

It's A Sign

By Karen Mitchell, Systems Contractor News, November 5, 2009

Enterprise Communications Present Digital Signage Opportunities For Traditional AV Integrators

Face it. The brave new worlds of digital signage and webcasting are here to stay, signs of the times.

Both present enormous opportunities for AV integrators as the technologies draw them from the periphery into the nerve centers of client organizations, allowing them to bring out worldwide initiatives at the CEO level, said Mike Newman, CEO of Accordent Technologies, which offers a platform for delivery of live streaming and on-demand webcasting. "The bulk of their systems integration expertise remains the same; the breadth of the solution is broader, a balance between AV room-based solutions and the network, expanding their role beyond the walls."

Accordent, whose client list includes Mayo Clinic, JPMorgan Chase, and Merck, has partnered with some 25 resellers, a few with a national presence. "Typically, they approach us at NAB or InfoComm," Newman said. "We do a sequenced certification process and they come for in-house training semi-annually. Our focus is on improving the depth of relationships and ensuring that they're up to speed."

Accordent goal is to make training as easy as possible for integrators to roll out the system without having to be immersed in the hardcore technology. "We are set up to enable them with technical resources and they're involved in system configuration and light integration," he said. "The technology for streaming servers often touches user-active directories and enterprise systems."

Entering the realm of webcasting and signage is less of a technical hurdle and more of a strategic issue, Newman said. "It's about asking the right questions, and how the AV provider can be more of a communication consultant."

"At the end of the day integrators need a tight relationship with IT, but it doesn't exist unless someone in a functional business unit has a need to communicate," he added. "You're talking about very important communication and education initiatives. Regarding the economy, traditional design and build falls into budget cuts. Digital signage and webcasting help organizations reduce costs and market more efficiently. The proof is in the amount of revenue we've derived in the financial services industry; the industry is notably impaired, and in an effort to recoup they're investing incredibly heavily in both signage and webcasting."

FIND YOUR NICHE

Many of Scala's integrators started out in traditional AV and moved into the digital signage space, said Andrea Waldin, VP of marketing for the digital signage company, which provides software and advertising management solutions: "We are 100-percent channel-based so everything we sell goes through an integrator of some kind."

The signage market has several layers depending on the complexity of the system, she explained. "As the end-user, you can buy software from a reseller and install it yourself. But typically, digital signage networks are a bit more sophisticated, and when it's a large deployment, there's usually someone doing the installation, someone handling the IT side, and a content provider—lots of partners involved."

The main thing integrators need to know is that digital signage represents a whole new medium. "It's not print, web, or a 30-second-loop commercial, so when they roll out the networks they need to treat content differently. This is a new technology and that's lost on some. Some integrators think digital signage is flat screens with Power-Point, but it's more sophisticated than that, from live data feeds and database integration in a retail environment, or in a corporation, integration of the CRM system."

Scala recruits integrators and currently has 450 worldwide partners. "We see ourselves as a platform that needs to be customized and delivered to the end user through an integrator who can add their own skill set and offer a really customized solution," Waldin said. "Most of our successful partners start in one market niche and then branch out. We offer training classes both in our training centers in the U.S., Japan, U.K., and Holland and onsite at integrators' offices. Among the growing market segments for corporate communications is the healthcare field, with many workers who are disconnected to the stream of communications. Hospitals have the added benefit of being able to use the systems as a patient communications tools."

WHAT TO ASK

"Key questions for AV integrators revolve around what kind of content is needed and how much will it cost to create and maintain fresh content," Engstrom said, communications director of the control products and software manufacturer Contemporary Research. "The ROI of signage is determined not so much in the equipment cost, but the yearly expense in keeping it relevant and useful. "From our experience," Engstrom observed, "we see that what the AV integrator's natural market—corporations, education, civic, and worship centers—is looking for today is informative signage that delivers relevant data, news, and announcements without creating high overhead to make it happen. This involves middleware software that can sift and interpret the data on the fly and present it attractively as multimedia charts, graphics, RSS feeds, and text on displays. This includes web tools that volunteers and staff can use to add text and graphics about services, seminars, meetings, and events—enriching the value of the medium without increasing origination costs."

In this developing market, AV integrators partner with enterprise communication AV companies such as X2O Media, Tightrope Media, and others for software solutions, he said. "That frees the integrator to design and install a system solution for delivery throughout the facility. While one imagines digital signage as IP-driven media played on PCs attached to displays, other pathways are emerging. Contemporary Research's QMOD technology can deliver the same signage as HDTV digital cable channels, using the



existing RF system to present content on displays with built-in HD tuners. Web engines can deliver enterprise signage to every desktop, appearing as a screensaver, or even through an iPhone app."

Engstrom said enterprise communication technology dovetails well with AV integrators' natural markets and skills, without the necessity of changing entire business models. "Integrator-driven signage solutions don't have to be about pushing ads and metrics for billing. This is about information and communication, which, when joined, could form a good name for our professional association."