, for sign-makers that are new to the digital signage world, Crystal Display's Bartram says such companies keep three things in mind: digital signage can be used anywhere and everywhere, keep updating simple, and remember that

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digital signage screens come in all shapes and sizes.

Referring to the first factor, Bartram says: "Our Android Advertising Displays always stand out whatever the environment, and freestanding Digital Posters are also available, so your screen does not even have to be mounted to a wall. When placing digital signage outdoors, however, there are a few other considerations. During the day a standard digital signage display has no chance of being readable in direct sunlight. That is why brighter LCD panels are required such as those in our Outdoor Advertising Displays range, as well as the use of a weather-proof enclosure."

In terms of keeping updates simple, Bartram advises: "For example, with a digital signage screen like our All-in-One Android Advertising Display, there are two ways to update it. The first is via plug-and-play with a USB stick. This way of updating is perfect if you have a small number of screens in one location."

The screen can also be upgraded without the need for additional hardware so that it becomes a network display, allowing screens to be remotely updated via an online web portal, as well as unlocking many other creative features.

And picking up on point three, Bartram says although most digital signage screens come in sizes from around 19" all the way up to a staggering 84", when an application calls for larger or smaller displays, unique digital signage screens are needed.

Bartram comments: "For example, video walls are fantastic at scaling to large sizes and unusual aspect ratios due to their



Crystal Display Systems' All-in-One Android Advertising Display digital screen can be easily updated via plug-and-play with a USB stick or, for network displays, updating can be carried out remotely via an online web portal

Crystal Display Systems' video wall solution has super-narrow bezel technology that makes the image almost seamless. This installation was created for Harrods in London and shows an amazing residential and commercial development in the UAE

modular nature. And when small digital signage is required, 10" POS digital signage displays are the perfect 'smaller size' display for commercial use.

"For any beginner venturing into the digital signage market it can seem daunting. That is why it is important to partner with the right integrator or value added reseller who can guide you to make the correct decisions."

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He concludes: "Digital signage allows you to deliver dynamic content to your audience and allows them to actively engage with your message. Today is the day to take that first step into the world of digital signage."

While not representing a straightforward move for sign-makers, with a little help and guidance from the right partner, the path into digital signage and the rich pickings of new opportunities it offers can be made considerably smoother.

