

# FOGHORNFOCUS: TECHNOLOGY

## Is Digital Signage Right for Your Vessel?

By Mike Menne and Andy Herbst, ESS

### Are You Ready for Some Football?

Since the emergence of riverboat gaming in the early '90s, the use of video technology on passenger vessels has been on the rise. Early on, gaming companies wanted to provide the customers the option of watching live TV while "playing the slots" or table games. Owners were anxious to provide sports programming so patrons had every reason to stay longer on the vessel (nobody wants to miss the big game). Within a short time, gaming vessel owners realized video was an excellent medium to provide details about other activities offered by the casino. While marketing announcements over the public address system were somewhat useful, the high noise level from the slots made audio impractical. Video certainly provided a great method of advertising the "low cost, high profit" buffet, promoting the next concert in the showroom or detailing the dates of the next slot or poker tournament. The era of digital signage on passenger vessels had arrived.

Early digital signage systems varied in complexity and technology. Some were as simple as a scrolling text generator that could be layered on top of the entertainment video. Other systems included PC's with video cards and power point software; system output could then be modulated over the in-house TV system (resolution was very limited as was the size of the TV monitors). Over the years, signage systems have developed dramatically. It is now not uncommon to see interactive informational displays positioned to attract the customer and allow them to choose certain content.

### "Hey Mister, You Want to Buy a TV?"

So if a vessel operator has new flat panel TV monitors on board, how can they be utilized for marketing? The next time you are in a fast food restau-



rant (while you're deciding upon your choice of value meals), you are likely looking at a flat screen monitor connected to a computer running digital signage software. Retail, food, and entertainment companies are utilizing digital signage to provide menus, promotional videos, interactive trivia games, wayfinding maps, and many other types of visual information. Transportation companies utilize digital signage to inform customers about schedules, schedule interruptions, emergency notifications, construction delays, etc.

The adoption of signage systems is well underway for certain ferry system operators. Passengers on their daily commutes may be presented with video monitors detailing safety and boarding announcements (some content could be critical for meeting passenger vessel Americans with Disabilities Act or ADA access requirements).

While being able to play a safety video from a DVD or computer PowerPoint is an option, digital signage systems utilizing wireless internet and specialized hardware/software provide enhanced methods of content scheduling and updating. The marketing possibilities as well as providing paid advertising placement systems provide an excellent value proposition.

An advertisement for WheelHouse Technologies. At the top, the company logo "WHEELHOUSE TECHNOLOGIES" is displayed in white on a blue background. Below the logo, the text "Maintenance Management Program" is written in bold. A list of features follows: "Cloud Based - Access from any Device with any browser", "Maintenance - Spares - Documentation", "Intuitive User Interface", "SMS Integration", and "Turnkey Setup". The bottom half of the ad features images of a laptop, a smartphone, and a tablet, all displaying the software interface. At the very bottom, the website "www.wheelhousetech.com" and phone number "978-562-5211" are listed.



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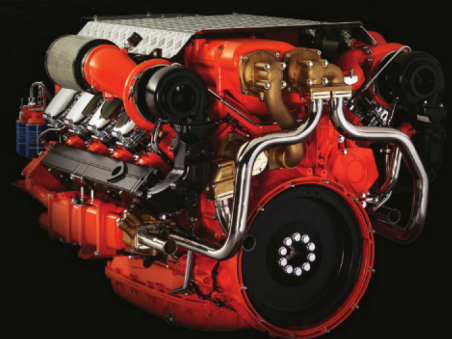
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Digital signage systems may also be equipped with external “event triggering.” Special messages, videos, or informational presentations may be “triggered” by buttons, door closure switches as well as GPS location software. In addition, motion sensors, serial commands from a control computer are easily accomplished. If a vessel passes over a shipwreck, GPS location software could trigger an underwater video of the wreck or some other pre-edited content. A motion sensor located near a video screen could activate content which details the vessel layout including points of interest and daily itineraries. A door closure switch on a boarding door could trigger a boarding announcement video. The possibilities using “event triggering” commands with digital signage software are endless.

### Your Attention Please...

For most vessel operators, safety and regulatory compliance are high priority issues. As previously mentioned, digital signage systems are being utilized to provide pre-recorded safety information to passengers on ferry vessels. These systems were put into place to help the companies meet ADA requirements for hearing impaired passengers. Systems may also be equipped with input consoles

for creating instant text messages on system monitors. This can allow the operator to input messages “on the fly” or integrate the system with a federal, state, or local emergency notification system. Weather events, Amber Alerts or other types of emergency notifications may be “parsed” and displayed. At some point, speech to text software will be adequate to allow for voice input of text messages on the screens.

Coupling the digital signage system with a wireless internet connection enables systems to display any type of governmental emergency notifications. In addition, vessel operators can continually update content on the screens. Schedule changes, ancillary information changes, or new sales/marketing information is instantly available. Newer digital signage platforms are not limited to computers and flat screens on board the vessel; information can just as easily be sent to tablets or smart devices provided by the operator. Discrete devices (instead of large monitors) may be used to provide information to the hearing impaired.

### Choosing the Right Technology for Your Operation

“What content should be presented to my customers/patrons?” This should be the focus when planning a digital signage system. Is it simply a monitor with a changeable

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snack bar menu? Or, should it be a snack bar menu on a screen that is easily interrupted by an important event message? Do you take boarding photos? How do you display those for passengers to choose from? Is there some particularly interesting national park video that your customers would find informative? Do you need the ability to utilize some of the space on your video monitors to display advertising? Would that be appropriate for your type of business?

Important details including the number of monitor viewing patrons may suggest certain usage. Perhaps selling some ad space to hotels, restaurants, or other tourist businesses would be a way to generate additional revenue dollars for the vessel operator. What is the benefit of information that can be provided to the customer or, in the case of meeting some regulatory requirements, to the operator? Determining what content and what information you want to show your customers will help you to determine a benefit/cost ratio.

Most digital signage providers can help design and determine the optimal display system for a certain type of client. Your priority is to plan ahead and determine system end goals. This will certainly create a solution that provides excellent content and utility. ■

**About the Authors**

Mike Menne is the Vice President of PVA Associate Member Electronic Systems Support, High Ridge, MO. ESS is an electronic integration company with a 25-year history providing internal communications systems of all types on marine vessels. Andy Herbst is a Project Manager at ESS, where he has extensive experience in interior communications systems, fire detection systems, CCTV camera systems, voice and data systems, and video systems for casino boats, small cruise ships, and ferries.



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