What Faith-Based Organizations Need to Know About Digital Signage

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Executive Summary

Houses of worship and other faith-based organizations are now more than ever using technology to spread their messages.

Digital signage is one of the most effective ways to communicate and engage with congregation members and visitors. However, with much of the signage industry focused on markets such as retail, food service, education, government and healthcare, the unique needs of faith-based organizations are often overlooked.

Many of the principles and best practices for digital signage are applicable to any type of installation. Nonetheless, faith-based organizations differ in significant ways from other institutions and businesses. These organizations need to consider carefully their specific environments, audiences and objectives in order to make the most of digital signage technology.

This white paper discusses the special considerations for digital signage within faith-based organizations.

We begin by defining the four main factors that differentiate these organizations from other digital signage users: Resources, Dwell Time, Focus, and Hours of Operation.

Following this, we discuss the importance of the content that appears on a display. You will learn how to develop stunning digital content using resources you already have available. We also explore free and low-cost options for enhancing your content.

The remainder of the paper provides a guide to choosing technology that will meet the needs of your organization. We examine in-depth the most important items to consider when selecting a signage management platform, including media file formats, licensing, networking, scheduling, and technical support.

A brief discussion of display hardware concludes the paper.

Digital signage is perfect for faith-based organizations of all types and sizes. The information in this paper will help church leaders and IT professionals evaluate their needs and develop effective digital signage strategies for houses of worship and other faith-based organizations.

What Makes Faith-Based Organizations Unique

Faith-based organizations have unique needs and goals. While many of the same concerns about hardware, software and content apply in any environment, these organizations must take into account a number of special considerations. In particular, we can identify four essential differentiating factors.

Resources

While a number of so-called "megachurches" may have funding and resources to rival those of large corporations, most faith-based organizations don't have that advantage. Nonetheless, even the smallest of congregations can benefit from digital signage. It is important to find a solution that will work with your existing resources.These resources can be divided broadly into two categories.

People: How many people within your organization can dedicate time to implementing and maintaining your digital signage? Are they paid staff or volunteers? Does your organization employ experienced IT professionals and content designers?

An ideal digital signage solution should be powerful enough to meet your needs, but simple enough for a small team or even a single individual to manage without extensive tech skills or content creation resources.

Technology: Does your organization have a dedicated sound studio, high-definition video cameras, and state-of-the-art multimedia production facilities? Or are your technology resources limited to a few desktop PCs running applications like Microsoft Office? Do you have the network infrastructure to support a sophisticated digital signage installation?

Fortunately, today's technology makes it incredibly easy to develop and deploy stunning content without investing in costly equipment. In most cases, organizations find that the resources they already have available are more than sufficient to create engaging and informative digital signage content.

Dwell Time

Dwell time refers to the amount of time someone remains within view of a digital sign. This doesn't include people "just passing by" while their attention is elsewhere.

Accurately defining your audience will help determine the ideal placement and content of your signage. Target those who have enough time to see, engage with, and remember the content on the display.

Environments with high dwell time include airport terminals, physician waiting rooms, and visitor lobbies in corporate or government offices. In these places, visitors are likely to wait for fifteen minutes or more. On the other hand, the entryway to a house of worship may be a high traffic area, but the dwell time is often a few minutes at most.

Invite a professional AV consultant for a walkthrough of your facility to help determine optimal placement for your digital signage. The final decision will rest with church staff who know best how long people remain in a particular location and what they are doing while there. The size of the display should be appropriate to the space and the proximity of the audience. In many cases, bigger is not always better.

> For maximum impact, carefully consider:
>
> • Available Resources
> • Typical Dwell Time
> • Audience Focus
> • Hours of Operation

Focus

How much of a viewer's attention is engaged actively with a digital sign? This has a huge impact on the type of displays and content employed.

For example, imagine a news station with various types of on-screen content: a main video feed, multiple ticker bars displaying headlines, stock prices, weather, and other information, and additional screen zones featuring video or images.

