

Chapter Eight

What Content to Put on Your Displays

If you hate the cliché “Content is King” raise your hand.

You know why industry experts keep saying it, over and over?

Because it’s still 100% true.

Content is what people look to your digital signage to see. Your customers don’t care about your well-chosen media player. They care about the information or entertainment your digital signage promises them.

And it’s easy to trip up on content.

I’ve heard about, but have yet to witness, a QSR accidentally advertising for its own competitor [115].

Surely you’ve never made such a grave mistake—but odds are you’re still making some common errors in your content. Maybe not that bad, but it might need some polishing.

Ask yourself:

- Are you keeping the same content for weeks at a time? Months?
- Do you use bullet points? Long sentences?
- Does your content flash by on the screen too quickly to read, or too slow to hold attention?
- Is your content aligned with your brand identity?

A lot of careful consideration goes into making top-quality, eye-catching content specifically for digital signage. In this chapter, we’re revealing inside secrets about how to do exactly that.



Answering the Big Content Questions

Before you think about what picture’s perfect for a certain slide, there’s some big picture questions you need to answer. These will help guide the general tone and look of your content.

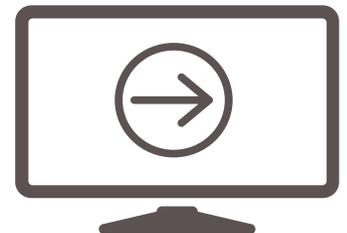
Where’s the Sign Placed?

Is your digital sign located at a Point of Transit, Point of Sale, or Point of Wait?

The answer should help you determine the pacing and amount of information conveyed in your content.

Point of Transit

A Point of Transit sign is located where people are on the go. This includes things like wayfinding kiosks at airports and digital billboards along highways.



If your sign falls into this category, recognize that you have very little time to get the attention of passers-by.

Particularly with advertising, you must strive to be as concise and bold as possible, using some of the tricks we’ll be discussing later.

Why?

Because average dwell time for something like a digital billboard is around two seconds [116]. That’s not much time to make an impression.

If you have multiple segments of content on your loop, they should cycle through quickly enough to maximize chances of your audience seeing multiple messages.

Point of Sale

If you have a Point of Sale network, there's not quite as much of a hurry, but your audience is still there for a purpose.



Focus on providing immediately relevant content that focuses on opportunities available now—for example, a sale in a nearby aisle, or a giveaway that can be entered on the go.

Consider timing how long customers spend within visual range of your signs. This will help you determine how often to switch between segments. If the same information remains on-screen for the entire time your customer is within visual range, they'll get bored and stop looking.

Make sure whatever information you put on the screen is readable within the time allotted!

Point of Wait

With Point of Wait signs, you have a captive audience. As customers queue or linger in a waiting room, they'll be desperate for anything to distract them.

This means you can include longer messages and more words per segment.

However, in order to take advantage of that longer dwell time, you'll have to compete with cell phones. Consider mixing in trivia questions or fun facts with advertising and other important information in order to keep customers' attention.

Who's Seeing It?

Not all potential target audiences react the same way to content.

Age is a big factor.

For example, if every Thursday is senior discount day at your store, the messaging playing that day shouldn't focus on social media engagement.

Given that only 18 percent of people between ages 50

and 64 access social media on their mobile phones—that is, potentially while in your store—you'd have very little chance of fostering customer engagement that way [117].

However, if you had a vintage clothing store in Brooklyn, you could target your younger-skewing customers with social media-oriented content.

Demographics should inform design, information, and call-to-action choices as well. (We'll talk more about design later—this is just to get you thinking.)

If your corporation is a professional environment full of no-nonsense businessmen, you'll want sleek designs with simple color schemes.

How Are You Approaching the Campaign?

It makes sense that your content will change depending on the purpose of your signage.

All communication, including digital signage, fits one or more of six purposes. Your content will probably include a mix of at least a couple of them.

Here's a simple breakdown.

