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Digital Signage for Beginners

What you need to know to manage
your displays

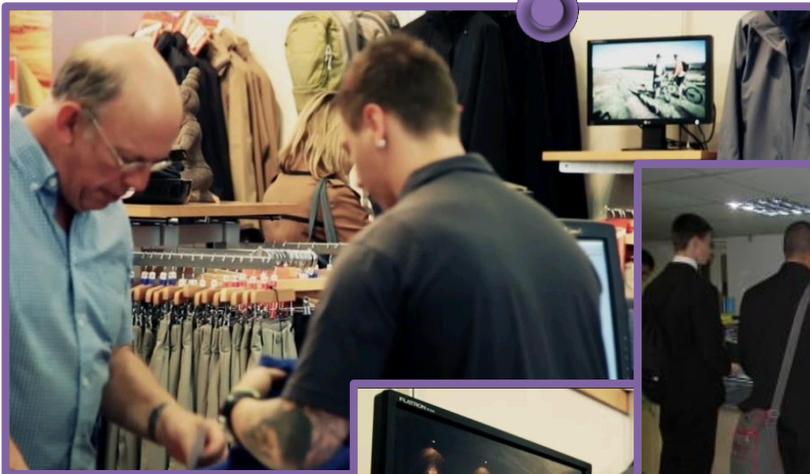


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Experience taught us that digital signage is an unfamiliar term to those outside our industry, despite the system's pervasiveness. We all have encountered digital screens in reception areas, hallways, shopping centres or at checkout points during our daily journeys.

So in plain words **digital signage** is....

-a form of electronic display showing advertising and general information in private and public areas (eg. shopping malls, hospitals, colleges, small shops, waiting rooms, restaurants) both outdoors and indoors.

In its simplest version, the system has three elements:

What is digital signage

1) The content- the message you want to display on your screen. In digital signage terms this is represented by the media files you use: HD videos, JPG's, RSS feeds, HTML5 widgets etc.

The content is the core element of your project so choose your digital signage software carefully for it will affect the type of media files you will be able to play.

Modern digital signage systems can and should support live data but the choice of using such content is ultimately yours.

The software



The content



The hardware

The software: The software is the “glue” that keeps everything together and represents the bridge between your content and your hardware.

Also called content management systems, digital signage software products like digitalsignage.NET and POV allow you to schedule and send content to your screens and control them remotely so they represent a critical part of your install.

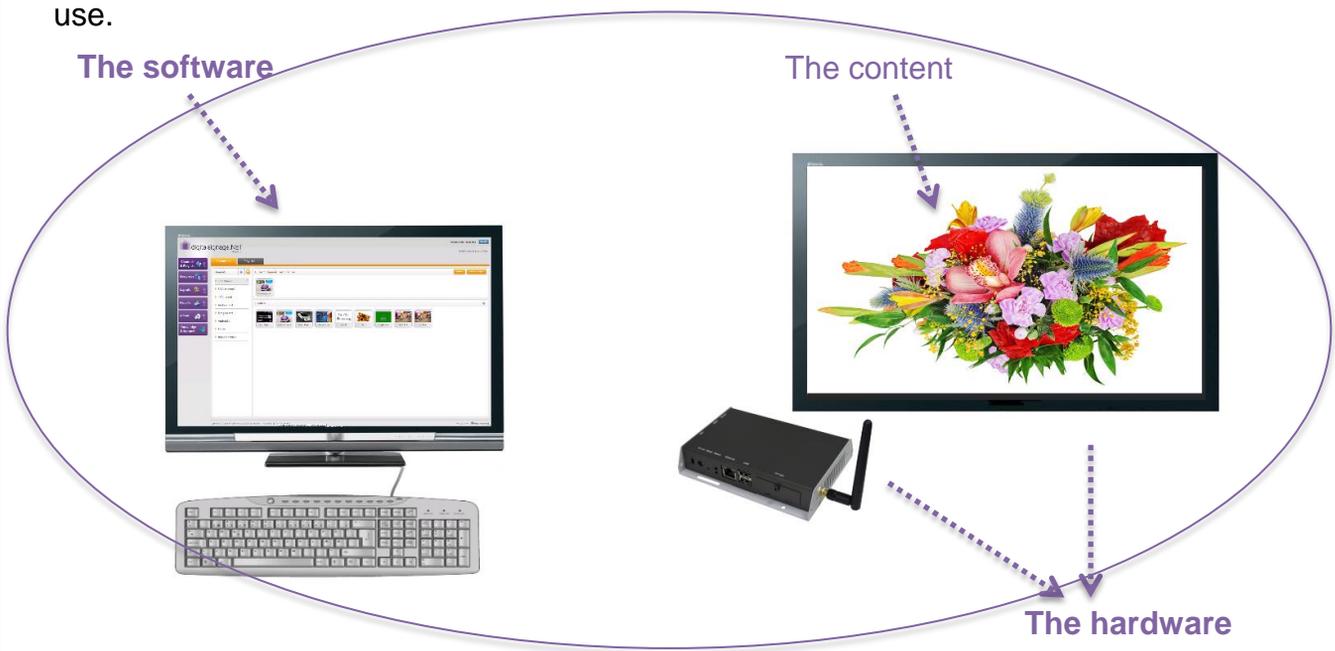
Your software allows you to disseminate your message to scattered locations across the country or even across the world enabling you to deliver uniform communication strategies.