This approach works well for a mixed audience, when you don't know who is going to be interested in what. If you put enough content on the screen, most people will find something to catch their attention.

However, that technique often resulsts in a cluttered look with a lack of focus. If you have an accurate and well-defined idea of your audience, you can attract attention much more effectively by prominently displaying only the most relevant content. This is a powerful strategy for faith-based organizations, which know their audiences well enough to communicate in a targeted fashion.

Rather than throw "everything but the kitchen sink" on screen, consider utilizing full-screen visuals with colorful photos, video and animation for a unified and consistent message that is relevant to your viewers.

Faith-based organizations typically have a well-defined audience, message and mission, which makes it easy to develop a focused and consistent content strategy.

Hours of Operation

Faith-based organizations rarely limit their activities to standard business hours. While businesses such as restaurants and retail shops may operate during evenings and weekends, this is even more critical in faith-based organizations. For a house of worship, weekends and holidays aren't just extended business hours - they are often the most important parts of the schedule.

Most media players, commercial displays, and content management software support 24/7 operation any time of the day or week. However, you may require advanced scheduling capabilities to accomodate your calendar of events.

If the staff managing your signage only works during weekdays, can you schedule "after hours" content weeks or even months in advance? Is it feasible to make last-minute changes when staff is off the clock, and is it easy enough for a layperson to do?

The hours of operation can also raise challenges when it comes to technical support. Many hardware and software companies only offer support during standard business hours, or charge fees for after hours support. What happens if a problem arises just before a weekend worship service or holiday event?

You need reach a live human being who will walk you through a solution with easy-to-follow directions. Choose a technology provider you can count on to answer the phone even on weekends and holidays, without additional cost.

These four issues should be addressed before selecting hardware equipment, software or sign placement. Faith-based organizations must develop digital signage strategies appropriate to their varying resources, lower dwell times, targeted focus and hours of operation.

How to Develop Great Content

Where to Begin

Content is king. It's been said time and time again, and it is especially true of digital signage.

Investing in costly displays is just throwing money away if nobody pays attention to the content. A smaller and more affordable display may provide significant and measurable results if presenting outstanding material.

Most faith-based organizations don't have the technological and personnel resources of a Fortune 500 corporation. However, they often have a more clearly defined audience and focused message, which they can deliver with fewer resources.

Many organizations already have a substantial library of digital media. Utilizing your existing technology and human resources, it becomes easy and affordable to deploy eye-catching and effective digital signage.

If you organization doesn't have a dedicated production facility and staff, how do you develop great content?

Start by finding out what is already available.

Many dioceses and larger faith-based groups provide digital content to their member organizations. If only portions of the content are relevant to your audience, use video editing software to easily extract a short clip from a longer video. A simple $100 software package will meet the video editing needs of most signage users.

Perhaps the best application for designing signage content is something you already use everyday. Microsoft Office is one of the most well-known and easy-to-use tools for developing digital signage media.You've probably seen tedious and boring PowerPoint presentations, but it is just as easy to create stunning and engaging slides by following a few simple "rules of the road."

> Save time and money by using resources that are already available:
>
> • existing content
>
> • familiar applications
>
> • free templates

Rules of the Road

The renowned author, marketer and entrepreneur Guy Kawasaki coined the guidelines known as the 10/20/30 Rule of PowerPoint.

This rule states that the most effective and engaging business presentations adhere to three simple requirements:

> **• 10 SLIDES**
> Maximum presentation length
>
> **• 20 MINUTES**
> Maximum presentation time
>
> **• 30 POINT**
> Minimum font size

This rule works great for business presentations, but doesn't address the unique nature of signage content. Viewers would quickly lose interest if your digital signs looked like corporate slideshows.

However, we can easily adapt these same principles to create a winning strategy for digital signage.

