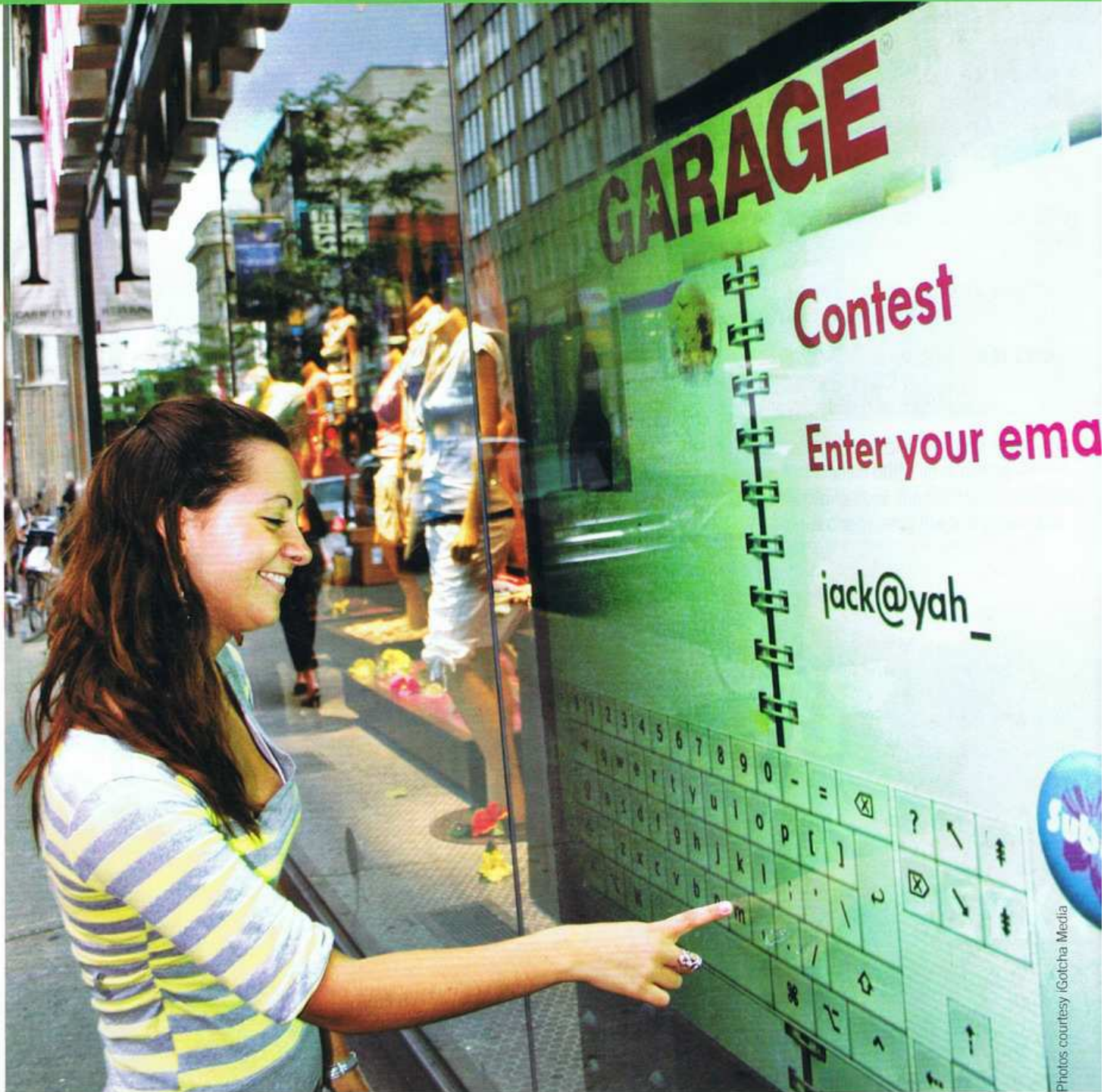




# Interacting with Consumers



Photos courtesy (Gotcha Media)

# Measurable two-way communications are highly valuable.

By Greg Adelstein and Michael Terni

Interactive digital signage seems to have a bright future. One day, there likely will be touch screens almost everywhere: retail stores, restaurants, malls, gas stations, subway trains, bus shelters, sports arenas, office buildings, schools and libraries, among other locations.

