

Making Smart Technology Decisions for Cost Effective Digital Signage Solutions

A whitepaper outlining cost effective approaches for deploying digital signage solutions on a budget. Reduce content creation and distribution costs with simple but proven and reliable workflows.

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As companies scrutinize budgets and challenge the cost of projects in response to the uncertain economic times we currently faced with, stakeholders are forced to look ways to control the costs and reduce the risks of deploying and maintenance of digital signage initiatives.

Operators can “work smarter” by making wise technology choices and adopting cost and labor saving workflows that can not only save money, but streamline and simplify the process as well. The key is to clearly define the objectives of your digital signage initiative and make sure each technology and workflow decision you make is aligned with your goals. Don’t build what you don’t need. Be wary of bell and whistle features that don’t contribute to your core goals and add unnecessary costs and risk to your projects. Keep deployments simple to reduce risk.

Reducing Content Creation Costs

Digital signage content can basically be broken down into two types: 1) Media (movies and pictures) and Information (text and data). Cost savings can realized in both areas.

Media

Saving money in media creation can encompass several techniques. Video is, of course, a common content type used in digital signage. Everyone knows video production is a complex and expensive process involving sets, locations, crews, editing and snazzy computer-generated effects, but does digital signage content need to be so elaborate?

In many cases you have only few seconds of your audience’s attention, often a glance or a quick look. Therefore the most effective digital signage content is short, simple and direct.

Use this to your advantage by dispensing with the video production workflow entirely. Instead use desktop authoring tools like Adobe Flash. In the hands of a talented artist, existing graphic assets like product shots can be used to create high-impact animations. Even MS PowerPoint can be used. With built-in support for basic animations and transitions plus the ability to combine text, graphics and video, this office workhorse can become a tool for creating eye-catching content. Just be sure to apply a liberal dose of creativity to prevent your digital signage from looking like your last sales presentation! Even still JPEG images, properly designed, can be highly effective as well.

Other factors work in favor of a desktop-based workflow. First, the skill set and equipment required to produce content is more commonplace than producing video. Most competent web designers have some Flash authoring experience and, of course, PowerPoint usage is nearly ubiquitous, so finding someone to perform content authoring is easier and less expensive. A second factor is the reality that most digital signage content does not use sound, which reduces production requirements significantly.

Another cost saving technique is to use leverage your existing content in the form of corporate videos, television spots, online web content and images from print media where possible, as raw content to be repurposed into effective digital signage content. While this reduces the need to create raw content from scratch, your creative team must be experienced in creating content specifically for digital signage – an entirely different medium with different objectives.

Information

Informational content in digital signage usually consists of rapidly-changing text and data that comes from specific sources. This can take the form of news or weather information, and in some cases, data from corporate databases such as real-time customer information.

A key cost-saver here is to use automated data-retrieval processes to ensure that this information flows with no human intervention. This does not necessarily mean, however, that a team of developers need to toil away at complex application development.

A simple tool – RSS – can be used to get up-to-the minute data to your screens. You may think RSS is no more than a news ticker and blog-searching tool. While RSS can be employed to grab news headlines from internet sources, it can also be used for much more. RSS stands for “Really Simple Syndication” and the protocol is nothing more than a simple way to structure data based on XML. Therefore, any type of data can be quickly and easily published as RSS feed by publishing a single XML file. This provides a simple and standardized way to publish data. An additional bonus is that most enterprise database platforms already have automated RSS tools built in, so IT project costs should be minimal.

RSS, like MPEG video, is supported by many inexpensive digital signage media players, negating the need for expensive PC-based systems.

Reducing Content Distribution Costs

Do I really need a networked solution?

