A Sharper Focus on Safety:
Digital Signage Boosts Campus Security

To protect students, faculty and visitors, use digital displays
to distribute real-time emergency messaging and alerts

By Richard Ventura

As higher education facilities work to create enriching environments for students and faculty, digital signage technology is now a common sight on university campuses, but its applications are changing: It's now being used to help boost safety and security.

Campuses have incorporated digital displays for years, but traditionally, the screens were informational and located in administrative buildings or student centers, where only a small audience would see them. In continued efforts to uphold campus security and safety, however, universities are focusing on better distribution of real-time emergency messaging by using digital signage in new ways.

Digital Signage: Protecting Safety and Security

Digital displays capture the attention of a larger audience, and simplify the effective and rapid transmission of real-time information, even across large campuses. They are well suited for a unified cross-campus and cross-platform communication strategy, and allow real-time methods of dispersing emergency information and alerts.

Unlike text messages and emails, which can take several minutes to show up on a device, emergency alerts on digital signage can appear within seconds. And unlike verbal announcements or sirens, which the hearing impaired may not be able to understand or hear, digital signage is visual, making it part of a multifaceted effort (along with other elements geared toward the visually impaired and those with language barriers) to enhance safety and security for everyone on campus.

Making the Case for Digital Displays

Many universities are on tight budgets, so to justify the purchase of digital displays, administrators should create a strategic objectives plan that shows how the displays will meet university goals and presents several benefits to school leadership.

Digital displays that show wayfinding information and campus events can also be part of an emergency alert messaging platform, allowing displays to have multiple purposes on campus. Displays can also show state, local and world news to keep students informed about current events.

Weather alerts and Amber Alerts also can be integrated into signage systems used for directional info or campus news. For example, tying the Federation for Internet Alerts (www.internetalerts.org) into signage gives schools a way to show real-time alerts to a large audience in a matter of seconds. During an emergency, an administrator can trigger safety messaging on the displays that overrides the informational/news content and weather alerts.

Using digital signage to achieve more than one goal – including communicating campus events, keeping students informed, and flashing emergency messaging when needed – ensures that a university will more than recoup its investment in the technology.

Digital Signage for Safety: Best Practices

To achieve effective campus safety signage, consider the following items:

- Look for an enterprise platform that works for the entire campus – not something that is only useful in one area.
- Determine who will be in charge of creating and pushing out content, and the various levels of access and approval each person has. Several different departments may have access, including media services, campus admissions and marketing, and IT, as well as the campus safety organization.
- Other departments also may want to submit non-emergency content about their activities or clubs. Ensure a platform lets emergency signage override all other messaging when an admin triggers it, and set up the appropriate trigger.
- Place the displays in high-traffic areas, and make sure there are enough to spread across the entire school.
- The emergency message should look the same across the entire campus, regardless of where each screen is physically located, and should take over the entire screen to catch viewers' attention and let them know something is going on.
- he size of the screens will depend on their location, but the emergency text must be readable and highly visible, no matter the size of the screen. Work with a trusted content provider to ensure that content follows emergency messaging best practices in terms of font, font size and verbiage.

- If screens are also used for non-emergency messaging, it's important to always keep that content fresh. People pay attention to displays more when their content is always changing – so then in the case of an actual emergency, people will be sure to see the messaging.
- Educate students and faculty on the displays' emergency messaging purposes – let them know to look to the displays if they hear alarms or see emergency lights flashing, as the displays will show what the emergency is an where to go (or not go).

Case in Point: Newcastle University

With a main city center campus spanning 50 acres, Newcastle University, located in the United Kingdom, required an efficient, inclusive means of communication in high-traffic areas.

When investigating digital signage options, administrators sought bright images, connectivity (including Open Pluggable Specification [OPS] option slots, outputs and control), operational functionality, reliability, energy efficiency and support – as well as 24/7 run time in either portrait or landscape mode. Administrators also needed remote management capabilities that would let them control, configure and monitor the screens.

After a procurement process, the university selected (56) 46- and 55-inch NEC Display Solutions digital screens and Single Board Computers (SBCs) driven by NEC OPS 'slot-in' PCs embedded within each unit.

The displays serve a number of purposes: The informational signage can be used for presentations or academic departments' content, or to promote activities at hospitality events, and can show real-time news updates and Twitter feeds. When necessary, the administrative software can send global commands to all screens, overriding other content to show emergency messaging.

A Laser Focus on Safety

Each year, universities invest more money into ensuring the safety and security of students, faculty and visitors. Safety concerns will never go away, and thus real-time methods of dispersing emergency information and alerts remain a major priority.

Digital signage pushes real-time data that can help protect and enhance safety and security while also providing campus information and news on a day-to-day basis, helping universities create a safe and enjoyable experience for everyone on campus.

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