

WHITE PAPER

Cutting Through The Digital Signage Software Clutter

By Ranga Raj, June 2010

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Companies weighing scores of options for digital signage software can easily cut through the clutter if they figure out what they will necessarily require going forward, and not just what they currently need right now.

The companies that get this right have a clear sense of how their networks will grow and evolve, and what that means in terms of future technology and resource requirements. But then, many companies make the mistake of basing their software platform decision on current requirements only. These companies almost certainly find themselves stranded with a platform that eventually exposes core weaknesses once a network starts to get real scale and requires new features. Limitations can quickly grow more evident and costs that seemed attractive in the pilot phase start to pile up as more players and screens turn on.

“Buyers are struggling to get a complete and cost-effective solution”

Paul Flanigan, Partner, The Preset Group¹

In the worst of cases, they find themselves doing a

costly reset of software, hardware, the networking environment, and content, all within a year of launch. Or they are left spinning their company wheels, stuck in a two or three-year Software as a Service (SaaS) agreement that looked attractive at the beginning, but grew too expensive with scale and is unable to deliver the enhanced flexibility and customization that is now needed. Functions that are needed right now are promised by their vendors for the “next release”, although in reality they would not be made available in a year or, for that matter, even longer.

It’s a mistake that is easily made.

“Scrimping leads to scraping”

Lyle Bunn, Principal & Strategy Architect,
BUNN Co. Services²

At first glance, the seemingly countless options in the marketplace for digital signage software all appear to do the same essential thing – enable operators to schedule, distribute, and manage messaging across a network of displays. The determining factors are therefore limited to ease of use, price, and whether the operators want to “rent” (using a SaaS provider) or own the software platform.

¹ Source: KioskCom & The Digital Signage Show - <http://experiate.net/2009/11/12/kioskcom-the-digital-signage-show/>

² Source: Fail to Plan – Plan to Fail - <http://lylebunn.com/Documents/Fail%20to%20plan%20-%20Plan%20to%20fail%20-%20Software%20Confusion%20Reduced.pdf>

What are regularly overlooked are important questions such as the workflow efficiency of the platform, its ability to integrate with third party systems, the impact of converging technologies and requirements, and ramifications of network security and traffic.

In planning a digital signage network, you should not decide on a platform based on features and specifications that meet only today's needs, and what looks easiest or least costly to use at the start. Organizations change, and your platform must be able to accommodate that change from a technical perspective. You should plan for a three-year horizon, and here are some of the factors that you need to consider:

True Scale

Can the platform technically handle the volume of data, concurrent connections, reporting, and storage needed when your network reaches its full size? Do the workflow processes for scheduling and managing the network mean staffing requirements grow at the same pace as the network, or does that growth mean only nominally more work for your staff? Easy-to-use systems are often easy because they don't do much, and require a lot of people when the network grows.

Evolving Needs

Can the platform ensure that a network that is

customer-facing now, also be employee-facing over time with demands for internal training and employee communication? The retail network that starts as simple marketing screens might need to tie into pricing and inventory back-office systems within a year. The IT department might want to bridge several existing systems and get them working together in harmony. Digital out-of-home (DOOH) advertising sales planning systems will almost certainly want to plug in directly to networks. Whatever be the case, you need to carefully consider if your software vendor would be able to satisfy these and any other new and customized needs.

Emerging and Converging Media Technologies

Will the platform be able to address the impact and leverage the opportunity of mobile, Web, and non-PC computing developments that are already changing the way people shop and consume media? Can the platform adapt, or will it leave your network largely on the sidelines waiting for your software vendor to catch up?

Looking Forward

To put together a seriously-smart, future-proofed system, your platform architecture needs to be flexible and able to rapidly evolve to quickly and effectively satisfy a wide range of growing requirements in each of these core areas:

Content

- Integration with data sources and external applications
- Personalization of content based on data
- Advertising campaign creation that can come in from external systems
- Support and filtering for user-generated content

Network Traffic

- Support for alternative networking and communication technologies and levels of encryption
- Provide high availability infrastructure that can change based on a network's business needs
- Aggregation of other business data that goes well beyond proof-of-play