1. Educate

Educational content has a number of uses.

A well-informed shopper can make the best choice for his or her needs.

Outward-facing educational content can include product demos, use cases and testimonials, and handy comparison charts to other products (or with your competitors' products!).

Employees and associates can also benefit from watching training content during slow traffic periods or before/after store operating hours.

Whether providing information to customers or associates, your bottom line will feel the boost.

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2. Inform

Where's that conference room? When's the office picnic coming up?

That type of question can be answered by informational content.

This includes company announcements (especially useful if you have a QSR and the employees don't have company emails), calendar events, and wayfinding.

Informational content should prioritize clear communication. Aesthetics are important, too, but ultimately secondary.

Keep your interfaces clear and simple for interactive informational content, and make sure the five W's can be gleaned at a glance.

3. Entertain

Your audience will get sick of continual ads.

Sorry, but it's true.

You have to break it up with engaging, attention-grabbing content of another sort.

There's lots of options out there for entertaining content, so pick something relevant to your audience: sports, weather, news, a stock ticker...

This type of content is inexpensive and available in many forms, like live streaming, files, static images and RSS feeds, just to name a few.

In QSR, some franchises use infotainment—a custom blend of entertainment programming and advertising aimed squarely at keeping customers around long enough to buy more food. (And also at building their brand image, which we'll talk about shortly.)

They know that content doesn't have to be pure advertising to help the bottom line.

4. Convert

Often, your content's purpose will be to get your audi-

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ence to do something, such as sign up for a loyalty or reward program.

How do you craft a compelling call-to-action?

We give you the details under "Give Your Viewer a Job" below.

5. Promote

Promotions aren't necessarily trying to sell anything. But they are a little flashier than the above-mentioned informational content.

The idea is to catch eyes and bring awareness about something your audience wasn't aware of before.

For example: You can promote upcoming events and opportunities, award programs, and your social media.

With social media, you can display the feeds right there on the signage using widgets that are included with most CMS, and pair with a call-to-action to encourage your audience to follow you.

We'll talk more about social media and how it can help your branding efforts a little later.

6. Sell To

Remember: All ads, all the time will get your digital signage tuned out eventually.

Keep a mixture, and it'll make your ads that much more effective.

Ads made for traditional forms of advertising can sometimes be repurposed for use in a digital signage network.

But, often ads need to be produced with the venue and dwell time in mind, as we mentioned under "Where's it Placed?"

Also think about how often ads will show up in a given "loop" of content. People often suggest having a single ad make two impressions per loop, though that wouldn't be the case for advertising banners or crawls.



Here's a challenge: if there's no sound, you'll have to rely on visual appeal.

Here's a challenge: if there's no sound, you'll have to rely on visual appeal. We've got some tips for that later in this chapter, but realistically, you may want to enlist the help of a professional.

In the retail vertical, digital signage often includes merchandising that advertises specific items located physically near the sign. This type of "ad" varies in length and usually includes a call-to-action.

For retailers, presenting contextually relevant content can enhance shoppers' experiences and help each sign's ROI.

What Content has Worked for Your Competitors?

Managing expectations is an important aspect of creating digital signage content.

There are certain expectations for what content will look like in each vertical, in each business.

**You can't break
the rules until
you know what
they are.**

For example, if I say "sports equipment store," you probably think of high-def HDR images of dirty, sweating athletes; angular sans serif fonts that look like they're about to zoom off the signage; and close-ups of shoes, high-performance sports drinks, and so on.

You'd be baffled if the signage featured news about the stock markets, instead of the latest big game.

How do you surprise and excite without confusing your customers or failing to meet expectations?

That's a question you'll have to answer for yourself, because the answer will be different for every business in every vertical.

But I can give you a starting point: You can't break the rules until you know what they are.

So study your immediate competitors, along with the big names in your vertical. Know what kind of language they use, what sort of imagery they rely on. Know what kind of content is de rigeur.

