

# Reading the signs

Digital signage has become more noticeable in recent years as retailers get to grips with the technology. As Glynn Davis discovers, there's now a range of solutions to suit all types of operations

**A**fter the gung-ho introduction of digital signage some years ago by the supermarkets, who had hoped to use it as a TV channel to drive extra revenue, the market has now calmed down somewhat. Things have not quite worked out as the grocers planned.

Nigel Rix, commercial director at Episys, which delivers solutions for the likes of Woolworths and B&Q, says that as a result of limited advertising demand, there is now much more thought going into how screens can be used, with a more balanced approach taken to mixing promotions with general product information, such as nutritional advice.

"They are now being used to reinforce the general messaging about a retailer, and the printed materials in-store, by putting an image into somebody's mind. People are now thinking more about how they choose to use them in-store," he explains.

One of the most sensible ways to use the medium, according to Rix, is for retailers to integrate their printed promotional PoS materials with the content for their screens by using the stock and price files to not only create in-store posters automatically, but also feed data into the content production software so that the digital signage fully reflects what is happening in the stores.

## Content is key

This focus on content is becoming increasingly important, as the cost of technology has dropped and is therefore less of an issue for retailers looking to implement digital signage solutions.

Simon Cockayne, retail account manager at Hughes Network Systems – which has implemented solutions for clients including Tesco and Asda, says: "The break even point is now much lower on technology costs, but people still focus on screen and infrastructure costs, whereas the content costs are ongoing. The failures with digital signage have

occurred when there has been no money left to produce the content."

Barrie Guy, public display sales manager at NEC Display Solutions, suggests that any expectation retailers might have of simply asking suppliers to fund the content through advertising should be forgotten. However, he still believes that revenue can be derived through the screens, by influencing shoppers to buy specific goods rather than by getting the brands to advertise.

therefore putting more thought into how it should be better used in-store.

"We can visibly increase sales using digital signage and not irritate brands or hold them to ransom by forcing them to produce content and pay for time on screen. Customers consciously watch screens and absorb what we display, we all know it influences them, but there is a fine line between influence and boredom," he explains.

Cockayne suggests this focus on content has also been fuelled by a shift towards retailers' marketing departments getting involved in digital signage, and

of content, with media players distributing the relevant channels to specific screens within different departments.

#### All shapes and sizes

A wide variety of implementations are now in use in the retail industry as merchants of all sizes realise that there are a multitude of different solutions that suit all budgets.

Whereas the larger players such as Tesco and Camelot are likely to be running complex networks that allow the content to be updated regularly and quickly from a central point (with content management technology playing a big part) there are many much smaller players, such as single-store retailers, that are now running simple solutions involving screens with USB inputs, into which

memory sticks containing content can be inserted.

As an example of a smaller implementation, Rix cites a chocolate shop that Episys has been working with, which utilises screens to display its daily changing menu with content simply controlled from a PC in the back-office.

At the other end of the scale is the implementation by Sony of 450 screens within the Arsenal Emirates stadium (other implementations include Benetton and Moto). Nick Deen, senior market development manager for retail at Sony Europe, says the company delivered an end-to-end solution, with the Sony Ziris content creation and management software streaming content straight down to the screens, which operate without using any storage capacity.

Through this implementation, Arsenal FC has been able to entertain the fans by showing interesting content while at the same time driving revenues, as a captive audience watching the screens in the ground before and after a match will ultimately end up spending money on food, drink and merchandise.

#### Finding the link

Deen predicts that in the future implementations like the one at Arsenal will likely involve some sort of interaction between customers and screens. This could include RFID tags on products being scanned and relevant information then being displayed on the screen.

According to Deen, there is also the prospect of linking mobile devices to the screens. "We're looking to see if football clubs want

the price of a seven inch version is now as low as £50, placing them within the budget of even the smallest operator. He says they are capable of running 'rolling' presentations (including animation, if required) through the use of a memory stick that enables content to be updated quickly and easily.

The wide variety of digital signage solutions now available highlights just how far the industry has progressed since the supermarkets were the only players in town, and suggests that digital signage has plenty of value to add for retailers of all sizes.

Sony PlayStation Portable devices linked to screens via Wi-Fi connections or mobile phones linked up to screens."

The increased use of wireless within stadiums and retailers' stores, which is currently being used by portable devices such as handheld PCs for stock control and chip and PIN payment tools, will make this possible. It provides a perfect ready-to-go infrastructure for shelf-edge screens to be implemented. These small devices are ideally suited to promoting single products and can easily be changed by downloading new content when required.

Although not using wireless technology, Rix suggests that 'photoframe' devices could also be used for this purpose, or alternatively as display units in shop windows for smaller retailers – especially as