In one of the next chapters we will outline a check-list you should go through when selecting the software you want to use.

What is digital signage

The hardware: represented by the screen itself (consumer or industrial displays, 10” digital signboards etc.) and the media player- PC’s or SMIL devices- associated with them that store your content and send it to the screens.

The recent advent of Android devices eliminates the need for media players, reducing the price of the hardware and making the system easier to deploy. Choose the most convenient option for you.



Choosing the right type of digital signage system

The high number of options available on the market at the moment can make the choice of the right digital signage system difficult for a non-connoisseur. But before evaluating the choices, you need to know which are they and what benefits and short-coming each of them has.

In terms of digital signage systems, here are the two main types:

An open system architecture- *the digital signage software and hardware are agnostic of each other*, allowing you to replace whichever element without affecting the rest. This will allow you to add and modify any piece of the puzzle without having to rebuild your system from scratch.

Closed proprietary architecture- *the hardware and the software are designed to work together*, no intermixing with other outside elements. This system's advantage is that it was thoroughly tested before launch which implies that the rate of errors is very low. The disadvantage is the fact that you'll be using a system that is bound

The technicalities of the system

to 'lock you in'. Changing one element (say the media player) will mean that you will also have to change the others directly related to it (the software).

Make sure you know the costs, strengths and limitations of each option and apply those to your own project. The most expensive solution might not necessarily be the best for you and the same could be said about the cheapest one.

If you are you planning to expand your system you want this to happen as seamlessly as possible, with little effort and minimum cost. Ensure that you will be able to change your system as and when needed, instead of being 'stuck' with it or having to completely replace it altogether.

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An on-premise digital signage system implies that you will have to buy the server software (thus owning it), build it and maintain it. The advantage is that the system is very secure, as nobody outside your organization would have access to it.

The downside is that you will need to become a specialist in that piece of software and have a certain amount of IT knowledge required to buy, build and maintain the server mentioned above. This will cost you time and money but at the end of the day, you will have a sophisticated digital signage system.

A cloud-based digital signage solution, on the other hand, relieves you from the task of maintaining servers, backing up data, worrying about band width or data storage. This implies that the technical knowledge and effort required of you as a user will be minimal. The costs of setting up a cloud-based system will be lower as well and the entire process will be quicker. If all the elements were chosen correctly (software, hardware), you will have a simple and reliable digital signage solution.

The technicalities of the system

Should you host it or should it be in the cloud?



The software makes all the difference

...between the two aforementioned types of systems. [POV](#), for example, is our premise-based, enterprise software that during the years has supported large and complex digital signage projects. [digitalsignage.NET](#) is our cloud-based digital signage software, a more cost-effective solution suitable for simpler projects.

Here is a quick comparison between the two types of digital signage software, further highlighting the aspects that differentiate them.

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The technicalities of the system

Open-source vs. off-the-shelf digital signage software

An open-source software is a community-developed product and it's usually offered for free. The fact that anyone can contribute to the software's development yet no one is in charge of customer support means that when something goes wrong, you will have to sort out the problem yourself. As digital signage software is quite a niche product, support and maintenance must be taken seriously.

An off-the-shelf digital signage software is developed by a company that takes responsibility for its quality, maintenance and bug fixes. You will be offered support in a timely manner usually involving little technical effort from your side.