One of the reasons for this growing trend is marketing. There has been an overall decline in advertising in traditional media, like TV, newspapers and radio. Out-of-home (OOH) media, on the other hand, are growing as people's lives become busier. Working adults spend up to 60 per cent of their lives outside the home, so the appeal of digital signage as an advertising medium continues to increase.

Another key driver is cost. The prices for the hardware necessary for interactive digital signage are becoming more affordable. Also, the technology is becoming easier to implement.

In-store signage, in particular, will continue to become digital and more interactive. While 'pure' digital signage is a one-way form of communication, interactive signage allows for measurable two-way communications; and for this reason, it has significantly more value.

"Touch screens and other interactive devices permitting the exchange of content with consumers are powerful additions for digital signage," says Benoit Johnson, president of Vif Communication, a digital signage consultancy and network operator in Verdun, Que.

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This in-store kiosk allowed shoppers to customize their athletic shoes.

Digital signage attracts attention. With interactivity, it is more likely to lead to a sale.

### Engaging customers

To sell their products, companies need to engage customers. Digital signage is effective for attracting their attention, but interactivity—if handled right—engages them further and is more likely to result in a sale.

Today's retail landscape is dominated by very large stores that prioritize low prices and wide selection, rather than sales staff who can provide information to customers. The shopping experience has thus changed substantially.

Interactive digital signage can help, by providing a potential customer with detailed information and showing off a product's unique selling points. A 'barren' retail environment can be made more fun, with happier shoppers leading to more completed sales.

"Whether shoppers are looking for information or inspiration, interactive digital signage provides an effective tool to allow them to experience in-store media in a relevant way," says Jeff Canetti, marketing manager for Artisan Live, a digital signage developer in Markham, Ont. (see *Sign Media Canada*, April 2007, pages 18 to 22). "To make it relevant, the content must be contextual and experiential."


The following are several examples of the medium's benefits for retail stores.

#### *Athletic shoe store*

Today, walking into an athletic shoe store can be quite daunting, as most stores carry hundreds of different shoes. The staff is usually young and has limited product knowledge, due to high turnover.

For these reasons, interactive digital signage can provide an effective way to help customers find the right products—as well as for an advertised brand to stand out. A touch screen can be used by the customer alone or by staff as a sales tool.

Interactive digital signage can help collect personal data for future marketing endeavours. The retailer's



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human resources (HR) department can also use the same technology as a tool to help transmit messages and train staff more effectively, providing further strategic justification for the investment.

One of the primary problems faced by shoe stores is keeping all of the sizes in each of the styles in stock. Many sales are lost because a desired product is not in inventory. A touch screen connected to the Internet could enable such purchases to occur online, with shoes of the correct style, size and colour subsequently shipped directly to the customer. The return on investment (ROI) for this scenario is clearly measurable, with customers walking away more satisfied.

"The number one request we see from shoppers today is to build a better bridge between the online channel and the store," says Laura Davis-Taylor, founder and principal of Retail Media Consulting (see *Sign Media Canada*, June 2007, pages 54 to 60). "This makes sense, as many online stores provide excellent customer service, personalized experiences and easy shopping transactions that consumers have grown to love. Interactive digital signage is an ideal way to build this bridge."

#### *Car dealerships*

Automotive manufacturers use modern advertising campaigns, but their point-of-purchase (POP) materials tend to be very traditional and 'mass' in scale. Generally, a tiny piece of paper is placed next to a vehicle, listing its price and various features, with no localized or targeted messages.

