

Digital Signage:

A Guide for Internal Communications Professionals



Quicker, cheaper, better.

1) Overview

Digital signage technology has the potential to dramatically improve internal communications and result in a more informed and engaged workforce. This document offers a comparison of traditional communication methods with this newer channel, and outlines a route through to successful deployment.

You may already have an awareness of the potential, and perhaps have started to come across case studies where organisations have begun to deploy screen-based communications – most notably, so far, in the United States. The technology has arrived at a juncture where it is now both affordable and simple enough to operate, making it a realistic option for many businesses. But before embracing the future and possibly a significant short-term capital outlay and a whole new company information culture, you need to be clear what the benefits are – in terms of cost, sustainability and effectiveness – and how you might successfully achieve them.

This document is aimed at professionals who appreciate the advantages of a proactive, dynamic communications approach, even though you are likely to be operating under financial constraints in the current economic climate. It assumes a basic understanding of the processes and principles of communicating internally, but also a willingness to explore and exploit new opportunities.

2) Traditional communications channels, and their limitations

Shortly, we'll have a look at how digital signage technology can solve many of your communications issues, but first it's worth articulating what those issues are with the most popular methods of employee communication.

Let's start with an established cornerstone of internal communications: the staff newsletter. In its traditional, printed format it has performed many years of sterling service delivering company-wide information directly into the hands of employees. You will already be familiar with the many different types of messages (some more subtle than others) that can be incorporated within it. Indeed, the *content* of such newsletters remains largely valid. The problem is in the method of delivery.

Many businesses have ditched their printed newsletters for electronic versions; largely because the cost of printing and fulfilment has become prohibitive – as well as being environmentally questionable. The problem with electronic newsletters, however, is in getting them read: firstly because not all employees are necessarily desk-based; secondly because (if they do spend a lot of time at their laptop) their in-box is likely to be overloaded, encouraging them to delete all non-urgent communications or – more likely – skip over them intending to come back to them 'some time'; thirdly because even if they do get as far as opening the newsletter, they are likely to give it the most cursory skim-read before moving on. Studies using 'eyetracker' technology indicate that readers spend less than a minute on average reading even those newsletters they've bothered to open.

Furthermore, the time-consuming processes of compiling and producing newsletters (whether printed or electronically) means that much of the information is out of date by the time it reaches the target. And indeed, newsletters' all-encompassing nature often means that (for larger, complex businesses particularly) a lot of the content is irrelevant to the individual anyway; it isn't easy to 'target' bulk-circulation communications. So we're left with a medium which is slow, time-consuming, expensive, poorly read, and frequently only partly relevant – yet often contains key messages.

Straightforward company- or perhaps department-wide email communications solve the problems of speed, cost and (sometimes) targeting, but they exacerbate the issue of poor readership figures. There are plenty of complex studies to highlight this, but your own experience will tell you that when you open your laptop and are faced with the usual daily deluge in your inbox, you're likely to skim past anything company-wide that isn't demanding immediate action from you.

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Many businesses have staff noticeboards, usually located in communal areas such as the canteen or by the coffee machine - excellent locations to engage with employees. A pity that in practice they are almost always overloaded with out-of-date posters competing for space with irrelevant policy statements and long-completed initiatives and the like; so many different communications, in so many different styles, that it's next to impossible for the individual target to separate out the relevant from the dross.

All businesses above a certain size will have an intranet. These will vary in their content and their efficiency, but if they're properly maintained and easy to navigate, they can certainly be a useful repository for company information, policies, opportunities etc. *But you have to go looking for that information*, making them a poor channel for news or initiatives.

'Cascade' communications are another useful way to disseminate key messages throughout an organisation, generally culminating in face-to-face team briefings. This is often a successful method of ensuring that the message is pitched in a way that is relevant to the individuals receiving it, and has the advantage of inviting feedback too. In practice, however, it is often the case that the message gets distorted by the manager delivering it (or even lost along the way), and it isn't always practical to gather staff together for such team meetings – especially at short notice for fast-breaking news or directives.