Premise-based digital signage software	Cloud-based digital signage software
More complex, it is usually used for large advertising projects.	Simple, suitable for users with limited technical knowledge.
You have to buy, build and maintain the server software.	There are no servers to buy and maintain, you are provided with Internet server hosting.
You purchase licenses, hence buying and owning the software.	You 'rent' the software, paying a monthly or yearly subscription.
New versions are not automatically distributed and they involve a cost.	Updates are free and automatic at the server-end (you still have to do a bit of work yourself).
Given the complexity of the software, support is payable.	Software support is offered free of charge.
To learn more about each system's benefits and limitations check out our new infographic	

Another important consideration when choosing your digital signage software is knowing who developed it. If you're going to opt for a free solution make sure you know its limitations.

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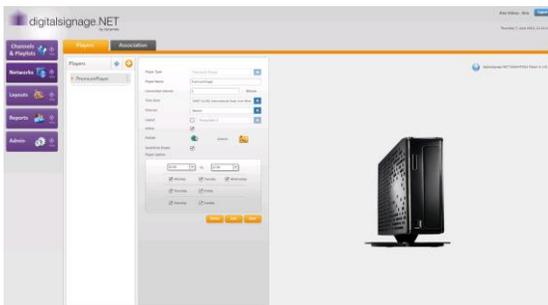


DIGITAL SIGNAGE FOR BEGINNERS

The rise of cloud-computing has made digital signage available to organisations of all sizes, from virtually all sectors. Here's how the system delivers your message to your screens, via the cloud.

After creating and publishing your content using a cloud-based digital signage software such as digitalsignage.NET, **this will be loaded** onto the **cloud** (i.e. the Internet) then **redirected to the media players** that will store it and **send it to your screens**.

The entire operation takes seconds allowing your message to be displayed in almost real-time. The image on the right presents the process.



Cloud-based digital signage explained



Being hosted in the cloud, your system is accessible from anywhere in the world, provided that there is an Internet connection available. So you don't have to be in a certain office or use a certain device to update your content. Simply log into your account, using a standard Internet browser and start managing your content from there.

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DIGITAL SIGNAGE FOR BEGINNERS

The software is the critical part of your digital signage solution as it affects the type of content you can display, the cost and the reliability of your system. So choose it carefully to ensure that it is able to serve your needs.

Here are a few questions you should answer before selecting a digital signage software product.

Does it allow you to get started quickly?

The answer should be “yes” for SaaS (cloud-based) applications that should be suitable for DIY digital signage systems (provided you can handle the installation). You should be able to set up your account in a few minutes and manage your content (and displays, if you have them) seamlessly.

When it comes to on-premise digital signage software that is usually more complex, you will most likely need a demo and/or specific training to be able to use it independently.

[Sign up to digitalsignage.NET for free](#)

No obligations, no credit card required.

Tips for evaluating digital signage software

Are you offered the chance to test the software before subscribing/ paying?

You won't be able to truly assess the simplicity of a piece of software until you actually use it. Therefore, you should be offered a free trial before you commit any resources.

This exercise will reveal another important aspect the quality of the customer support you are going to receive. In our case for example, all our users have set up their accounts and tested digitalsignage.NET for free until they decided to purchase a subscription and send content to their screens. They receive all the help they need in the process from our support team along with user guides and videos.

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Can you know where and when your files have been played?

This feature enables you to monitor the system's health remotely and be sure that your content has been played when and where you wanted it to. You don't want to be running around from location to location checking that each screen is working. The software should do the work for you and offer an overview of the system's performance.

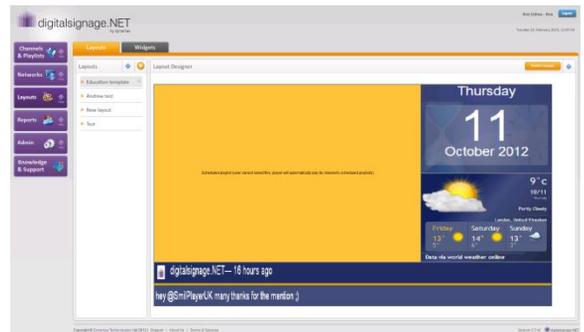
The reports prove particularly useful if you are responsible towards a third party that wants to know if a certain piece of content has been indeed played on the screen(s) selected.

Does the vendor have a proven history of successful, scalable deployments?

Search for [case studies](#), reviews and [press releases](#) of the vendors you are assessing to check if they have solid-enough businesses for a long-term partnership.

A company's history is oftentimes an objective indication about its products' quality and reliability.

Tips for evaluating digital signage software



How flexible is the software when it comes to media support?

When selecting your digital signage software, the types of files you can or cannot play must be a major consideration because eventually, they will affect the final output of the system. Choose a software that can play the type of content you want to show (videos- live or pre-recorded, photos, widgets, news feeds etc.).