The 1/2/3 Rule of Digitalage

1 MINUTE:

Break up the content flow every minute. That way, someone just approaching the sign doesn't feel like they walked into the middle of a movie. For example, a church may develop several slides to inform parishioners about a new community outreach program. If each slide is displayed for ten seconds, this particular message should be limited to six or fewer slides.

2 MINUTES:

Consider 2 minutes as the maximum amount of time an individual will spend in front of your sign. For an unforced environment such as a house of worship, this is a rather high dwell time. Visitors aren't waiting to see the doctor or board a plane. Convey your message quickly and concisely before they move along.
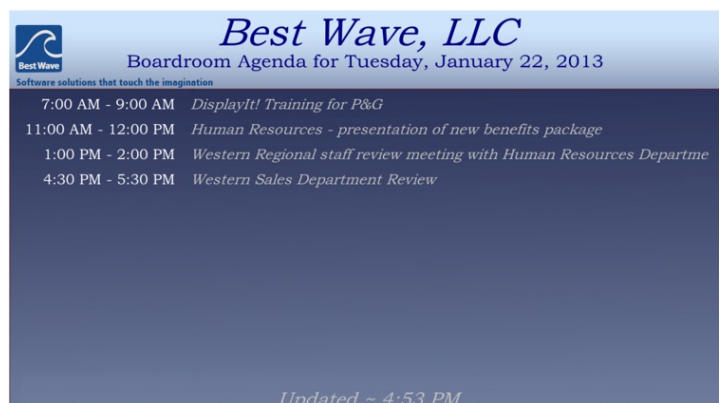
3 LINES:

Limit each slide to 3 lines of text. This means using larger and easier-to-read fonts. Your viewers aren't standing there taking notes, so don't overwhelm them with too much information. Make it easy for them to determine the relevant information at a glance. If necessary, provide a phone number or web address for those who want to learn more.

One exception to the 3 line rule applies to presenting calendar and agenda information. It can be valuable to display an at-a-glance overview of upcoming services and events.

In this case, it is especially important to use text that is clear and easy to read. You may also want to consider more visually-based ways to display such information. For example, free calendar templates for Excel are readily available online and easily customized for any schedule.

Other software packages can present agenda information for multiple locations with data synced from Outlook, Excel, Google Calendar, and even proprietary church calendaring systems.

Best Wave, LLC
Boardroom Agenda for Tuesday, January 22, 2013
Software solutions that touch the imagination

7:00 AM - 9:00 AM	*DisplayIt! Training for P&G*
11:00 AM - 12:00 PM	*Human Resources - presentation of new benefits package*
1:00 PM - 2:00 PM	*Western Regional staff review meeting with Human Resources Departme*
4:30 PM - 5:30 PM	*Western Sales Department Review*

Updated ~ 4:53 PM

Automated agenda displays are a great application for digital signage. The 3 line rule does not apply to a calendar or list of events, but readability remains an important concern.

Digital signage can be as easy as 1-2-3.

Content Examples

Developing content for digital signage does not have to be costly or time consuming. In fact, it can be much easier than you might expect.

Freely available PowerPoint templates make a great starting point. Since these are not designed specifically for digital signage, you don't want to use an entire template as you would for a typical presentation. Instead, build a playlist with slides taken from multiple templates, along with content from other sources. Customize each slide with the information and images you want to present. This is an easy way to create great content in no time.

Tom and Linda Stanton's baby girl!

Martha, 6 lbs. 14 oz. – born at 2:45 AM on Sunday, August 31st

Microsoft offers an extensive selection of templates that are free for commercial use, including digital signage.

Find these free templates at
http://templates.office.com

For example, this slide from the free "Green Leaves" template is ideal for a birth announcement.

The "Basketball or Other Sports" templates is great for promoting youth sporting events. Simply add your own photos and text to create an attractive and engaging display image,

Come watch the Brophy Mustangs take on the Horizon Hawks!

Friday night, September 14, at 7:00 PM in the church gym.

Educators can find templates for everything from nursery school to post-secondary education, including those designed for specific subjects such as mathematics, science, technology and music. A chalkboard style template with kid-friendly fonts makes for a welcoming Sunday School display.

