

Driving Toward Digital

Digital signage has waited its turn in the drive-thru lane. Now, its order is up

For the first time in recent memory, Brian McClimans saw that his 13-year-old daughter was actually impressed and excited by a piece of technology that he also found interesting. The vice president of global business development for Peerless-AV says the same digital menuboards that caught the eye of his daughter were of particular interest to him as well.

“I’d gone into McDonald’s with a whole group of kids right at 10:25, and couple of them wanted lunch, while some still wanted breakfast,” he says. As they waited, he and the kids watched the menuboards in the store switch so that some displays were dedicated to lunch, some to breakfast, and some featured a blend of offerings from both dayparts.

“It was fun just to have about a dozen people there staring and waiting for the digital menuboards to switch and see what items were available,” he says. “To be honest, it was probably the first time my daughter and her friends thought I was cool! It’s very hard to impress the tech-driven Millennials, and they actually were having fun watching the switch, too.”

A lot has changed in the outdoor service and tech scene over the past five years.

Now the quick-service industry stands at the brink of a whole new way to connect with customers at the drive thru.

The way of the future lies in digital, but unfortunately, it comes at a cost.

Starbucks is providing an example for others in the industry for how early implementation can come with sizable payoffs.

“They’ve been disruptive in the industry by leading the charge, and I think that’s a really smart move,” McClimans says.

Starbucks has, in essence, blended static and digital signage by keeping constant items on a more traditional display while highlighting special offers based on the season or even the weather to encourage impulse buying and up-selling.

Still, despite the recognition Starbucks and some other brands are receiving from their tech-forward approach—and despite the sales increases that have come as a result—many are hesitant to swallow the initial cost for the update.

When McClimans discusses Peerless-AV’s



digital menuboards, durable, customizable, and visually appealing Xtreme Outdoor Digital Menu Board Kiosks, he encourages management to look not only at start-up costs (which can run two to three times that of traditional menuboards), but also at the long-term benefits that outweigh the upfront costs.

“Instead of getting stuck at that first point, they really need to break down the barriers of silos within their organization to understand the true benefit,” he says. “We tell them to truly look at the operational efficiencies that they’ll save once they actually fully implement digital into their business, and how that will impact their speed and ability to beat competition.”

For instance, while it might take a number of months to finally launch a new menu item and get product to stores, additional months are required to update, design, and release new static menuboard designs to accommodate every single addition. With digital, that change could happen stress-free overnight, easing menu roll outs and increasing both efficiency and efficacy of marketing efforts.

Ease and stress relief are two focal points

within NCR Vitalcast software, which envelops a complete drive-thru solution, not a patchwork of hard-to-integrate products.

NCR’s one-stop shop allows system-wide changes to be made at any time in mere seconds.

Digital menuboards, pre-sell boards, order confirmation boards, and more can be managed from a single location to provide consistent brand messaging. Improved communication and consistency doesn’t stop there—NCR recognizes that customers no longer have much tolerance for late-stage order correction or mistakes, so each of the products are meant to not only speed up service, but also increase accuracy and customer-employee communication throughout the process.

In addition to measurable speed increases, Brian Gray, general manager of NCR Texas Digital, says that digital pre-sell boards and menuboards with animations reduce perceived wait times as well.

“The waiting customer now has their mind active with ‘oh that looks good,’ or ‘maybe I should try that,’ instead of sitting there focused on trying to move one step up in the queue.”

Everbrite is searching for the optimum balance between promoting the speed of drive thrus and the implementation of new technology.

“We’re at a turning point in the industry right now,” says Jay Jensen, vice president of sales and marketing. “One of the opportunities is that a lot of quick serves in the marketplace have been working to change their image to much more of a casual, upscale environment and much less of a fast-food atmosphere.”

Everbrite is doing its fair share of research to determine the most effective ways to leverage digital signage for elevating brand image. The company is the only signage and menuboard company in the U.S. that has its own dedicated technology center devoted to developing new, effective, and cost-efficient forms and uses of dig-

itate the shifting tide toward digital signage.

