



NAIT's

Network

Expanding digital signage gives new meaning to 'continuing education.'

By Peter Saunders

The Northern Alberta Institute of Technology (NAIT) is using digital signage to keep its students informed about when and where they can find various classes and events. In so doing, it has avoided deploying the technology just for its own sake, but instead has turned to the medium to address and resolve specific organizational challenges.

Comprising eight schools, NAIT administers 250 post-secondary programs and 36 apprenticeship trades and degrees—reportedly making it the largest apprenticeship trainer anywhere in Canada—but it also serves older students, with more than 1,400

Digital Signage



When students arrive at quiet campuses in the evening or on weekends for continuing education classes, wayfinding can be a challenge without staff around to help.



The screens were installed in high-traffic zones to let students know about classroom moves, cancellations and other updates.

The network now reaches other departments, with localized content for their needs.

continuing education courses across three campuses in Edmonton.

As these adult students arrive at the campuses in the evening and on weekends, wayfinding can be a challenge. Not only are they less familiar with the facilities than their full-time, younger counterparts, but they also may encounter classroom moves and cancellations without enough staff around to help them.

Project planning

Digital signage was seen as a possible solution to these problems. It could be centrally administered, controlled and automated to store and share content with local support. It could connect the needed directional information with NAIT's web-based class scheduling system. And it would provide a medium for emergency messaging, too.

Discussion of the potential for such a project began in July 2007, with the turn of the school's fiscal year.

"It takes a long time to go through a decision like this," says Diane Landry, administrative assistant for NAIT's department of continuing education. "You have to get the correct funding, with a committee looking at whether or not it would be an appropriate investment."

An initial request for quotes (RFQ) was followed by a request for proposals (RFP) in November 2007. After a series of presentations, NAIT decided upon a vendor based on the flexibility of the software that would be involved.

The department chose to work with Matrix Video Communications, an audiovisual (AV) and broadcast equipment provider with offices across Western Canada, including one in Edmonton. In addition to specializing in institutional markets like education, government and health care, Matrix is an authorized reseller of Audience digital signage software platform, developed by Capital Networks in Markham, Ont.

"They're our local representation," says Blake A. Reeves, North American channel partner manager for Capital Networks. "Digital signage is like an orchestration of many technologies, including displays, hardware, personal computers (PCs), cabling and power, but if any single element underperforms, everyone on-site blames the software! So, it's extremely valuable for us to have a trusted partner who can put it all together and run the AV world for us."

Meanwhile, though she was not involved at the very beginning of the process, Landry became the campus signage project leader. The role was a good fit because she already managed continuing education class data, but she had no previous expertise with information technology (IT) in

Directional information is combined with the class scheduling system.

general, let alone digital signage specifically.

“Once we chose Matrix and Capital Networks, then the process of learning the lingo began,” she says. “There was a lot of back and forth in determining how the ‘show’ would look.”

Matrix provided training, design assistance and other support as the project evolved. Capital Networks built the digital signage show—*i.e.* the consistent on-screen format through which updated content would be delivered—such that NAIT could use it as a template in the years to come.

“Once we’ve built a show structure, the customer can then shoot messages into each zone of the display, as easily as updating a Facebook page,” Reeves says.

