

Four Considerations for Digital Signage Implementation in Education

Defining the goals, choosing the right hardware and software and having a content strategy are all factors in a successful system.

From elementary schools to universities, educational institutions around the country are deploying digital signage. A digital signage network can serve as a key communication channel between administrators and students.

On campus, a digital signage system can be used to provide information, such as campus event schedules, menus at campus dining facilities, wayfinding, emergency notifications and classroom instruction.

With nearly every educational institution in the country facing budget cuts, however, it's important that facilities pay particular attention to the planning process and ensure that they get the most for their investment. In this white paper, sponsored by Itasca, Ill.-based digital signage solution provider NEC Display Solutions, some of the factors to consider when planning a digital signage implementation will be discussed.

Uses for digital signage in educational institutions

- Campus event schedules
- Wayfinding
- Menus
- Emergency notification
- Classroom instruction



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Know the purpose

Before an educational institution invests in a digital signage network, the first thing it needs to do is to outline exactly what the technology should accomplish. Is the main goal of the deployment to serve as a communication tool on campus? Will it serve a wayfinding function? Is it a system that will provide emergency alerts? Or a combination of any or all of those?

“Too many schools we talk to want to start out just by installing a screen and then figure out from there what content they want to run,” said Rich Ventura, director of sales — vertical solutions with NEC

Display Solutions. "That's always a shame to hear because of not only the financial investment they make, but also due to the potential waste of critical resources."

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"It's important to not just look at what the goals are for six months out, but to also consider what their goals may be a year or even five years into the future," Ventura said. "What an institution doesn't want to do is put in a system today that they'll have to replace a year from now because they grew out of the system limitations."

Hardware and software

With the dozens, if not hundreds, of display models and media players on the market, it's impossible to name a specific display or player that is the best fit for every application. The best thing an institution can do when deciding what hardware to deploy is to work with a reputable vendor who can recommend the right product to meet that institution's needs.

In general, however, the hardware needs to fit the job for which it is intended.

"Again, this comes back to defining what your goals are," Ventura said. "Make sure the product fits the application. Too many schools look to low-end retail displays and computers for their digital signage system. The money that they save today will increase their costs in the future. A very large college that NEC works with had previously made the decision to deploy consumer-grade televisions, only to find out when they started to fail, they were not

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covered under warranty and required the school to purchase brand new replacement screens. Being smart with a hardware purchase will prevent the system from becoming a blemish on campus."

Institutions have a number of options when it comes to deploying software. Applications can reside on the institution's own servers, or they can reside in the "cloud" under a software-as-a-service model. As with hardware, software questions can best be answered by a reputable solutions provider.

One factor an institution needs to consider when choosing software, however, is to ensure that the software can be expanded to service a growing network.

"You don't want to install a system that in a few months you realize needs to be upgraded because it's not expandable enough to do what you want to accomplish," Ventura said. "Schools should make a wish list of system features that they may want to use and make sure that there is a plan to cover and address all of those future needs."

Emergency alerts

On April 16, 2007, a gunman roamed the campus of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in Blacksburg, Va., killing 32 people and wounding 17 others before taking his own life. The massacre was the deadliest shooting incident by a single gunman in U.S. history. In the wake of the shooting, Virginia Tech administra-

tors came under intense criticism for failing to take actions that might have reduced the number of casualties.

That incident and others have spurred campuses around the country to look at ways they can quickly warn staff and students of a threat. Although many schools in recent years have deployed some combination of text and email alerts, there is still a percentage of people that will be on campus who either do not have a cell phone or are not in the emergency alert system. Even if they do have a cell phone, most students and faculty turn their phones off while in class and may not remember to turn them back on until later in the day.

