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Top Tips For Digital Menu Board Implementation



Quick service restaurants (QSRs) have always been known for their dynamic environments. Orders are taken quickly, payment is made, and the food is prepared, wrapped, bagged and handed over all in less than a minute or two (ideally). It's a fast-paced, ever-changing world. With one notable exception: the menu boards.

Many QSRs are still using the same basic, static menu concepts that have been around since a certain milkshake machine salesman opened his first hamburger stand. Even that is changing now, though, with the move to digital menu boards. Unlike the printed materials that have to be designed, produced and delivered from corporate to the stores—a process that can take a couple of weeks to a month—digital menu boards allow QSRs to react instantly to market pressures, easily comply with caloric labeling regulations that vary from state to state (in 2011 Federal Mandate for restaurants with 20+ locations), allow for dayparting of menu items and pricing, and feature particular food and/or promotional items on a rotating basis.

With all that going for them, it would seem like deploying digital menu boards should be as easy as asking, "Would you like fries with that?" Yet there's more to it than

hanging a monitor where a static board used to be. Following are three things YOU need to keep in mind when asking for a bid, and design of a digital menu board project.

Make systems redundant

The menu board is the information lifeline between customers and the QSR. If screens suddenly go blank, the whole operation comes to a standstill. That's bad enough inside the restaurant. But in the drive-through, which represents 70 percent of QSR revenue, it can be a disaster.

In a standard installation, every menu board is connected to a PC. But what if that PC has a problem? It's important to have a backup on every board, with a failover that activates instantly should a problem arise. Make sure that the media players are also designed so that they can support the type of content you wish to run. Just because today you don't want to run video doesn't mean tomorrow you won't.

The same is true for the signs themselves. If one digital menu board in a four-board display goes out, the content and software needs to be dynamic enough to shift critical information immediately to the three remaining boards. It may not be ideal, but it will keep things running.

Everyone is concerned with keeping costs down, especially in competitive bid situations, but redundancy is not the place to cut costs. Be sure you have a plan in place.

Use professional-grade equipment designed for the environment

The insides of QSRs tend to be hot, greasy, even dusty places with lots of airborne contaminants flying around. This "hostile" environment can wreak havoc on the electronics and other components if the screen isn't built to take it.

When choosing a display to place in a restaurant you should look for products with a sealed module design to prevent particles from getting in and contaminating the LCD. They should also be able to withstand temperature extremes, particularly heat, while operating 24 x 7 x 365. That's not something you'll find at your local big box retailer.

Another advantage to using professional-grade equipment is the ability to lock out video ports, such as an HDMI port. QSRs don't want their employees playing video games or watching movies on their expensive digital menu boards. Yet that's what some will do if the capability exists.

When you're selecting products, be sure that unused or undesired ports are disabled or inaccessible to prevent unauthorized use. That also applies to controls such as power, channel or volume. The more you can prevent tampering, and keep control of the operation in the back room, the less likely you are to be called in during the height of dinner hour for some emergency maintenance.

Take extra care outdoors

One of the keys to a successful outdoor deployment is selecting the right enclosure in which to place the menu board. It needs to be weatherproof, built to withstand a 98 mph fastball, and anchored so solidly that if anyone tried to uproot one, then they'd be more likely to tear the bumper off their car than pull the sign out. It also

needs to be able to keep the screen readable, even in direct sunlight. Yet those aren't the only considerations to keep in mind.

LCD signs generate a lot of heat on their own, and during the summer, conditions only get worse. You need to be sure the sign itself has adequate cooling for outdoor use, and that the enclosure is well-ventilated and able to dissipate heat quickly. During the winter, those same screens may be subjected to extreme cold, and so must be able to withstand those temperatures without cracking.

Then there are the bugs. Not the computer-type – although you want to minimize those as well – but actual, physical bugs. Here again, a sealed system keeps digital menu boards from turning into large, expensive bug zappers.

Expectations are that the outdoor menu board will operate flawlessly on a 24 x 7 basis for five years. Taking these steps will help you meet those expectations.

Bonus tip: Size matters

Different QSRs have different requirements for their menu boards. Some want to include promotional or “keep the customers occupied during the rush” video. Others don't. Some have more limited menus and need fewer boards and/or less space. Some of the more advanced may even want to use them to encourage customers to send a text for a coupon for a free food item, or vote on a new beverage flavor. One size (or configuration) doesn't fit all those needs.

Digital menu boards are the present and future of the QSR industry. That creates tremendous opportunities for resellers who can deliver quality installations.

Rich Ventura is North American Sales Manager – Vertical Solutions for NEC Display Solutions (www.necdisplay.com).