That piece of paper can now be replaced with a portable, lightweight touch screen showing—rather than simply listing—the vehicle's features, along with video footage of the assembly process and other content. The customer can take the screen into the car to learn about different components, such as airbags and electronics, and how they work.

The process can be customized based on the features and benefits being explored, with incentives targeted on a local basis. This is a more powerful way of helping a potential buyer experience the vehicle while assisting the dealership in closing a sale.

Again, the shopping advantages provided by the Internet can now be brought into the retail environment. In-store customers can electronically customize a car's design to their preferences—*e.g.* seeing what a particular model will look like in black or with five-spoke aluminum wheels and a skirt or spoiler.

#### *Wine stores*

Customer service is important in wine stores when it comes to up-selling. Many stores find their average revenue per sale increases 30 to 50 per cent when a



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Garage, which sells clothing for young women, is reportedly the first retailer in Canada to use an interactive window display, whereby the exterior surface becomes a touch screen. Garage's flagship store in Montreal is using the technology for a back-to-school campaign.

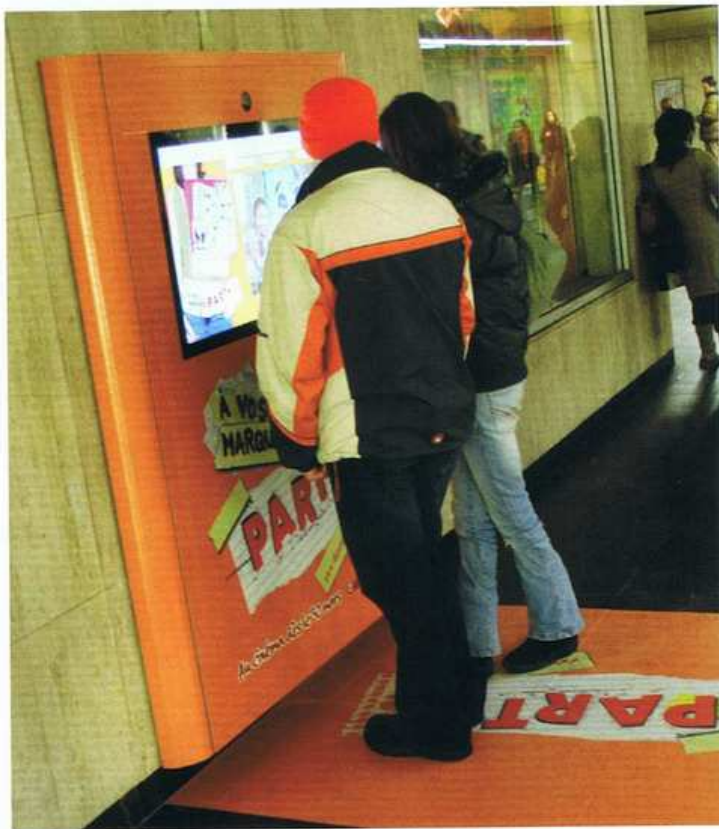
customer is helped by knowledgeable staff. For example, a customer considering a \$12 bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon can fairly easily be convinced to purchase a \$15 bottle if advised it is twice as good.

Today's customers also want to know about a wine's flavour and which foods would match nicely—or vice versa, which wine to choose to go with a particular meal. Unfortunately, some of these customers do not like to ask for help and many large-scale retailers lack sufficiently trained staff. So, interactive technology that can educate customers and staff alike presents an opportunity to increase sales and loyalty.

### Trends

Among OOH media, more marketing and advertising dollars are being directed in-store, as this is where most buying decisions are made. Interactive digital signage offers the added benefit of providing personal data collected from users to advertisers.