Use free resources such as PowerPoint templates for eye-catching signage content that is easy to create without costly designers, artists or tech support.

Modern smartphones and digital cameras provide another amazing source of content. Record or photograph your church picnic or other event on a handheld device, and you can have that content playing in time for the service an hour later.

Make sure that your software allows for quick and easy updates to the playlist. This will let you add timely content even at the last minute.

Choosing the Right Software Package

Determine Your Needs

The digital signage industry offers a wide variety of software options. When choosing a software solution, faith-based organizations should consider three key factors:

1) Does the platform provide support for your content, without requiring additional resources or advanced IT support?

2) Do those managing your digital signage possess the technical skills required to use the software?

3) Will the software work with your existing technology and networking infrastructure?

Media and Content Types

Make a list of the content types you intend to use. This may include images, video, Office documents and web pages.

Look for a software solution that supports your specific content types. Converting media files to different formats creates extra work and may not preserve the quality of the original content.

Most signage software supports a majority of standard image formats. Ensure that the application you choose will display your photos and graphics.

> • The most common image formats are JPG, BMP, PCT, TIF, GIF and PNG.
>
> • Image editors such as Photoshop, Paint and Corel Draw export to the above formats.
>
> • Most digital cameras and smartphones output to JPG, BMP and/or PNG.
>
> • Almost all signage software supports JPG.
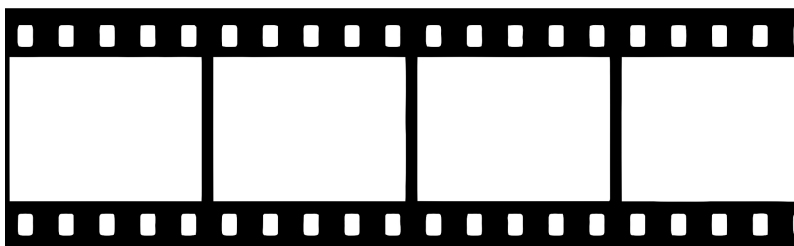
Digital video is more complicated. Variables to consider include frame rate, aspect ratio, codec, key frames and more. Not only do you need a software solution that can handle the proper formats, but also one that can display them at the best possible resolution and video quality. In some cases, you may need to invest in an inexpensive video encoder software utility to re-encode videos from one format to another.

A robust signage software should support MPG, AVI, MOV, WMV and MP4 files.

Wondershare's Video Converter Ultimate is a simple and affordable (under $100) option for converting video. It is easy to use and can convert between nearly any video formats. A built-in set of default parameters for most common video formats make this a quick and easy solution.

If you want to create signage content using your existing Office applications, PowerPoint compatibility is a must-have. Digital signage software may offer varying levels of compatibility. In many cases, the software cannot actually play PowerPoint files, but instead will convert the slides into static images. While this may work for simple presentations, it also means abandoning the transition effects, animation, sounds and other special features. You may also lose the ability to set the slide duration, so that every slide is displayed for the same amount of time.

Ideally, your digital signage software should include a fully functioning PowerPoint player that will display presentations exactly as designed, including all animations and transitions.

It is often desirable to incorporate Adobe PDF, Microsoft Word and Excel documents into a signage playlist.

Adobe PDF documents have become a standard for creating and sharing files that will appear the same on any platform, regardless of what software was used to create them or what fonts are required. This is particularly important for displaying visual content created in less commonly used applications. For example, technical drawings, floor plans, and other document types from specialty engineering or design software, are often output to a PDF file for guaranteed readability.

Microsoft Office documents such as Excel spreadsheets and charts are a great way to convey quantitative data in a visual format. Complex information can be translated into easy-to-read graphics for maximum clarity and impact.

Some of the digital signage offerings that are standard in corporate or retail applications may not be as important in a faith-based organization. However, the ability to incorporate real-time weather, clock, calendar, scrolling text and news feeds can be useful in many circumstances.