For Techknow, this next frontier provides exciting opportunities to elevate marketing strategies and integrate displays with pre-existing systems to provide more insightful analytics.

As a first step, the company began looking into how restaurants could better use order confirmation screens for marketing and up-selling opportunities.

Order confirmation screens have traditionally measured at around 15 inches, providing just enough space to list back-order contents. Far exceeding that standard, Techknow introduced the industry’s first 32-inch and 46-inch order confirmation system.

With this product, the company is able to split the screen between order confirmation text and

to use the space.

Elliott says the company is in the process of enhancing its analytical software package to provide feedback on effectiveness of limited-time promotions.

This is another area where the digital aspect of the technology works to help restaurants: providing analytics to deliver better marketing campaigns.

Delphi Display Systems’ Insight Verify software solution does just that. The solution, which is designed to work with Delphi’s Endura line of order confirmation systems, pushes out specific upsell messages based on items ordered.

The system is easily managed with web-based tools, allowing brands to create custom order confirmation layouts as well as pre-sell and upsell slide shows. The software’s marketing capabilities are enhanced by the ability to pair text with high-resolution imagery.

Additionally, the Verify software provides detailed reports to analyze the effectiveness of marketing campaigns in the drive thru.

“Now that operators have more space to advertise, and more information about how to best place those advertisements, marketing in the drive thru is becoming more sophisticated and more effective,” says Mark DiCamillo, vice president of product management.

As a veteran in the background music industry, **Mood Media** considers curating the perfect customer experience its specialty. Mood offers a complete, end-to-end digital signage solution complete with system design, software, hardware, content, service, and support. This comprehensive approach allows brands to take complete control of the customer experience in a dynamic way.

With Mood’s custom TV option, which allows brands to create unique television “channels” to run on digital displays, customers are engaged within the restaurant in entirely new ways.

“People spend so much time considering the lighting, the color on the wall, the type of tables in their store,” says Dave Van Epps, global chief product officer. “This part of the visual experience is just as important.”

Whereas questions of cost associated with digital signage are an area of concern for many operators, Mood’s custom solutions often cost less than a subscription to cable or satellite TV, but with a much larger impact on promotion and engagement.

“There are so many small dials that any restaurant has to turn to build something great,” Van Epps says. “But whatever restaurant it is, experience is always going to be the biggest thing, and there are subtle things that can really make or break that experience.”



ital signage. The tech center also provides a space for Everbrite to work with brands to understand exactly what they hope to get out of signage and drive-thru initiatives, as well as what franchisees might be incurring in terms of costs.

Jensen is certain that digital drive-thru tech is merely in its infancy, and that big leaps are on the horizon. For instance, simply using digital as a moving version of static signage has shown to be an effective marketing technique with plenty of time-saving operational benefits, but it’s quite possible that the digital drive thru of the future will look less like a menuboard and much more like a host panel to interface with mobile apps.

Techknow is another company on the scene providing thought leadership as restaurants navi-

product promotion.

“We’ve seen that a larger display gives brands more room to not only give a better description of the product being ordered, but also turn their drive thru into a digital merchandising platform, since up to 70 percent of quick serves’ revenue is generated in those lanes,” says Techknow president Richard Elliott.

Techknow uses its patent on these larger screens to improve order accuracy by pairing more detailed item descriptions with images of the ordered meals, making mistakes even easier to catch.

Of course, simply having a larger screen doesn’t guarantee improved service or marketing if brands aren’t aware of the most effective ways

Consumer engagement with tech in the drive thru is driving marketing in less direct ways as well, and **HyperActive Tech** is one company investigating how to best use the dynamic abilities of digital signage to drive consumer interest.

“We think that the way you go through the drive thru in the coming years is going to be substantially different,” says Scott Marentay, chief operating officer. “The idea of engaging people with a digital strategy is going to be huge.”

