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DIGITAL WORKSPACE

Q&A: University of Illinois' Thomas Kunka on How to Make the Most of Digital Signage
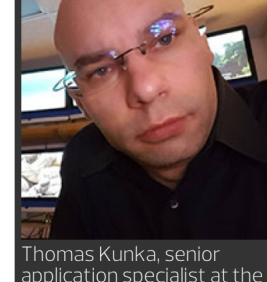
The senior application specialist discusses some of the key components involved in overseeing screen-based communication across campus.

by Erin Brereton

Erin Brereton has written about technology, business and other topics for more than 50 magazines, newspapers and online publications.

During a 1993 trip to the University of Illinois as a grad student, Thomas Kunka was intrigued by the way a digital sign he passed used interactive elements to help visitors navigate the school's Digital Computer Lab.

Little did Kunka know that 17 years later he'd be launching a digital signage service for the university. He was hired in 2001 to coordinate the general assignment classroom network and other operations and has been with the university ever since. EdTech recently spoke with the senior application specialist about content management, finding the best display spot and the unique ways digital signage can convey information to a university audience.

Thomas Kunka, senior application specialist at the University of Illinois. Photo courtesy of LinkedIn.

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EDTECH: How many digital signs are on the University of Illinois campus?

Kunka: We have a total of 350 on our system, and that's growing. The College of Engineering alone has 120–130 signs. Housing has 64 and is adding more. Signs can go in as part of new building construction, renovation or just an internal decision.

EDTECH: What are the most common specifications for the digital signs on your campus?

Kunka: The best display is around a 46- to 55-inch monitor. But some departments are starting to put in 65- to 70-inch signs and moving from standard high-definition screens to 4K (UHD) screens.

There's a difference between something that's made for someone's living room and something made for signage that's on 24/7. They're meant to be vented in certain ways, are heavier-duty and you pay more for them.

EDTECH: Who on campus updates all of the signs?

Kunka: Our campus is very large. For instance, the engineering department has 14 academic departments inside of it — each one with a communications and marketing department.

Our service is basically there for them to leverage, so I have 24 or 25 customers — the College of Engineering, Willard Airport, housing, etc. Departments have digital signage managers who have access to the content management system.

EDTECH: How is the location of a sign determined?

Kunka: For signs outside of conference rooms, it's pretty straightforward. Put it in an open atrium area and know your traffic patterns. Having an interactive sign right when you walk in a doorway means someone is going to have to stop and read it, and there can be congestion.

Schools definitely want to consider the Americans with Disabilities Act requirements regarding accessibility, [such as] if it's an interactive display, anything the user would touch has to have a certain reach radius.

EDTECH: What main advantages can digital signs offer?

Kunka: Having emergency alerts definitely adds value. Making sure information about services available on campus, such as rideshares and walkshares, is well-publicized also enhances safety.

One of the unique things about digital signage is that you can reach people at the right place and the right time. With social media, you never know who's going to read it where. You can text people, but you still don't know when they'll get it.

A lot of people think digital signage is just slideshows, but signage is really moving toward being data-driven and real-time data can be powerful stuff.

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