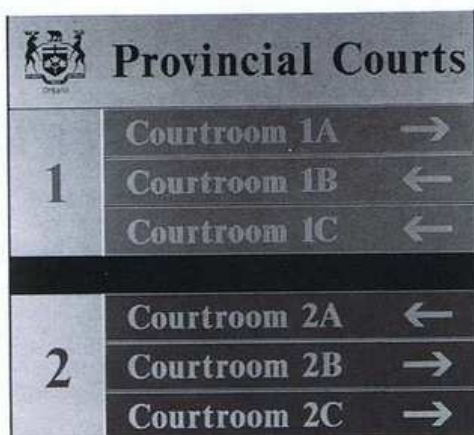
Another reason retailers are using interactive digital signage is to reduce staffing costs. In this way, it is similar to the increasing popularity of self-checkout counters at grocery stores.



MetroMedia Plus' backlit posters in the Montreal subway system are being replaced with touch screens. In the first month of this process, several thousand transit users interacted with signage advertising a new movie.

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Interactive window displays are a growing trend in retail signage, as well. An image projected on a window is combined with touch-based technology that works through the glass, thus turning the exterior surface of an existing store window into an interactive touch screen.

Passersby can gain product information, enter a survey or contest and provide personal data. And the hours of operation can be extended, with customer interaction still possible after the store has closed and employees have gone home.

This development in signage has been gaining popularity because it is bright, attention-grabbing, engaging and easily updated. It can also be big—while interactive window displays are usually between 1 and 2 m (40 and 80 in.), they can potentially be any size, given today's multimedia projectors of varying brightness.

Last year, clothing chain Ralph Lauren reportedly became the first retailer in the U.S. to use an interactive window display. It was part of a temporary campaign during the U.S. Open tennis tournament.

The signs had already proven popular in Europe, but now several major rollouts are expected in North America.

This summer, for example, Garage—a chain that sells clothing to teenage girls—became the first retailer in Canada to use the technology. An interactive window display is promoting a back-to-school campaign at its flagship store in Montreal.

Another growing trend is the conversion of static signage into interactive digital signage. For example, MetroMedia Plus' large backlit posters in the Montreal subway system are now being converted into interactive screens, using custom-engineered 1-m (42-in.) displays designed for the harsh, vandalism-prone environment.

In the first month of this installation process, a campaign ran whereby transit users could watch a movie trailer; learn about the actors in the movie and enter to win passes to see it. Several thousand users touched the screen, for an average of almost two minutes per user session. More than 30 per cent of users answered three multiple-choice questions and provided valid e-mail addresses. These results will allow MetroMedia to generate significantly more revenue per campaign than with static posters.

Conversion projects like this are well-suited for shopping malls, airports and other high-traffic areas.

### Key features

When planning an interactive digital signage project, a variety of hardware and software tools should be considered, depending on the environment, budget and objectives.

The following are some key features for software:

#### Content management

Software can provide the capabilities to 'push' content out on a per-screen basis, change it in real time, schedule time-of-day programming, synchronize screens, trigger content based on motion or touch and send Short Message Service (SMS) or e-mail messages to customers who provide personal data. It can also allow for the addition of bar-code readers, card-swiping hardware,

Bluetooth connectivity—for wireless downloads to mobile phones—and radio frequency identification (RFID) technology.

When choosing content management software, it is important to find out what happens if the Internet connection is lost.

The fact a screen offers interactivity at all needs to be made abundantly clear.

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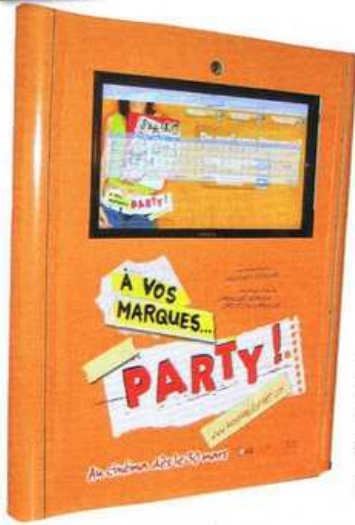
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## Special Report: Digital Signage



- Is content still displayed?
- Can the touch screens still be used?
- Are user statistics stored locally, then transmitted back to the central server when the connection is restored—or is the data permanently lost?