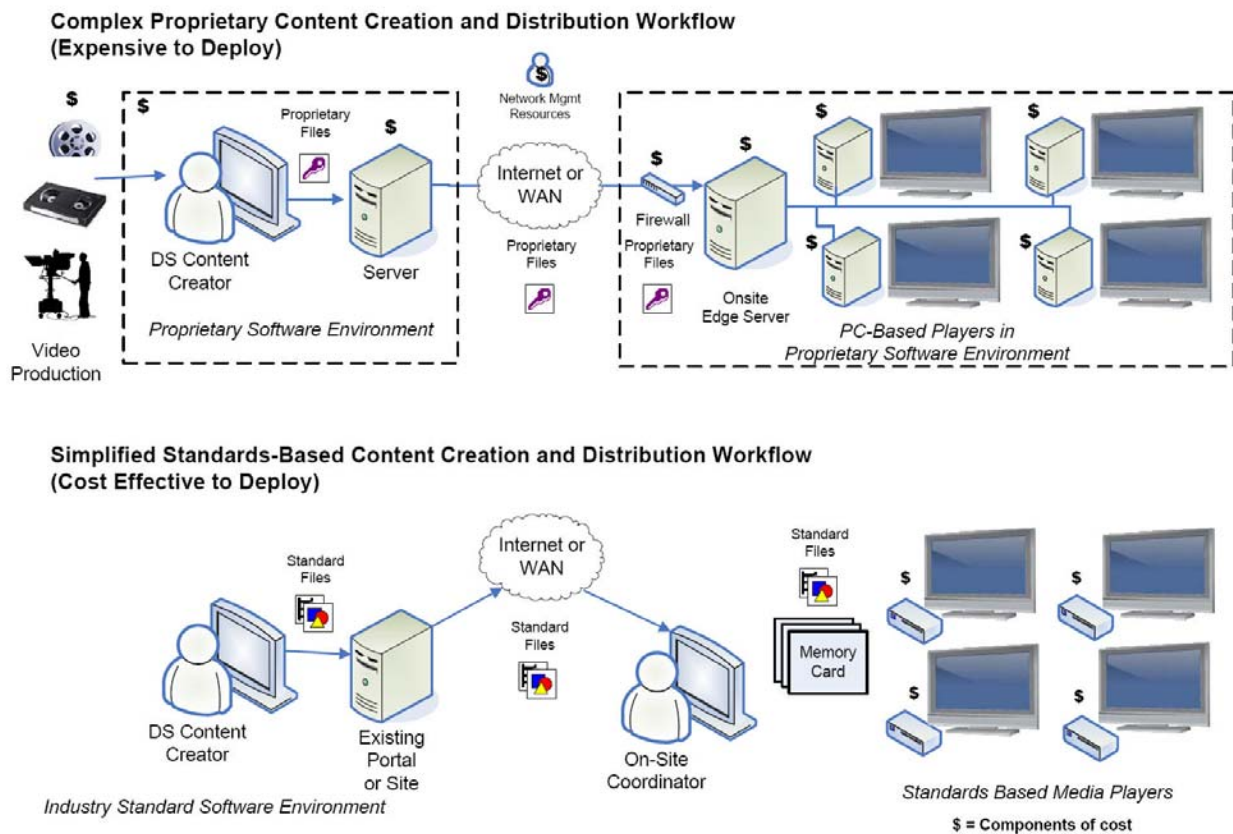
In addition to content creation, significant savings can be realized by making smart choices on the distribution and delivery of content to screens. Components of this cost include everything that is required to move content from the author to the screen.

A big component of distribution costs is networking. You may have already reached the conclusion that your digital signage deployment needs to be networked. Think again. Many large successful digital signage “networks” use standalone devices and have no networking infrastructure at all, or utilize existing infrastructure like Corporate Intranets or email.

You should strongly re-consider the costs and hassles of maintaining a networked system if you don’t require daily content updates and you have personnel on location. Using the right media player technology, manual loading can be very simple and takes only a few minutes. Removable CompactFlash Card or USB thumb-drive upload systems enable content to be easily loaded for playback.

Content distribution does not have to involve the physical delivery of CDs or DVDs. Media files can be effectively and rapidly distributed using a corporate intranet portal or a simple web hosting service for remote branch locations to access media downloads provided by corporate. In some cases even email can be used to distribute media files to branch locations. Once media is manually downloaded onto a CompactFlash or USB thumb-drive, users can load files into standalone media players.

Figure A. illustrates three options for your content distribution workflow



Economize with Standard File Formats

Saving money on content distribution also means moving to standardized media types that can be moved from place to place as simple files on a storage medium. The key to saving content management costs is to avoid proprietary or closed systems that use special file formats and only vendor-proprietary methods to transport and view the content. Content encoded directly as MPEG video and JPEG images are an excellent medium because whether you are adopting a video production or desktop workflow, all content can be stored in a single, widely supported format that can be generated by the author, previewed by stakeholders and deployed to devices using whatever method works best. For desktop-based content such as Adobe Flash and MS PowerPoint, inexpensive software is available to transform native files into MPEG video.

Conclusion

As you can see, the choices you make in your content creation and content distribution workflow will greatly impact the overall cost of your digital signage deployments, and whether you have an expensive, complex, high risk solution or an inexpensive, simple, low risk solution. It is up to the stakeholder to determine the proper cost benefit and risk profile based on your overall business objectives for digital signage.

The key to achieving cost savings is careful analysis of the workflow. By considering the “what”, “who” and “how” of content creation, management and deployment, digital signage stakeholders can survive, even thrive in an era of belt-tightening and budget cuts.

Author Name, and Bio

Minson Chen (mchen@agnpro.com) is President & CEO of AGN Professional (AGNPRO), an innovative provider of “Out of the Box” digital signage hardware and software solutions. For the past 10 years he has been involved in developing and marketing new technologies in the fields of digital signage, electronic displays and eBusiness. Formerly as a management consultant, he worked with Fortune 100 companies with focus on eBusiness and IT strategy and has a background in global manufacturing and sourcing. Minson graduated from Columbia University with a degree in engineering and has an MBA in Finance from the Stern School of Business at NYU.