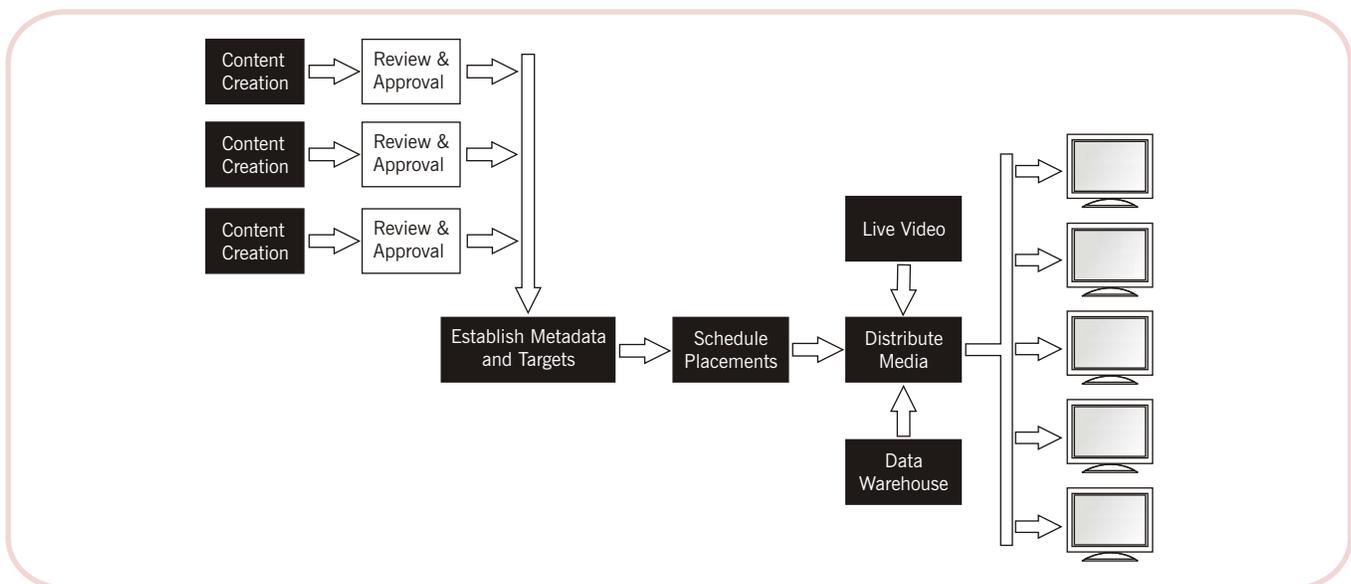
Hardware

- Platform and player support for non-PC devices, like low-cost Set-top HD video boxes

- Variety of hardware options for target price points and capabilities
- Integration with existing legacy or third-party players in a hybrid mode (put differently, will the players on the network you just merged with be able to run your software, and can your software vendor facilitate that?)
- Integration with business systems, such as POS and billing systems

Software Customization

- Security and authentication frameworks
- Audience measurement/Metrics/Analytics systems
- POS/Supply chain/ERP systems
- Telepresence, video distribution systems
- Digital Asset Management systems
- Mobile interactivity platforms
- Portals that allow access to partners, users, and customers



- Leverage multiple channels of communication with your customers, besides just digital signage – such as mobile, email, etc.

Looking beyond pure technical matters, companies choosing a software partner also need to carefully factor business considerations.

You need a partner with a platform that is capable of handling customization and extensions, and has the credentials and resources to actually deliver on those needs, and on your timelines. Any software company can promise to deliver new features and functions, but few have scalable teams that can do quality work and still move the company's overall platform roadmap along. Almost always, custom work interrupts or slows core development in small companies which largely dominate this sector.

You also need cost-effective rates for professional software engineering services that would not cripple budgets or compromise plans. You should not be held hostage by the argument that “dropping everything to do this will cost you.”

You want to look for an organization that has the breadth of skills, experiences, and capabilities ranging across embedded systems, networking, application development, Web services, rich media, workflows, and varied operating systems. Your customization requirement should not be new territory for your vendor. Your software vendor of

choice should also have a proven track record of delivering products for global clientele ranging from start-ups to Fortune 500 companies.

Finally, the three-year planning horizon for your project also needs to incorporate the status of the vendor. In a crowded field that is certain to see substantial contraction and many mergers, you need to be absolutely confident that your chosen supplier has the financial resources and business position to be one of those companies that are still a part of the industry in three years time.

When you decide on a platform, do not just go by specification sheets that meet today's requirements. Find yourself a partner that is capable of helping you get to where you intend to be. Getting that right will help ensure your network's smooth growth and success.

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