If they have a marketing push that's the talk of the town, take note. Don't copy it, of course—but you can take the same basic idea and put your own spin on it.

Check out your vertical on a site like Digital Signage Today for glimpses of successful campaigns that push the envelope.

What's Your Brand Identity?

A well-formed brand differentiates a company from its competitors [119].

Using digital signage to create an emotional connection with consumers attaches your brand to their lives and in turn creates loyalty and builds equity in your brand



As you're striving to maintain brand consistency, make sure you don't overlook your digital signage!

Not only is digital signage a chance to put your brand front-and-center from the moment customers walk in the door to the moment you leave, but having poorly designed and out-of-character content can damage your image.

That said, here are three ways for you to make sure your brand stays clear and central in your digital signage.

1. Keep a Consistent Look

It may be tempting, for simplicity's sake, to use a theme you found online or that came with your content-creating software for your digital signage.

**A little
customization
goes a long way**

Three problems: that's boring and lazy from the customer's viewpoint, it's a missed opportunity to brand content, and it can lead to incongruities between your overall brand and what's on your screen.

For example, a vehicle parts supply store probably would wish to avoid delicate fonts, Instagram-style filters and shades of pink.

Nor do you want your visual style to vary from slide to slide.

A little customization goes a long way.

If your company already has a style guide, that's your place to start to find guidelines for producing on-brand content.

Otherwise, it's worth it to take the time and decide how you're going to create a uniform look for all of your content [120].

- **Color Scheme:** Your company probably already colors that they tend to use in their promotional material and décor. Use a neutral tone for backgrounds, a color associated with your brand for contrast, and one other color that fits the brand and looks attractive as an accent. To make sure you're always using the same red, define it using a hexadecimal code. If you want to sample a color from your logo or website, there are Chrome extensions that'll help [141].
- **Preferred Fonts:** If the brand is already defined typographically, go with those fonts. Otherwise, choose a sans serif font to be used for most content, and one or two other fonts from different font families for emphasizing elements [121]. (No more than two fonts per slide!)
- **Template Slides:** Consider creating a collection of blank template slides into which content can be inserted in order to guarantee a uniform look. (You'll want a variety so all of your content doesn't look exactly the same.) Whatever program you're creating content in may have some built-in options.
- **Imagery:** Decide what sort of pictures you want to include in your content. Would you prefer exclusively black-and-white images? Should they ever include people? Is clip art ever acceptable?

2. Create a Content Guide

Provide guidelines to make sure your written content stays in the brand's voice.

Tone: Are you sassy? Formal? Always positive?

Focus: Is plain, simple information preferred, or can you have a little personality?

Word choice: Are there certain words you prefer to avoid? Are there specific words associated with your brand?

Style guide: Should content conform to a specific style guide, such as AP or Chicago?

Terminology: Make sure commonly-used terms and phrases are always spelled, worded, and capitalized the same way.

3. Make it All Readily Available

Once you have all of these guidelines created, make sure they're available to everybody who could conceivably create content for your digital signage.

You could create print copies, but it's easier and more cost-effective to share online. This document or set of documents should also contain necessary files such as logos, icons, and images [122].

Consider posting them on Google Drive and sharing the link to your content creators.

Be open to feedback. Especially if you aren't a marketer or designer, other members of your team may have useful suggestions for improvements.

As trends come and go, and your company tweaks its own brand, your guide should change as well.

That's another reason why cloud-based sharing is advantageous: it allows any changes to be distributed instantly to all who have access to the document.

5 Tips for Writing Compelling Content That Will Get Seen

Once you've set your vision for your content, you can fire up a content creation program and get going. Here's some tips to help you along your way.

1. Try Something New

If you don't refresh your content frequently, repeat visitors will eventually stop paying attention to your signs [123].

However, you don't have to start from scratch every time.

You can simply swap new stock images into your existing content. Or change the layout of an existing message. Or add a bit of motion where there hadn't been any before. Or maybe just change the color scheme.

Consider posting them on Google Drive and sharing the link to your content creators.