If your organization publishes news online with Real Simple Syndication (RSS,) make sure your signage software supports this feature. Many digital signs include a scrolling news ticker with real-time news from an RSS feed. A valuable feature is the ability to combine both dynamic and static text with your news feed. This allows you to include the current date and time, along with customized information such as church announcements, thank you messages, event details and other timely information.

One common source of frustration involves weather data. Many signage software providers claim that their product licenses include free weather data, but customers often discover unexpected limits to this data.

How many weather locations are available and how often can you look up the weather? If the weather comes from a third-party service, there may be restrictions that apply.

For example, some weather providers will offer a free license key that allows a certain number of lookups every 24 hours. Anything beyond that limit requires a monthly paid subscription.

One such provider utilized by some digital signage software will allot users with 500 lookups per day at no cost. That may seem like a lot, until you consider that keeping the weather current requires at least 10 lookups per hour. At that rate, two digital signs running around the clock will exhaust the entire allotment in little over a day. Upgrading to the next level costs $65 a month for 5,000 lookups, an expense your budget may not accommodate.

Licensing

Digital signage software is available under a variety of business models. The most popular is Software as a Service (SaaS.) Instead of purchasing a permanent license, SaaS customers pay a recurring subscription fee for continued access to the software. For example, Adobe recently adopted this model for their Creative Suite. Customers who might have paid upfront for Photoshop or other products now pay a monthly fee according to the software they to use.

Software as a Service makes sense for many of today's web- and cloud-based applications. However, in the case of digital signage, other factors come into play.

Many SaaS-based signage options keep their monthly costs low by charging additional usage fees. In addition to the monthly licensing, users are charged fees for data upload, download and storage. The software provider will generally maintain their own data storage "cloud." Signage content is uploaded to the cloud and users are charged for that bandwidth. Customers also pay for the amount of data stored in the cloud, and pay additional fees each time content is downloaded to a media player.

For signage installations with minimal content needs, these fees can be trivial. However, if you are using a variety of digital content, such as video and PowerPoint presentations, these usage fees quickly skyrocket. Make certain you fully understand these fees and accurately estimate your monthly cost before contracting with a SaaS provider.

What happens if you are unhappy with a software provider and want to switch to a different solution? You may face penalties for leaving the SaaS agreement. Even worse, you may not be able to use the hardware you already purchased. Some digital signage companies utilize proprietary hardware that only works with their software. In this case, cancelling your software subscription renders your hardware virtually useless.

Another popular option is to purchase the software outright with a permanent license. With this option, you pay upfront for lifetime use. Software support and upgrades may be included in the price or may require additional fees. Pay careful attention to understand what you are paying for and what other costs may be involved.

The benefit of this option, as opposed to a SaaS offering, is that you own the software forever and don't have to budget for a monthly expense. You also maintain local control of your software installation, which offers added reliability and security.

Networking

Many faith-based organizations don't have the same networking infrastructure in place that commercial installations often do. In fact, many houses of worship were built before today's gigabit networks came into existence. Re-wiring your facility can be expensive and extremely disruptive. That's why you need hardware and software that will work reliably with your existing technology.

Most facilities have an Ethernet Local Area Network (LAN) available. This hard-wired connection is far more reliable than a wireless network. If wi-fi is available and you prefer to use that, make sure to check the signal strength at the location of each digital sign. Signal strength can

vary based on a number of factors, including simultaneous usage. Everything might work fine when you install the system, only to fail when you have a full house and need it to work the most.

Whether wired or wireless, you should be able to update all of your signs from a single desktop. It is also helpful to have the option to update from other locations in the event of an absence or to support multiple administrators.

Other scenarios may require different networking options. For example, if you have facilities spread out geographically, it would be ideal to update your displays through cloud services such as Google Drive. On the other hand, if you have no networking capabilities, you'll need a software solution that supports manually updating content by portable media such as a USB thumb drive.