Tip: All the choices related to your digital signage project should be driven by your goals. Don't choose a certain technology just because it's the latest or the most sophisticated.

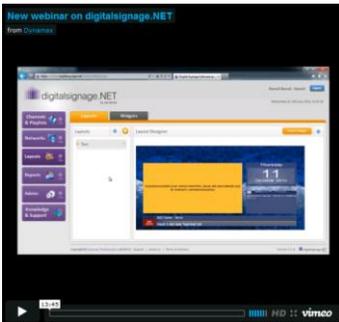


How easy it is to use?

This question is mainly valid for cloud-based software products rather than on-premise ones.

A good web-based digital signage software is written with the end-user in mind and so it should be intuitive and simple to use even for non-technical persons. Don't commit any resources before testing it and seeing how it works for yourself.

As you will be managing content on a daily basis or at least several times a week, you need a product that you feel comfortable with and that comes with all the support you need along the way.



[Watch this webinar](#) to see how our software works

Other features to consider:

Scalability. This feature implies that you can start small (with one or two screens) and grow your network at your own pace, without having to replace existing infrastructure.

Tips for evaluating digital signage software



Image credit: Ria Pereira, Flickr

Flexibility. The software should allow you to send different content to different screens and change it based on the time of the day/ day of the week besides other variables and you should be allowed to involve different users with different admin rights.

Versatility. A modern digital signage software supports the latest and most popular media types- from full HD videos to HTML5 (widgets). It also allows you to organise your screen into zones to display complementary information simultaneously.



DIGITAL SIGNAGE FOR BEGINNERS

Digital signage is a suitable marketing and communication channel for any organisation that has:

- **a message to transmit;**
- **and an audience interested and willing to receive it.**

The two conditions remain valid for both public and private establishments regardless of their sector as long as they are willing to share news and information with customers, employees and other stakeholders.

Here are a few examples of how the system can be used in different environments:

Retail

According to a recent study released by Cisco only 4% of consumers reported a desire to receive help in-store. At the same time, in-store displays are looked at 13% of the time. You make the connection.

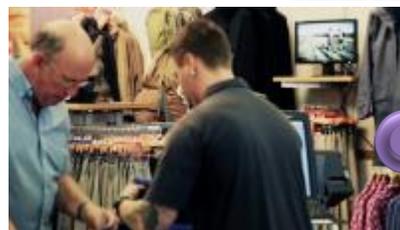
Use digital displays to deliver relevant information and capture your shoppers' attention to convert them into buyers. Download our white paper- [Digital Signage for Retail](#)- to learn more.

The types of organisations digital signage is useful for

Education

The millenials are today's most connected consumers, preferring digital sources of information over traditional ones. *"Young people are connected 24 hours a day...They don't have much time to spend looking at adverts"* (Keith Parkman, UCAS Media).

Networks of screens offer you the chance to grab their attention during the short window of opportunity you have available. To learn more, download [Digital Signage for Education](#).



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Hospitality

They say that “people eat with their eyes”. This is a figure of speech of course but the truth is that we want to eat food that not only tastes but also looks good. Use the visual impact of digital signage to your advantage by displaying freshly cooked food in your restaurants and dining areas. Make guests feel at home in your hotel by employing an elegant, unobtrusive tool that delivers results.

Download [Digital Signage for Hospitality](#) for more information.

Healthcare

“Patients, especially those with long term conditions... want more joined-up care and much of the solution is in the better use and sharing of information.” (Jeremy Hunt, UK health secretary). There is no better time to inform patients about matters of interest to them than when they are in your premises. Use digital information displays in reception areas and waiting rooms to tell them about medical procedures, the use of medication, opening times, home visits and reassure them that they’re in good hands. Download [Digital Signage for Healthcare](#) to learn more.

The types of organisations digital signage is useful for

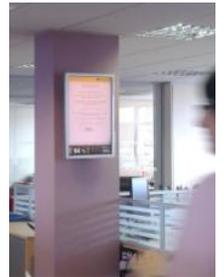


Corporate

Communications

Modern employees want to be informed and inspired. Use digital signage to keep your staff up-to-date with current events, reach your non-wired employees and create an environment in which people love to work. Transform your communications to match the way your staff lives and works by using a modern, flexible communication tool. Want to know more?

Download [Digital Signage for Corporate Communications](#).



DIGITAL SIGNAGE FOR BEGINNERS

Not all digital signage projects are successful and some for reasons that could be easily avoided. The following mistakes may seem obvious but we see people making them all the time.