But beware! There's a temptation to resort to "wallpaper"—cheap, generic, readily available material for your screen—in order to ensure there's something fresh on-screen at all times [124].

That type of content is not only easy to ignore and is useless in promoting your brand, but can in fact harm the effectiveness of your network.

Don't wallpaper.

That's a matter of simple math: if ten percent of your content is, say, generically pretty landscapes, ten percent of the time viewers will be seeing material that offers no useful information and doesn't speak to your brand.

It also helps hold interest if you vary the length of your messaging. Most of your messages will be on-screen for about 10 seconds, but if you need to communicate more intricate information (say, with 17-second long slots), make sure to break it up with shorter and simpler slides too.

For other concerns about producing enough content, and creating data-driven and localized content, peep back at Chapter 3.

2. Design Properly

It's time for a crash-course in the principles of digital signage design.

Your goal is maximizing visual appeal and ease of reading.

In an ideal world, you could hire graphic designers to do this for you, but given how frequently content cycles out, that's not an economically feasible option for many companies.

Luckily, by focusing on a few key areas, you can do this in a few minutes for yourself.

Resolution and Aspect Ratio

Make sure these match your screen. Very little looks worse than content that's stretched or squashed because its aspect ratio is wrong.

Font Choice

Hopefully you know better than to choose Comic Sans or Papyrus. There's more to it than that, though.

Particularly on outdoor signs, you should avoid difficult-to-read script fonts [125]. If you use it as an accent font, make sure it's large and only used on one or two words.

Choose sans serif fonts (Helvetica's the classic example) over serif fonts (such as Times New Roman)—the lack of serifs gives them a cleaner look.

Have no more than two fonts per slide or segment of content, and make sure they're from different categories [126]. Two novelty fonts in the same place is too visually busy.

Finally, consider tone. A heavy blackletter font would look out of place on an advertisement for a summer sale, but might fit an announcement about a book club [127].

Colors

With colors, contrast is the name of the game.

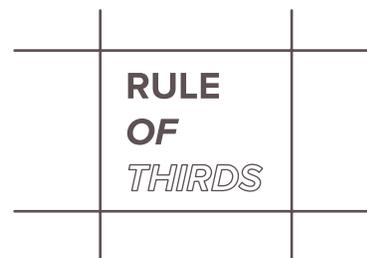
Pair dark text with light backgrounds. Be wary of using white text on a black background—if the letters are too small, they can be hard to read.

You also want your colors to be visually attractive together. Use the color wheel as your cheat sheet [128]. Complementary colors (opposite each other on the color wheel) pair nicely. So do colors that are next to each other on the wheel, called analogous colors.

Fewer colors is better—one color should dominate, another contrast and highlight, with maybe a third for accent (perhaps as part of the image).

Composition

When it comes to composition, it's hard to go wrong with the rule of thirds [129]. It'll help you achieve asymmetrical balance. Asymmetry catches the eye and is more visually interesting than symmetry, but you have to execute it correctly.



First, mentally divide your screen into nine rectangles of equal size.

Second, place your elements. Content close to the intersection of the lines will stand out more. That's where

Avoid difficult-to-read script fonts

you want important elements to go.

Also consider filling one-third of the space with an image while putting a neutral background with text in the other two-thirds for a simple, clean look.

Motion

While it's tempting to animate every square corner of the screen, don't.

Seriously, don't.

Moving text is too difficult to read, and more than one moving element will vie for the viewer's attention and distract from the actual message.

Motion should be used sparingly, to grab the eye and attract attention to one key part of a slide without hurting readability.

For visual interest, a slow pan over a static image, or a steady shot of something slightly moving (like waving grass, or a time lapse of a city scape) are arresting without being distracting.

Of course, it's a different story if your content includes video.

Readability

The above items do contribute to readability, but here's a few final tips.

Brevity

Deliver your whole message in as few words as possible. The fewer words, the more impact each word will have [130].

You don't even need to use full sentences.