### Monitoring

Software can be used to monitor network uptime and 'proof of play.' It can also provide instant alerts whenever there is an equipment failure.

### Control

At a minimum, software should offer the ability to turn screens on and off—to extend the life of the equipment—and reboot servers, all remotely.

### Reporting

Through software-based reporting, digital signage operators can measure how many people touch each screen in a given period (*i.e.* number of user sessions), how long each user session lasts and how often specific pages or products are viewed.

Reporting also includes the ability to collect data gathered from contests or surveys, which is crucial in determining 'cost per action' or 'cost per acquisition' (CPA).

### Network security

Software must be designed to maintain network security. It is important that (a) only desired messages appear on screens and (b) any personal data collected, transmitted and stored is sufficiently encrypted to adhere to privacy laws.

### Network scalability

As the popularity of digital signage grows, software needs to support the ability to deploy hundreds to thousands of screens within a single network.

### Execution

Like any media, the success of interactive digital signage relies not only on the technology behind it, but also on its execution.

Numerous networks have failed for a variety of reasons related to execution, including poorly chosen screen locations, content that was not relevant or timely, advertising revenue that never materialized and systems that could not adequately monitor and measure results.

The main reason networks fail, however, is companies underestimate the effort and investment required to maintain and grow effective place-based digital media.

'Content is king.' It needs to be designed specifically for interactive digital signage, not simply repurposed from TV or online advertising, because a brand may only have a few seconds to capture an onlooker's attention. For example, an advertiser's logo needs to appear on-screen throughout an ad, so anyone glancing at the screen can potentially be exposed to the brand.

The very fact a screen offers interactivity at all needs to be made abundantly clear. 'Button' graphics on a touch screen need to be much larger than those designed for the Web—and the experience needs to be intuitive and rapid enough to direct users to their desired content within three clicks.

Most companies in the growing digital signage sector specialize in software, hardware, installation or content. Few attempt to offer all of these services in 'turnkey' packages. So, generally, one of the keys to a project's success is the integration of various teams.

Also, a retail client planning to implement digital signage—interactive or otherwise—usually does not have a specialized team in place, but instead is seeking ways to outsource most or all of the work. The core teams who should participate in the process are marketing/communications, logistics/finance, visual merchandising, media asset owners, information technology (IT), construction, HR and store management.

### Measuring value

Digital signage has grown as an industry, but even today, the value of networks is often difficult to measure. There are no standards related to screen size, location within a store, etc.

Interactive digital signage can help solve some of the industry's problems through the ongoing gathering of data and continuous measurability. And where a simple retail kiosk's primary purpose may be functionality, an interactive digital sign can provide a more powerful tool for advertising and for providing customer service.

*Greg Adelstein is president and Michael Terni is executive vice-president of Montreal-based iGotcha Media, which provides interactive digital signage systems. For more information, visit [www.i-gotcha.com](http://www.i-gotcha.com).*

Success relies not only on technology, but also on execution.

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*Photo courtesy Picture This On Granite*



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**Editor** | Peter Saunders  
psaunders@signmedia.ca  
**Designers** | Jean Oh  
joh@signmedia.ca  
Sieu Truong  
struong@signmedia.ca  
**Production Manager** | Kimberley Cowper  
production@signmedia.ca  
**Group Sales Manager** | Peter Vos  
pvos@kenilworth.com  
**Sales** | Heidi Rule  
hrule@signmedia.ca  
**Sales Co-ordinator** | Anna Taratuta  
ataratuta@signmedia.ca

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ellenkral@kenilworth.com  
**Assistant to the Publisher** | Krista Taylor  
ktaylor@kenilworth.com  
**Controller** | Michael Usser  
musser@kenilworth.com  
**Vice-president** | Rudy Kral  
rudykral@kenilworth.com  
**Sales Director** | Erik Tolles  
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**Editorial Director** | Blair Adams  
editor@kenilworth.com

**Group Circulation Manager** | Jean Bilkey  
jbilkey@signmedia.ca

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