

Getting Started In DS: Part 2. The Creative Challenge

Written by Lee Distad
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This is the second part in a series about getting started in digital signage for ProAV dealers. Read the first part on our website here.



In our initial installment, we began by discussing some of the technical considerations, and the need to partner with the right technology vendors. While that's a large subject that we'll revisit again, even more important is learning how to effectively sell the end product.

What Dave Haynes, digital signage expert, pundit, and owner of *Sixteen:Nine* hears over and over from people who are on the vendor side is that when working with the AV channel, education is the huge issue. "It's not so much a question of training with regard to 'How do we do this?'," he says. "It's more to do with 'How do we sell this?'"

Haynes' point is that rather than lacking technical know-how, AV integrators need to learn how to frame the business opportunity, and express to prospective clients the value of digital signage and its applications, such as sales, awareness, and safety. The bottom line, says Haynes is what can be done with it that will generate real ROI, both for the dealer, and for their client.

To do that, dealers have to learn how to go to end users, talk to them and figure out what their objectives are and assemble a business argument that can deliver results for them. Says Haynes, "I think the DS highway is riddled with carcasses of dealers who've gone at this as a technology exercise."

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Melodramatic? Maybe, but Haynes lays out a pattern of dealers who've bought software, bought displays, and gone through the motions of hanging them without really knowing what the motives or objectives of the client were.

That lack of clarity shows. "What you see are repeatedly are screens that are too high, and content that is jammed on the screen," he says, calling it a "me too" activity, with no real impact. Haynes disdains crammed screens that look like a Bloomberg channel (not a compliment in his view) that's totally absent of strategy and, as a result, a recipe for failure.

Building on that, Haynes points to firms who do think those things through, but again approach this as a tech exercise and don't think of the audience. One parallel he draws is to point out that similar wrong decisions occur even in a century old industry like outdoor advertising: too much information for the format. With a crowded sign, viewers blow past it without absorbing any of it. Haynes says, "It's amplified in DS because a lot of this content is produced when actual creative people are involved (which is rare) and are producing content when the monitor is three feet from their faces. Try standing fifteen feet away and review it again."

The net result is you see a lot of systems that are ineffective and you get potential end users who canvas the marketplace and see things in retail and transit stations and are thoroughly uninspired because it's not well executed. That apathy, says Haynes, is an enormous threat to dealers' business models.

On the creative front, Haynes advises aspiring DS pros to look further afield for creative inspiration. He explains that "I think some of the best DS advertising I've ever seen doesn't run on DS -- it runs on TV." He lists Ford is an example of a company that does a fantastic job of hitting the right notes with its advertising -- very few words, and big simple type. "Put that on mute or only see part of it and it still makes an impression," he says.

The next challenge DS pros face is dealing with clients' issues about cost, not only about hardware and installation, which AV guys already know how to talk about, but also the creative aspect. Part of the problem is the end users who want to use DS and have no experience with advertising," he explains, "and they need heart paddles from the sticker shock when they find out what serious advertising costs."

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As with all advertising, when running the numbers, end users can have trouble seeing the ROI. Here's where Haynes says that it's critical that dealers understand that they're not selling an AV solution; they're selling a business solution, which is a very different animal.

Haynes says, "It's not easy, but it's a mental shift they have to make."

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