If you must include more words, make sure the message is on-screen long enough to read.

Distance

Double-check that the content is large enough to be read from wherever viewers will be standing when they see it. There's some useful rules to help you do that.

With an LCD screen, use the 4/6/8 rule [131]. That means that viewers can be four times the image height away in order to process complex information, six times to view simple information, and eight times for casual perusal.

With LED, take the pixel pitch and multiply by 1000 to find the minimum viewing distance.

No analytical method yet exists for finding the minimum viewing distance for a projected image, though one's on the way [132].

Accessibility

Consider accessibility, too.

Strong contrasts, avoiding white-on-black text (use the other way around), simple typefaces, and the largest font size possible will help people who have difficulty seeing or reading.

3. Check and Double Check

Because there are so few words per slide, any mistakes you make will jump out dramatically.

Read through all your content (and get someone else to look through it for you) to make sure there are no grammatical or spelling errors.



Someone will inevitably mock you on social media for a typo. Trust me, that's not the kind of attention you want.

Also ensure that all information is accurate. If you direct customers to the wrong aisle for a deal, you could be missing out on sales opportunities. And heaven forbid you give the wrong date for an event.

4. Give Your Viewer a Job

Picture this: You're the proprietor of a grocery store, and you've just installed your first digital signage system.

You've been careful to do everything right.

But a week passes, and then two, and you're not seeing the kind of results you were expecting. What went wrong? You followed the whole checklist, right?

Well... maybe not.

Did you remember to include a call-to-action?

CALL-TO-ACTION

Forgetting a call-to-action, or including one that's poorly worded, can render a digital signage system pretty much useless.

A call-to-action directs customers to give a certain response to the message on screen.

This can be anything from downloading an app, to picking up a coupon, to signing up for an event, to engaging with you on social media, to taking advantage of a deal.

A call-to-action is a command for your customer to take a specific action.

By tracking the level of response to calls to action, and which sorts of calls get the greatest response, owners of digital signage networks can determine how effective their signage is and how to make it even more effective.

In other words, they are absolutely essential. Below, you'll find tips for creating compelling calls to action:

Consider the Audience

Different demographics will find certain methods of action more appealing.

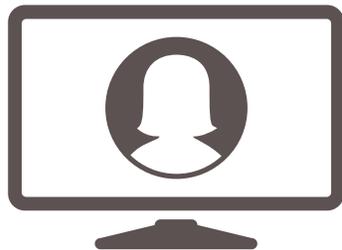
Take QR code usage, for example [118].

Across age groups, 64 percent of scanners are male. The disparity was greatest in the 55+ age group, with 71 percent of scanners being male. However, that age group makes up only 15 percent of all people using QR codes. People between the age of 25 and 44 were most likely to scan a QR code.

Another example: paperless coupons, distributed by email or found on the Internet [133]. Women are only slightly more likely to use them than men. They're most popular among those aged 35-44, though people aged from 18 all the way up to 64 are all fairly likely to use them.

You should be able to find statistics for other common methods of action online, and common sense is a valuable tool here as well.

Vary your action based on what demographic you wish to target—or, with broad appeals, try to choose a method with the highest engagement rate across demographics.



Enable and Incentivize Action

If your viewers don't understand how to act, or if acting is difficult, they won't act.

That's elementary, but worth pointing out.

Make sure that the exact steps a viewer needs to follow to take action are clearly and thoroughly listed on the screen.

Make sure that the exact steps a viewer needs to follow to take action are clearly and thoroughly listed on the screen.

If the screen is advertising a sale on a specific item, tell them where in the store the item is located. If the action is connecting on Instagram, give the exact username. If there's a contest, either list the steps required to enter, or give the general idea and display a link where people can find further details.

Make it as easy for your viewers as possible.

One of the greatest advantages of digital signage is how it enables instant interaction [134], so take advantage of that by making the call-to-action something that can be done immediately, such as:

tapping their phone to a tag to have content uploaded
texting a keyword to a certain number, or
watching an interactive presentation in order to receive a discount code.