Make sure you avoid them.

1) Not paying enough attention to the pre-selection phase. Obviously, not understanding the technology and the costs involved by your project will set you up for failure. So skip the research stage at your own peril. We advise you to get all the documentation and insight you can and need before actually doing anything to make sure you'll know what you're doing.

2) Skipping the testing stage. Any reputable digital signage software vendor will offer you a [free trial of their application](#). Take advantage of this chance to see how the product works at zero costs for you. If you're not given this option, disqualify the vendor.

3) Stale content. Digital signage is about timely, real-time communications. If you display the same information day in and

Top 10 mistakes to avoid



day out, you will discourage your audience from seeing it as a reliable source of information. As Thilo Schuetz of AFMG said *"The system is only as good as the information you put into it"*.

4) Using a solution that will "lock you in". You should be able to switch between vendors, without having to replace existing infrastructure. The offer should be flexible enough to allow you to change a piece of the puzzle without altering the entire install.

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5) **Forgetting about support.** Free or for a fee, support must be there when needed. Make sure you will be offered a prompt after-sale service and that you understand the costs involved (if any).

6) **Not requesting training when you feel you need it.** Understanding how to use the system allows you to maximise its benefits and maybe even cut costs. If the software is more complex (as in the case of premise-based solutions) you are likely to need to spend a few hours with the vendor to understand how it works.

7) **Choosing the wrong location for your screens.** If they're not visible, they're useless. Think where is your audience most likely to be found, take into consider their interests and state of mind when there and install your displays in these points.

8) **Not having clearly identified goals** for your system. Arguably, before doing anything else you should determine what you want to achieve with digital signage. Otherwise, why would you invest in the system in the first place?

Top 10 mistakes to avoid

Depending on your organisation, these could be anything from increasing sales to decreasing the time spent sharing information with all the interested parties.

9) **Not measuring the system's ROI,** after setting the goals which means that you will never truly know if these were achieved. Measuring the tangible effects of digital signage is not a straightforward exercise but it's important to ignore if you want to base your decisions on data rather than guesswork.

10) **Using SD cards and USB drives to run the network.** [This method](#) will imply either mailing the hardware or travelling to each screen's location to update the content. An expensive and time-consuming method of managing your system.

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DIGITAL SIGNAGE FOR BEGINNERS

1) Determine the system's goal, content and context

Before you start doing anything related to your project- stop! Think about *why* you need this new communication tool taking into account your organisation's context and set the budget you are willing to spend on the project. Clarifying your goals will help you choose the means.

2) Choose your software platform

After deciding what you need to communicate to achieve your objectives, choose a software that allows you to do just that. It should allow you to display the type of content you want, in different combinations and organise and manage your displays in an efficient manner.

3) Pick the hardware

Media players are usually chosen based on their compatibility with the digital signage software you selected. So do a bit of research on the existing software-hardware partnerships. Here is one of the [hardware vendors we work with](#).

To make things simpler, you might choose to work with an integrator who is already in

The right steps in the right order

touch with different hardware providers.

4) Install the system

Screens need to be fitted in the chosen locations, media players need to be configured- are you able to handle this stage? If not, resort to the aforementioned integrators whose brand and butter is handling this process for you. We work with [a number of companies](#), both from the UK and abroad, that are able to provide complete digital signage solutions.

5) Test

Some organisations planning to install a large digital signage network usually start by setting up a test system made up of a handful of displays (or less). It's a way of mitigating risk.

But if you plan a small install or even a one-screen solution, testing the software suffices, provided you get the help you need with the hardware side of things, if you're not familiar with it.

Examples of digital signage applications



Digital poster in [East End Foods](#) store controlled digitalsignage.NET



[Blue Cow](#)'s information display. Content scheduled and published using our software



Digital information display at [the National Exhibition Centre](#) in Birmingham, UK. Run by our software.



[Streetly Academy](#) uses digital signage powered by digitalsignage.NET

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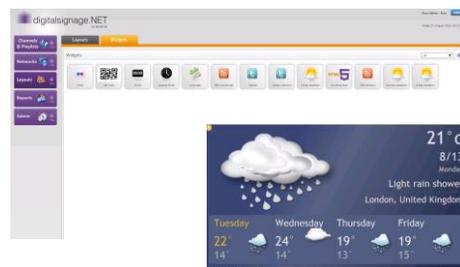


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Put your knowledge to work and take a tour of our digital signage application.

All you need is a standard PC or Mac, an Internet connection and a few content files to play with and you're all set.

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