Digital Signage as an Educational Tool

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With the New Year upon us and a "new" economy looming large it behooves us more than ever before to understand exactly what we are getting into when we invest our time and hard earned dollars in a project. Nowhere is this more a truism than digital signage and in that subset we all know as the education market. At the mention of the words "education market" many people turn off. Box sales, low margins, bid processes, etc. Sound familiar? Do not turn the channel - at least, not yet. We are not talking about selling boxes at the lowest bid prices. In fact we are talking about very modern systems integration in the education community from K-12 continuing through the bastions of higher education so stay with us a little longer.

In the "old days" we had black boards with chalk and high tech to us was a 16MM projector with the clackety clack of film going through the gate showing us a grainy picture on a glass beaded screen. Fast forward to modern times and we now have white boards, magic markers, and if we are lucky a video projector and a computer lab either in the room or at our disposal. Progress to be certain, but not exactly at the leading edge of what drives the most effective assimilation and retention of information and communication in our daily lives; let alone the classroom.

This begs the question as to whether we need to push the educational envelope further. The answer is a resounding yes. If we are to reassert the superiority of American talent in all areas we must close the "education gap" with developing countries like India, China and Russia not to mention Europe and we must learn to communicate and educate in a manner consistent with the needs of our students and how they are accustomed to learning in their daily lives outside of the classroom. If we arm our students not with weapons but with knowledge we will meet the needs of an increasingly complex world.

We no longer have a space race or thankfully a cold war but we do have an "education gap" that must be closed if we are to compete in the world economy. Today's media-savvy youth respond well to mediums where the message is presented and easily accessible at all times on a larger scale from computers to smart cell phones to digital signage. Studies have shown that using digital signage in the educational environment is literally a no-brainer and is a fundamental tool in closing that "education gap".

The challenge we face is how to effectively use and apply all the technologies at our disposal and not allocate funds for digital signage projects with poor return on investment. This brings us full circle back to the subject of true systems integration and providing solutions in an educational environment. This is definitely not a box sale and entails a complex needs analysis and a fundamental understanding of a specific educational institution and what their objectives are.
Projects will be ongoing and on-growing as well so understanding what is needed in the near, mid, and long terms become the first order of the day.

We can see that digital signage in various iterations can do a lot in terms of providing tangible value beyond initial costs for schools of all types. For example digital signage can provide:

- Emergency systems
- On-air bulletin boards
- Campus TV networks
- Interactive kiosks
- School news and weather
- Local area and school event calendars
- Sports scores, morning announcements
- Homework assignments
- Breakout room capabilities

A digital signage system can actually assist in a teacher’s instructional efforts. They can serve as video-extension and distance-learning setups. A lecture can be broadcast from one classroom to many or you can set up an IP-based digital signage system to stream a lecture at the main campus to a branch campus over the Web. For interactivity, digital white boarding tools can be used by students to upload work they’ve done on a laptop to the screen seen by all. Students benefit from the convenience on instantaneous communication and the school and teachers benefit from the wise use of their resources.

In digital signage we often hear that content is king and nowhere is this more accurate than in educational systems. Schools painstakingly enact policies to ensure an accurate and consistent presentation of content to both internal and external audiences. A properly designed digital signage system helps everyone comply with these policies by centralizing the point of distribution and becoming a clearinghouse for all multimedia content. With a digital signage system administered from a single point, an assigned person or group of people can effectively become the “gatekeepers” for all school-related content. If you want to stream media stored on multiple servers, use a digital signage system that integrates easily with an existing LAN. Some of the newer digital signage players do this particularly well and even come bundled with templates and other design tools, so you can create professional-looking presentations without the need for dedicated designers. In short, the content creation, distribution, and archiving is under school/teacher management and control. All it takes is forward thinking digital signage design from an AV/IT integrator.

Of course all of this has a price tag but the good news is that there are numerous federal and local government programs, funds and grants to help in this area. In addition consider the power of advertising revenues. The fact is that students are a key advertising demographic. Digital signage can be a tool for you to subsidize the investment in the
digital signage system as well as academic and operational expenses just by judiciously allowing advertisers to stream content on your system. In the content design phase and especially in common areas of the school you can blend in paid content with the schools own material in student centers, bookstores, and auditoriums, as well as stadiums and other sporting venues. In some cases, advertisers are even willing to underwrite the entire cost of the digital signage equipment in return for advertising access to the student population. Remember, we tend to buy products as adults that we are exposed to at a young age.

The bottom line is for us to think outside of the box and look at the educational community in a new light. Where there is change there is opportunity. The methods of communication in our society and now our schools is beginning to change and those of us that find creative solutions to issues of improved communication will benefit with increased business in a new and exciting field.

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