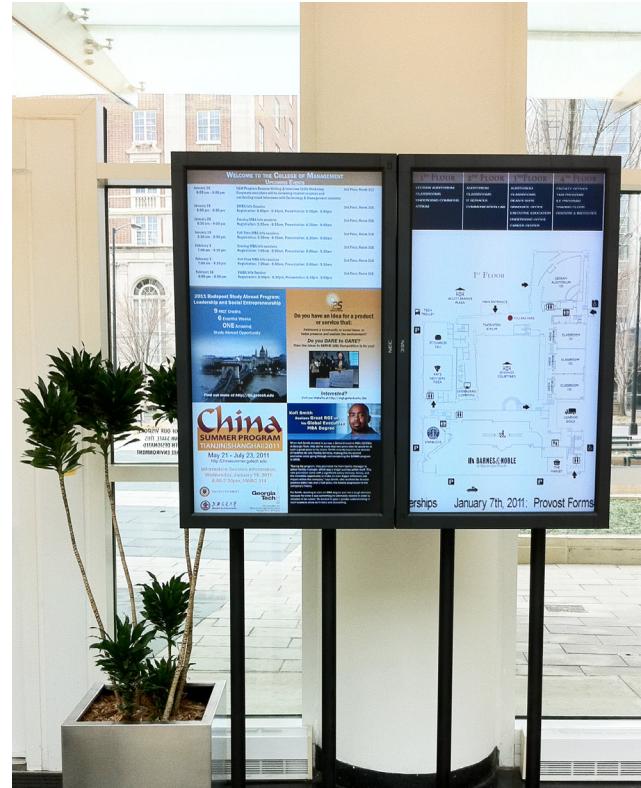
The bottom line when considering whether to incorporate emergency alerts into a digital signage network is to weigh the value of protecting lives compared with a modest investment in this additional functionality.

"I see many schools that are really interested in incorporating emergency alerts, and some that aren't really concerned about it," Ventura said.

"Then something happens on campus and immediately they realize they need to put it in," he said. "There have been several events in the past few years that serve as reminders to educational institutions that they have to go above and beyond just their text message or email alert systems."

Content

The content choices for a digital signage network are vast. An institution either can produce content in-house or farm the task out to a third party. Most content management systems give the school a choice of displaying static images or full-motion



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video. In addition, they can add media RSS feeds to automate the display of information, such as weather and news.

With all of the content options available, there are still a number of factors to keep in mind when planning an on-campus digital signage network.

One area of concern is who will supply and manage the content? Some schools have a central person or team that manages all content on the network. Others allow student body organizations, clubs, etc., to supply approved content to be displayed within the system. Still others take it a step

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further and will incorporate campus event videos and deliver a centralized campus network with multiple sources of content.

Many digital signage deployments in the “real world” rely on ad networks to not only provide content, but also to deliver advertising and the revenue it brings. While advertising may have its place in an on-campus network, administrators need to pay particular attention to the types of ads they run.

“You don’t want to show anything with inappropriate context, such as alcohol, or tobacco products,” Ventura said.

“Beyond those obvious things, you also need to be concerned if there is a company that is a major donor to the school,” he said. “That company is not likely to be happy if you run ads from its competitor. The only way for an ad-based network to really work is for the school to be able to choose what ads run.”

And while many digital signage software packages make it extremely easy for a network operator to design content, many schools have often-overlooked ways to generate engaging content.

“We are starting to see programs on campus that offer training in content creation, which, in many cases, can lead to careers after college,” Ventura said.

Every campus has access to tools that will allow them to create dynamic content and deliver content that rivals some of the largest content houses in the industry.

“Most schools offer courses in art or graphic design,” Ventura said. “It would be a great project to have those students design content for the digital signage network.”

About the sponsor: NEC Display Solutions, a pioneer in developing and delivering advanced display technology, has taken a leadership role in providing total digital signage display solutions. By bringing together strategic project management and solid display solutions experience, it can provide solutions for a wide range of markets, environments and applications. NEC offers a broad selection of LCD displays and projectors, coupled with expertise in hardware/software consulting, content creation and management services, financing, system configuration, deployment services, maintenance and service/support. The result is a customized, technology-rich deployment optimized specifically to meet a company’s unique needs.