

Going Digital In Public Spaces

Integrators can make it happen.

By Shonan Noronha, EdD

You may have noticed digital displays replacing notice boards and printed brochures in public spaces. City halls, libraries and other institutions are rapidly recognizing the value of digital signage, especially for updating schedules and providing wayfinding. Despite the substantial upfront costs, organizations are securing private and public funding to implement these “green” initiatives, and are realizing the many benefits of digital signage. States, cities and towns are also getting federal funds to replace static billboards with digital signs on highways and byways.

What do you need to get a share of the integration and installation contracts for these deployments? Start networking with local government agencies, innovate solutions for identified problems, and show technology and business leadership.

You might start by proposing digital signage to committees and departments that are planning large quantities of printed brochures or static signage. Do not assume that they’ll readily grasp the long-term benefits of digital signage technology. Among the challenges will be content creation and management, and maintenance of the system. That’s an opportunity for you!

Proper planning and research are necessary for success on any deployment, but the dynamics of govern-



In addition to this monthly column, Contributing Editor Shonan Noronha, EdD, is Editor of Sound & Communications’ twice-annual IT/AV Report.

ment or public works projects are different from those in the private sector. Depending on the size and scope, most projects span one to three years from contract to completion. Although that may appear to be similar to other projects, keep in mind that, with projects that depend on grants, the flow of funding may change the timeline. You can add value to your sales pitch by identifying potential funding sources and even offering to do some of the groundwork.

Funding sources range from federal and state government grants to funds from corporate sponsors or private foundations. Even government grants may be awarded for discretionary programs. The Federal Highway Administration’s National Scenic Byways Program (NSBP), for instance, is a discretionary program that provides merit-based funding for byway-related projects each year. Comprehensive information on more than \$400 billion in federal grants is available at www.grants.gov. Several agencies offer detailed information online, but identifying grants that a project might qualify for and writing grant proposals are specialized skills.

It is worth tracking funding sources from time to time for new initiatives and possible changes in processes or procedures. For example, the NSBP has extended its deadline for grant proposals FY 2012 to March 31. Useful information, such as a US map highlighting 150



Visitors can access digital brochures at a new ad-supported digital kiosk in downtown Chestertown MD.

America’s Byway’s routes, and an on-line application are available at www.bywaysonline.org/grants.

You may want to factor in six months to a year for networking with key stakeholders, community groups and elected officials before expecting to finalize a contractual agreement. Attending city, town or county public meetings, and researching local policies and procedures, should also prove beneficial. Researching potential projects in this market segment goes well beyond customer site surveys: It could investigate such topics as architectural guidelines, safety improvement strategies and funding sources

for special needs. For example, more than 2000 towns and cities in the US have adopted historic preservation ordinances and design guidelines for protecting and rehabilitating historic structures, according to NSBP.

The outdoor informational kiosk in downtown Chestertown MD is a good example of a successful DS application in this space. The project was initiated by iSign Logic, a local DS/AV integration firm. The company approached the Downtown Chestertown Association (DCA) after a town council meeting in which the DCA was proposing to build a structure in the town's central park to house printed brochures for local businesses and attractions. "Our pitch was to offer a 'green' solution that allowed unlimited information to be conveyed in a simple intuitive digital format," said Carey Callahan, co-founder and

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president of iSign Logic.

Several designs for an outdoor touchscreen informational kiosk were presented to the Historic District Commission. "Because Chestertown is a National Landmark District, we researched the origins of the streetlight fixtures and endeavored to meet the requirements,

while designing a kiosk with elements that reflect the existing lighting fixtures," noted Callahan.

The project received funding from NSBP, the county and the DCA. A 46-inch Samsung LCD panel was integrated with IR touch capability, HVAC and weatherproof material by i-Tech Company. A local company manufactured the kiosk to iSign's specifications. The enclosure contains an AOpen media player that complies with Energy Star 4.0, APC UPS and a TRENDnet security camera. It took iSign about a year from proposal to completion.

iSign Logic produced all the original content from data provided by the DCA and the Historical Society of Kent County. The events calendar is provided by Kent County through a custom web link. Google maps are utilized for the larger regional view through their API. This digital signage is advertiser-supported, with the local college and one of the local banks taking exclusive prime banner positions, and other businesses are offered onscreen digital brochure spaces for an annual fee of \$200.

"We have developed a custom online, user/roles-based CMS," Callahan explained. "The system allows authorized users access to specific zones on the screen. At this time, we manage the ad server." Local ad agencies and production companies create the banner ads and digital brochures within the size and pixel specifications for the display zone.

The biggest challenge resulted from a change in location less than a week prior to kiosk installation. "The original location was fully shaded and allowed for sufficient ventilation for the HVAC system," noted Callahan. "The new location is in full direct sunlight against a brick wall, and with a 180° viewer orientation change. Work that had already been completed for the maps also required a full redo," he said. Using the already-constructed enclosure, the kiosk was rapidly redesigned to handle ventilation and access to the components for system maintenance at the new location.

Mobile interactivity is now an expected, even required, feature for new digital signage kiosks. Much of the Chestertown's kiosk content is currently enhanced with QR code technology and there is a mobile version of the digital sign available for both Apple and Android. The kiosk will soon feature an iSign Media Bluetooth transceiver to support NFC (near field communication) with all cell phones.

Imaginative public/private partnerships are expanding the reach and utility of digital signage in municipal venues, and a forward-looking integrator can be the catalyst that makes it all happen. ■

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info@usa.messefrankfurt.com
Tel. 770.984.8016



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