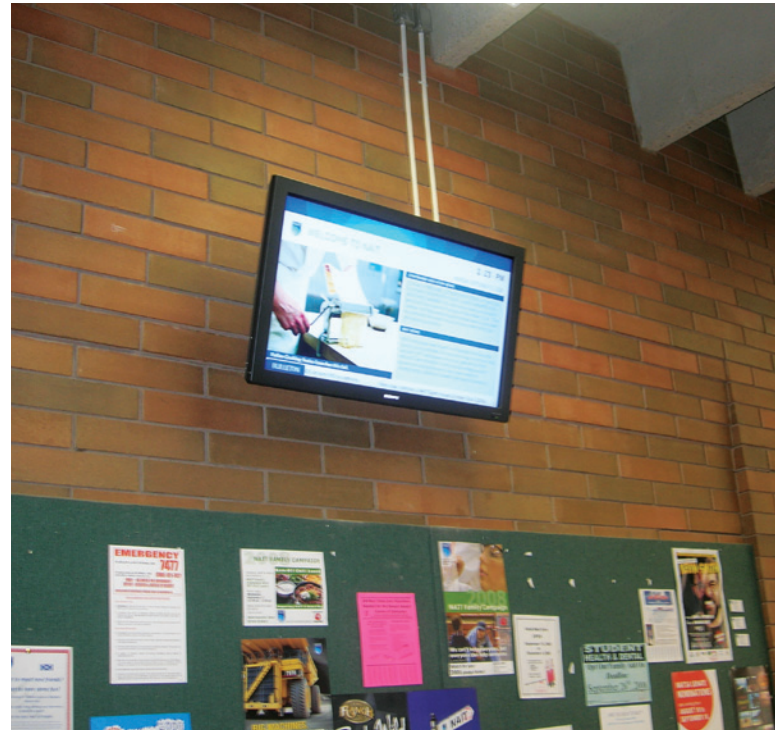
Going live

With an initial investment in seven liquid crystal displays (LCDs), NAIT’s project team had to determine where to have them installed across the campus. With a focus on high-traffic zones for continuing education students, the deployment began in March 2008, with all screens installed by June and ‘live’ by September, when Landry in turn trained other staff how to prepare content—including both general information and highly localized messages—for the network.

All of the systems were connected to NAIT’s corporate Internet Protocol (IP) network. A master PC workstation was established with centralized control of smaller PCs at each of the screens. Messages and other content would be distributed under Landry’s oversight.

The early results were well-received by both students and staff, so the digital signage network was kept in constant use thereafter, with an influx of new content.

“It expanded from classroom start times and locations to an all-purpose student communications system,” says Carl Enright, former director of the continuing education department. “Now it includes postings about exam schedules, locations of instructors’ offices, campus sport scores and ‘NAIT News’ ticker



NAIT’s digital signage network has expanded to become an all-purpose student communications system.

updates on student and school activities. It is also part of the campus’ security alert system.”

While such opportunities arose for the screens to serve new purposes, Enright also found the project achieved its original aims.

“Prior to the installation, our department handled many complaints from students having trouble finding their classrooms,” he says. “With the digital sign system in place, we saw an incredible reduction.”

Expanding automation

Meanwhile, the network quickly expanded into other departments. By November 2008, Landry found herself advising NAIT’s executive office about what would be needed to display information about its own meetings.

“They were able to get on board and I facilitated further discussions between us, Capital Networks and Matrix to make appropriate changes to the original ‘show,’” she says. “The faculty of business came on next.”

Soon, there were 13 networked screens, plus a ‘standalone’ system within the Nexen Theatre

Digital Signage

distance-learning and conferencing facility, which operates at a different resolution and shares no content with the other displays.

“We can integrate new systems as needed and I can contribute to their development because of the knowledge I’ve gained,” says Landry. “The newest installation, in June 2011, was for our food services department. Inquiries for additional systems continue to trickle in. The latest of these is for the school’s meat-cutting program, where digital signage is expected to be installed as soon as this September.”

As mentioned, NAIT had ensured during the planning stage the software would be flexible enough to support these changing needs.

“With the software, each NAIT department’s show can have an individual look and feel for local content, but you can also broadcast a message—like an emergency alert—that’s synchronized across all of the screens,” says Reeves. “Otherwise, different departments within the same campus

would have to buy different systems to support their different content; or all departments would end up with a single, identical, overly general and less valuable channel.”

While Landry’s primary responsibility at NAIT remains the administration of the continuing education department, the digital signage network’s expansion across various departments has also been part of her job, particularly since she has become the ‘resident expert’ on the medium.

“There’s no other person there to back her up,” says Reeves, “so the software has to back her up by helping to automate the data display. She can ‘set it and forget it.’”

“It can be difficult, being the only one with this knowledge,” says Landry. “At first, I was manually entering all of our course information into the program, but eventually, we automated the process. Now when we generate a report, the Audience software looks for it.”

With files from Capital Networks. For more information, visit www.capitalnetworks.com.

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