There are many variations on the above themes – table-top communications in the canteen, pay-packet enclosures, forums etc. – and it would be going too far to suggest that some of them don't still have their place, but they all have similar limitations.

3) How does digital signage technology overcome these limitations?

Put simply: by delivering fast, targeted, bite-sized information to prime locations. You will have certainly seen digital signage in many forms in customer-facing locations, but you perhaps haven't considered yet how it might be deployed in an internal comms environment – probably because until now it's been unaffordable. In this context, 'digital signage' possibly isn't the correct title for this type of communication channel. Think of it more as a 'digital noticeboard', carefully positioned in prime locations but offering somewhat more potential than old-style noticeboards.

Not all systems will be appropriate to your particular requirements – you'll need to choose carefully – but let's assume for now that you've selected wisely, have installed your digital noticeboard software and deployed screens in prime locations. How does it overcome the problems outlined above?

Speed. Your new system should allow you, from any location, to instantly upload and display content on any screen in your organisation. As quickly as sending an email, in fact. You should be able to do so using standard software applications (such as PowerPoint, or Acrobat, for example) with which you are already familiar. And you can remove any content that's out of date just as quickly.

Relevance. The latest systems allow you to target content as specifically as you wish. For example, you may want to send the same company-wide message out to every screen in every location, but you may sometimes prefer to adapt the message to different locations or work-groups – right down to individual screens – or maybe exclude some areas altogether. Now you can.

Engagement. You have a huge variety of options in how to display your messages - from still text and graphics to animations, video clips, web feeds and live data streams – and (with the right system) unlimited flexibility in how many different messages you display at a time, in what order, and for how long. Of course, you will need to choose the medium most appropriate to your message, and some will take longer to produce than others (how creative do you want to be?), but an interesting mixture and regular updating will continually attract attention and encourage readership. The best systems will also allow you to incorporate touch-screen technology, enabling two-way interaction.

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Control. It's up to you how much or how little control you have. Your system should allow you to have complete freedom when it comes to deciding what content appears on what screen. Some systems will enable you to give restricted permissions to individuals across your organisation; for example, an area manager may be able to control some of the content on those screens in their district, or a branch manager may be able to publish some of the content on their own individual screen.

4) Uses

These are endless, and you won't really know until you start utilising your system. If you're prepared to be adaptable and imaginative, you'll find that you can distribute most of your existing content via this new media, although perhaps in a different form which is more suited to today's disposable and fast-moving society. Thus previously long-winded newsletters evolve into snappy one-screen summaries of news as it breaks; performance targets or business results get published in real-time; prompts and reminders get displayed at just the right moment for actioning. You get the idea. Where it gets really interesting is when you realise that your system not only allows you to distribute most of your current content in a more interesting and immediate way, but also enables you to create new forms of content that you never had the opportunity to share before.

5) Can you afford it?

In common with much technology, as digital signage evolves it gets increasingly sophisticated in its capabilities, simpler to use...and cheaper. So a more pertinent question would be 'can you afford it yet?' This depends mainly on the nature of your organisation. If your company has a high ratio of employees to locations (i.e. a lot of employees based at a relatively low number of locations) then the cost is likely to compare very favourably to traditional comms activity. By the same token, a low ratio – indicating a particularly dispersed workforce – might be prohibitively expensive. The majority of systems are costed ultimately on a per-screen basis, so the greater the number of individuals you can expect to get in front of each individual screen, the more affordable it will be.

If you don't already have the information to hand, it would be very worthwhile to carry out a communications audit of all your existing activity. At the most basic level, this would simply be to total up your annual spend and separate out that activity which you feel has the potential to be replaced by a digital noticeboard system. You'll then have a benchmark figure to match or beat. What this doesn't allow for, of course, are the indirect cost benefits which might be achieved by sending out better and more widely received communications (a much harder sell to the Financial Director!). A more sophisticated audit which also measures issues such as readership, time taken to produce, levels of engagement / understanding etc. of your current output will give you a clearer indication of this.