Scheduling

The ability to schedule content is one of the most powerful features of digital signage. In some cases, you may want to display new content immediately. More often, organizations need the ability to schedule playlists in advance.

If your organization has a calendar of events stretching some time into the future, you may want to plan ahead and schedule your content accordingly.

Important Questions to Ask About Content Scheduling

• Can you schedule a playlist to begin and end on certain dates?

• Can you define unique content for different times of day?

• Can you schedule different content for weekdays and weekends?

• How far in advance can you schedule content?

Make sure that your digital signage software allows you to quickly and easily schedule content. Many software packages offer only limited scheduling ability.

Some software also has the ability to put monitors into standby mode when no content is playing, such as after hours when nobody is around. This option only works with monitors that include a data port connection to the PC or media player driving the screen. The software will send a signal to the display telling it when to power on and power off. This saves energy and prevents keeping the facility "lit up" all night long.

Support

Signage software vendors offer varying levels of support. When choosing a software package, find out what support is included and what will incur additional charges.

How and when will inquiries be answered? If you call on a Saturday or Sunday, will help be available? Will they charge you for that call?

Faith-based organizations are especially susceptible to after hours fees imposed by some software companies on weekends and holidays - just when houses of worship are typically busiest. If your signage goes down right before a Sunday morning service or a holiday event, you need to make sure you can get technical support.

It is critical to have a knowledgeable and helpful source of support that you can rely upon at any time. Look for a software partner that offers support in plain English, without the technical jargon. You want to speak with a reliable troubleshooter who can effectively communicate with any layperson, volunteer or staff member who may be dealing with a digital signage meltdown.

Ideally, you should be able to configure and manage your signage with minimal support. The easier it is for even non-technical users to use the software, the fewer support calls will be required.

Resources such as FAQs and troubleshooting guides enable users to solve common problems

without the need for a support call. Comprehensive documentation with easy-to-read instructions and plenty of screenshots are mandatory requirements if your signage is managed by individuals who are not IT professionals.

Display Hardware

The most visible part of a digital signage installation is, of course, the digital sign. Select a display that will support your needs over time.

Organizations on a budget may be drawn to the allure of cheap monitors on sale at discount stores. These are not digital signage displays and should not be used as such.

Consumer grade televisions and monitors are made to survive a one-year warranty term. After that, components susceptible to heat damage will fail. The lamp may burn out, and it's often cheaper to replace than repair. These displays are notorious for a lack of heat resistant components and heat removing slots in their chassis. They may be fine for a few hours of daily TV watching, but they are not designed for 24/7 commercial operation.

Commercial displays, on the other hand, are engineered for commercial environments and extended operation. Heat resistant components, heat dissipating designs, and 3-year or longer warranties make these a much better investment for digital signage. Even with a limited budget, this is one area where paying for quality upfront will save you time, money and plenty of headaches over the long term.

Conclusion

Digital signage is an effective communication tool for faith-based organizations of all types and sizes.

With proper planning and execution, it is easy to implement impactful digital signage. Develop a solid strategy that accounts for the considerations discussed in this paper. Keep your content fresh, colorful, informative and engaging, and your displays will receive the attention they deserve.

About the Author

John Glitsos is President and Founder of Best Wave, LLC.

With over 25 years of experience developing software for digital signage, information kiosks and interactive applications, John is a recognized expert and pioneer in the digital signage industry. He was honored as a guest speaker at the first Digital Signage Expo, and has also been featured as a panelist at GlobalShop and other retail industry trade shows.

John has served as Division President of a Fortune 500 company and Executive Vice President of Sales and Marketing for another public company. He holds a fellowship at the Eller School of Entrepreneurship MBA program at the University of Arizona.

Best Wave is a leading developer of digital signage software solutions, including DisplayIt! and DisplayIt!Xpress signage management software, and ReserveIt! for conference room scheduling and agenda displays.

Learn more and download free trial software at www.bestwave.com.