

Content management raises profits for LED billboard networks

Software technology allows LED screens to display content from multiple sources and can enable a strong return on investment, writes Tim Whitaker.

LED billboards represent a major investment, so the control and management of content is critical allowing owners to achieve an adequate financial return. A common industry approach is to use a single screen, a single PC and a highly qualified IT support. Now, companies are providing end-to-end software-based solutions for management of digital dynamic messaging and signage networks.

One such supplier is C-nario. The company's VP of marketing and sales Rami Bahar says that there is a demand for more targeted, high impact digital signage campaigns and improved quality. "However," he says "many customers are also battling the high cost of ownership." C-nario's content management technology is independent of the number, size and location of screens. "We have used standard hardware, such as PC components and graphic cards to reduce the cost-of-ownership," says Bahar.

Control systems are a crucial part of any LED display, particularly for large and expensive networks. "Prices for advertisers are high and there is a critical service level - we can't stop the screen for 2 hours [to correct faults]," says Bahar. "We provide systems with complete redundancy, ensuring 24-7 operation."

Systems using C-nario technology include networks for CNN in Atlanta (figure 1) and Olympic Marseille in France (figure 2). C-nario's technology also controls content for a 4 x 50m screen (screen resolution of 2016x 160, with 25mm pitch) that sits atop the publisher Axel Springer's building near the Reichstag in Berlin.

C-nario also supplied the control system for the Clear Channel billboard network in London, which uses Magink technology. Advertisers purchase time slots on the billboards, which are used to show multiple still images. Permit issues prevent video from being shown. "LED billboards represent a big market if permit issues can be resolved," says Bahar. Predictably this issue is easier in Eastern Europe and Asia.

Electronic billboards, particularly LED screens, allow multiple (10-12) advertisers to benefit from the same high-profile location. "In general, LED displays have a very good return-on-investment but are only found in a small proportion of sites at present," says Bahar. "Brightness and contrast ratio are very good, despite low resolution."

At this year's InfoComm 2007 show, C-nario unveiled its Digital Signage Multi Pkayer, which is able to run high-definition content across eight displays from a single PC. Major target markets are the banking, retail, advertising and transportation markets. Banks for example could install multiple screens in different branches operated from a central location. Availability of good quality content is a problem once the novelty of the screen wears off, says Bahar. "C-Nario provides tools to pull content from websites, live TV feeds, streaming video and many other sources. We don't want customers to have to generate their own content, this becomes a daunting task."



Fig. 1. C-nario is the digital signage provider for Turner Broadcasting System, Inc, with a network based out of the CNN Visitor Center in Atlanta. The network comprises 6 LED screens, both indoor and outdoor, including this 40 m long, 0.64 m high ticker screen inside the CNN store.



Fig. 2. C-nario supplied a content-based network for Olympic de Marseilles's Stade Velodrome that includes 2 Philips LED screens measuring 56 m² each, with 25 mm pitch and 256 x 352 resolution