The cost of different providers' systems are likely to vary widely; not only are there a lot of different systems to choose from (not all of them suitable for your needs), but per screen costs will also vary depending on the number of screens required, contract periods, levels of support / maintenance required etc. However, most reputable suppliers will be prepared to give you a guideline cost via email or on the phone if you are able to give them an indication of the number of locations and the type of capability you are looking for. Be sure that the cost includes all hardware, software, licensing, installation, maintenance and training as required.

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6) Choosing the right system

Digital signage has been around for some time now, which means that there are a lot of providers to choose from. Be careful, because most of the systems on the market have been developed for customer-facing uses and may not be appropriate for your requirements: remember, deploying digital signage technology for internal communications is a relatively new approach, albeit one expected to grow rapidly.

Have another look at the list of capabilities outlined above in section 3). Your system should be able to do all of these things; if it can't, find a different supplier with a system that can. Ease and flexibility of use is likely to be your biggest obstacle, as many existing software systems have been developed with a very different user in mind – one who is prepared to master complex applications rather than focusing on the communications opportunities.

Web-based systems are preferable, as they will give you the most flexibility when it comes to logging in and managing content. Ask your supplier about how content actually gets distributed – your IT department won't thank you for clogging up the network! Likewise, non-Windows based hardware will require less support or updates, will be easier to manage, and immune to viruses.

7) Trial it.

Play, test, explore. There's no substitute to actually getting your hands on a system in order to understand exactly how it's going to work for you. You should be able to convince your supplier to allow you an initial trial period of perhaps a couple of screens for a month or two, prior to making a commitment. Position those screens where they will be seen in a 'live' environment at one or two of your locations.

Use this period wisely. Start off by taking some of your existing content, and seeing how it might be delivered with more impact. Put together some simple design templates in familiar applications, to give you an easy platform for creating fast communications, and gauge the response of the recipients.

You should be prepared to explore the boundaries of the system and to try your hand at creating lots of different sorts of content – data feeds, web links, animations or perhaps video. Hopefully, your supplier will be prepared to guide you through and show you ways to get the best out of the system.

8) Rolling it out.

The vast majority of employees should be engaged by the new media, but as with any new approach that represents a change in company culture, you may see some initial resistance – most likely as a result of the perceived cost of the system ('the money would have been better spent elsewhere'). It might be advisable to draw a distinction between perceived cost and actual cost.

Ensure that early on in the roll-out process you emphasise that the cost of the new system actually compares favourably with the old communication channels. Above all, however, *create good content*.

This really is the key to the whole process. You have a rare opportunity to revolutionise the way your business communicates with its staff. Don't waste it with poorly-delivered or badly targeted content! Make sure that you (and anyone else with permissions to create and distribute content) are fully conversant with the system, and create design templates that maximise impact and fit with both the media and the message. Update your content as frequently as you can to keep it fresh.

Have regular reviews to ensure that you are continuing to make the most of your system, and keep an eye out for new types of content and formats that you can distribute on it. And, if possible, carry out follow-up audits so that you can demonstrate the uplift you have achieved for your business.

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About the author

Steve Braden has worked in the communications industry since graduating in English Language from Leeds University in 1992. Since 1998 he has been a partner in [Braden Threadgold Ltd](#), a Hertfordshire-based design agency offering internal and business-to-business communications solutions for both printed and electronic media.

More recently he has joined forces with [Scene Double Ltd](#), a supplier and designer of video, KVM and USB extension products since 1991, to launch [eye2i Systems](#) and offer digital signage solutions specifically catering for the internal communications market. [eye2i Systems](#) aims to offer the best of both worlds: all the technical expertise you need, along with the communications understanding and experience required to make that technology really work for you.

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