Also, make sure the benefit to following the call to advantage is obvious—list it right there with the action to be taken. “Text (keyword) to (number) and get 20% off any item.”

A Second Purpose

Your call-to-action doesn't have to serve just one purpose—in fact, if you can have a secondary purpose, go for it.

Don't add too many steps.

For example, perhaps your primary purpose is to get viewers to enter a contest by tweeting at the store's Twitter account.

Your secondary purpose would be getting people to engage with your social media, in hopes that they'll continue engaging there in the future.

Even if your primary message isn't one that require a

certain action, you can include one anyway [135]. For example, if you're announcing an event, you can direct viewers to an online calendar so they can view other upcoming events.

The main caveat here: Don't add too many steps.

Everyone's lazy at heart, and if people have to jump through three or four hoops to receive a certain benefit, they will probably decide it's not worth it.

Choose Your Words

- **Action verbs:** Avoid passive language, such as "can be found" or "is available." Instead, pick action verbs that convey your call-to-action forcefully. Don't suggest—command. Act now! Find it here! Visit today!
- **Trigger words:** Certain words are more likely to catch eyes than others. You can find lists of powerful marketing words online [136], but here's a few to get you started: You (makes the customer feel directly engaged), free (speaks for itself), save (everyone loves savings), easy (customers are less likely to take action if it means work for them), and new (novelty is compelling).
- **Keep it short:** The same rules you'd follow for making a compelling slide presentation apply here: the fewer words you can use to convey your message, the better.
- **Keep it simple:** Prefer language that is clear and straightforward. Write like you're scripting a comic book, with snappy, short, action-oriented words. Use a readability score tool to estimate the message's reading level. As a general rule of thumb, most good business blogs try to communicate complex concepts using vocabulary under a 7th grade reading level. It's faster to skim and digest. [137]

Make it Visible

If the call-to-action is the most important part of your slide, treat it as such.

Make it larger or a different color than other elements (aside from the headline).



You may wish to offset it with a border.

You can take this too far, of course. Don't confuse contrasting with clashing: yellow and red, vivid green and purple, or a riot of neon will just hurt your customer's eyes and be difficult to read. Flashing or animated

elements are tacky and distract from your message.

Don't sacrifice good design in the name of catching eyes.

If you include a QR code, make sure it's large enough to easily scan from wherever the viewer is standing. If you include a URL, make sure that is readable as well.

Create Urgency

Limited-time offers are the most compelling [138].

How many times have you been watching an infomercial, chuckling at the ridiculousness of the product on offer, and been a little tempted once they reached the "Call now and get all these extra things!" part?

JUST TODAY



Put that principle to work in your call-to-action.

Perhaps the first 50 customers to take advantage of an offer get a bonus item or extra 10 percent off. Maybe the special coupon is only available for the next 36 hours. The contest ends tomorrow.

You get the idea.

Don't go overboard, though. If every single deal is "Act now or you'll never see it again!" customers will become annoyed with the manufactured scarcity.

5. Integrate your social media

Need more in-voice and fresh content?

Try tapping a resource you probably already have: your social media accounts.

Your Twitter feed or Facebook page should be updated frequently, and should already have a particular voice that reflects your brand's personality.

55%

of Americans state they're more likely to stick with a brand they follow on social media

Not only that, but with modern digital signage software, displaying a live and/or curated feed on your screens is simple. Many social media networks have an API that developers can use to develop a custom module for your signage [139].

If you choose to display posts from followers, that reinforces your customers' sense that your brand is personable and that they have a personal relationship with your company, fostering loyalty.

In fact, 55 percent of Americans state they're more likely to stick with a brand they follow on social media [140].

And, bonus, by displaying your social media feeds, you'll remind your visitors that they exist—which should translate into new followers and an expanded reach.

Make sure to show your username or handle, and consider displaying a QR code or shortened link so interested customers can follow you instantly.■