Marentay says he sees social media playing a greater role in the future of digital signage. For instance, additional screen space could be used to run a Twitter feed or show people enjoying the latest LTO on Instagram.

Especially for socially savvy, tech-connected Millennials, seeing friends on the screen—along with the prospect of seeing themselves—could work as a powerful marketing message.

Of course, this would have to be used strategically so customers don’t linger. Ideally, however, leveraging social media in the drive thru would create an exciting, connecting experience, which would promote repeat visits and LTO purchases.

NEC Display, a leading projector and display manufacturer, aims to balance display efficiency and effective advertising in the drive-thru space.

“What we’re seeing are brands looking for different ways to push impulse buys without breaking up the flow of traffic,” says Richard Ventura, vice president of product marketing and solutions. “To do that, there’s been a lot of experimentation and requests for integration of new data points into the menuboard system, like integration of social media or mobile ordering apps.”

While software specialists continue to explore the best ways to use beacon and RFID technology to streamline customer orders, some simple tech tweaks are having immediate effects on sales in the drive thru.

This is especially the case for LTO marketing. Because digital signage allows for easy updates, LTOs can be marketed by daypart or according to inventory. In fact, Ventura says he has seen some restaurants test out LTOs that are exclusive to the drive thru, giving customers an added reason to pull the trigger on an impulse purchase.

Special drive-thru LTOs also provide easy-to-prepare and easy-to-repeat orders, allowing employees to move people through the line even more quickly.



Recognizing the need to protect valuable digital signage from the elements, **ITSECLOSURES** creates environments to ensure sensitive hardware works in any situation—come sleet, dust, or searing sunlight.

The switch to In Plane Switching (IPS) panels outdoors has given the company the ability to broaden the temperature range in which digital menuboards can be used. The company’s ViewStation enclosures support an impressive range of temperatures, from -40 F to a steamy 120. This switch to IPS, coupled with LED backlighting, reduces power consumption and allows enclosures to use fan-only cooling solutions versus compressor-based systems.

Together, this confluence of improvements drastically reduces lifecycle costs while increasing reliability.

ITSECLOSURES is able to enclose a wide variety of dimensions and set-ups.

While these digital signage investments need to be protected from the elements, it’s also crucial that these protective measures not obscure the information on the menuboard.

ITSECLOSURES products come with museum-quality antireflective laminated safety glass for top-notch outdoor visibility. The LCD lighting features automatic dimming capabilities

that soften the look in lower light conditions. In addition, the company’s proprietary glass combination allows 99 percent light transmission and UV protection and is completely serviceable in the field.

These types of savvy precautions are what have made the company successful for 30 years in protecting what is becoming an increasingly valuable and expensive investment for restaurants.

“We are often called upon to clean up after ‘signage’ companies who think an enclosure system is just another ‘light box,’” says Jennifer Bissell, director of sales and marketing. “ITSECLOSURES has a reputation for doing it right the first time with unparalleled customer support, both pre- and post-installation.”

By locating a vendor that understands restaurants’ expectations and goals for digital signage, brands can confidently take the leap toward new technology in the drive thru. As more restaurants make the move, it remains to be seen just how much higher these improvements can push convenience and commerce in such a high-impact aspect of the quick-service industry.

To ensure that these benefits can be fully realized, NEC developed technology to provide the stability of a static display with the versatility of digital.

In other words, a special drive thru LTO will only be effective if it’s actually present on the screen.

To make sure that potential computer failures don’t lead to any downtime or revenue loss, NEC built in a back-up for its systems.

If one feed goes down, the system is self-aware enough to immediately replace it with an alternative feed or menuboard, so there’s no disruption in service or marketing.

By conquering downtime, NEC quelled another fear faced by brands that are hesitant to invest in the digital technology.

“There’s a reason why there are so many NEC screens out there in the restaurant industry,” Ventura says. “Our low failure rates, high reliability, flexible design, and extensive feature set are all incredibly important and useful for restaurants.”

For outdoor products, physical durability also plays a crucial role in reliability.

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