AIR TIME

Sydney Airport has invested heavily in a multi-pronged digital signage solution.

Story: Christopher Holder

I s there a more apposite venue for screens than an airport? I hardly think so. Whether you're coming or going, meeting or scarpering, the first thing you do upon entering an airport is look for a screen.

But gone are the days of airport screens existing solely to inform, there are other fish to fry. Internationally, airports are investing heavily in digital signage, reflecting airports' growing retail role. That's right, airports are becoming more and more like shopping malls (with plenty of room to park your A380), especially in the international terminals where duty-free 'luxe' shopping is flourishing. The reasons are obvious: international passengers are by necessity affluent, they have no choice but to have time on their hands, and depending on whether they're coming or going they're often 'off the leash' or frantically finding a gift for family. It's a heady cocktail of factors that produce the perfect retail storm.

So it's no wonder that advertisers can't wait to get their hands on the transit lounge crowd.

EMBARK WITH BITE

Sydney Airport is loudly and proudly Australia's premier airport. Last year its international terminal handled 8.3 million passengers, which is around 45% of all Australia's international travellers. With those eye-popping numbers you can begin to understand why the $500m investment in the international terminal over the last three years seems entirely appropriate.

The $500m encompasses a much expanded departures level (with 7300sqm of extra space) a new flash set for Channel 7's *Border Security* (ahem, of course I mean "a new security screening area to undertake essential aviation security measures") as well as a new shopping Forum to provide more waiting areas and food, beverage and retail outlets for passengers (after customs) including a huge duty free store you could get lost in for days. Needless to say there are plenty of other improvements to the airport amenity that many readers will be aware of and appreciate.

Digital signage is a key part of the upgrade, with Sydney Airport Corporation Limited's (SACL) Martin Salter talking us through the finer points of the fitout. Martin's title is Manager Advertising & New Media and has presided over some cutting-edge deployment of what SACL is calling 'new media'. There are three new external sites (digital billboards), which anyone driving in and around the airport couldn't help but notice. But the major work is indoors, including plenty of LED, LCD and a Captive Area Network (CAN). The CAN is particularly interesting. It operates in a similar way to an internal TV network, 'broadcasting' a mix of advertising, operational and corporate messaging. The CAN is for areas where people have time on their hands – areas of dwell – and lends itself to being shown on a good number of smaller format, networked 46- and 42-inch LCDs.

CAPTIVE AUDIENCE

I kicked off my conversation with Martin Salter by asking him more about the CAN:

Martin Salter: CAN was a specific strategy we had for the development of the digital signage in Terminal 1. The Captive Network was positioned so we could create a frequency of message as the passengers conducted their journey throughout the terminal. As the International Terminal caters to new customers every day, the challenge was to develop a network which could assist clients [CAN advertisers] to communicate their branded message over a number of times to the same person, i.e. maximise frequency and exposure.

We have achieved this with the installation of small digital formats in key customer touch points throughout the terminal i.e. check-in, customs, flight information screens, and departure gates. This allows a client to have a departures and arrivals digital strategy in the same format while improving the overall impact of the campaign.

DS: Right, so there's a journey that the signage is taking with the traveller. Very different to the high traffic multi-screen displays.

MS: That's right. In arrivals and departures we've used large-format screens made up of LED and LCD displays. These are designed to be multifunctional, including high-impact digital displays that create much movement and impact to passengers in

high traffic areas, while also being able to give category sponsors such as Emirates the opportunity to develop 'Branded Live Sites' for major events such as the World Cup and add ownership to specific areas for retail experiential zones.

DS: Okay, so these Branded Live Sites, how big are the screens?

MS: They're 4 x 4 panels.

FREE TO AIR?

DS: You describe the CAN as being like an in-house TV channel, as it were. What other content are we talking about other than advertising?

MS: Depends. We developed the network to target passengers in specific zones. And again, these zones have been created based on dwell time. The shorter the dwell (i.e. under five minutes) the screens are 100% advertising. If the dwell areas are higher, we have incorporated non-branded content, such as partnering with the ABC for live news feeds and the advertising component is higher.

DS: How has the digital signage altered the way in which you inform and market to patrons?

MS: A major benefit of developing this network has been "impact and engagement focused" which has allowed us to reduce the floor clutter in and around the terminal. Since the implementation of the digital network, our marketing team has reviewed the way we communicate offers from our retailers to the customers. As the retail department has time allocated on the network, this allows them to communicate dynamic retail offers on the screens in more places and in a more dynamic way.

DS: What measurable differences has the digital signage made?

MS: It's generated new advertisers ad categories to the International terminal. In addition we have greater rotations and more flexibility with advertisers and brands, with both call to action and brand statements working together.

Our communication terminal-wide has also improved; we have worked with AQIS [the quarantine service] over the past year to develop much improved content, incorporating multilingual messaging about the importance of quarantine and declaring goods.

DS: Right, the 'Hey, you with the salami in the handbag' messages. Do you imagine the digital signage novelty will wear off quickly? If so, how can signs be kept fresh?

MS: Unlike a major shopping centre where they could have traffic of up to 200,000 people per month coming to the centre on average two times per week, the International Terminal has up to one million new customers every month. It is due to this we do not expect there to be an issue of the network becoming stale. In saying this we understand it is vitally important to keep developing the relevancy of the content to assist the length of time customers view the screens, and thus help drive the commercialisation.

We are currently undertaking phase two of the CAN project whereby we will integrate our flight information systems with the Captive network. This integration will mean we will be able to schedule non-branded content and advertising content to be relevant to the passengers' destination.

DS: How much of the content is generated in-house?

MS: We develop 25% of content in-house. The majority of Sydney Airport stakeholders have signage on the CAN.

FEED ME

RSS (Really Simple Syndication) is a format for delivering regularly changing content via the web. Many news sites, blogs and other online publishers make their content available via an RSS feed as well as via a web browser. For digital signage they're a no-brainer, it keeps your content dynamic without having to lift a finger. Most content creation software will allow you to add a 'crawl' to your template (where an RSS can crawl across the screen). Most RSS feeds are free.

news.com.au
News: Nothing limited about News Limited, there's an abundance of RSS feeds from around the world to choose from. Everything from federal politics to 'Weird True Freaky'.

asx.com.au
Money: Financial info on tap. Everything from standard stock prices to video of ASX expert interviews.

weatherzone.com.au
Weather: Show me someone who's not interested in weather and I'll show you a corpse.

foxsports.com.au/rss
Sport: Get sport-specific feeds or breaking news. Guaranteed crowd pleaser.

Kitted Out: The Forum is the centrepiece of SACL's $500m redevelopment of the International Terminal. The approach to digital signage is 'a little goes a long way'. Branded messages are reinforced at key dwell areas like departure boards.

DEFINING YOUR RULES

DS: How did you go about specifying the system? What attracted you to the set-up and the suppliers you have?

MS: We defined the rules of the network in advance and found a group of companies to help drive this solution, obviously through the tender. Price was an important consideration but we needed to make sure they could deliver the network requirements.

DS: What key attributes of your requirements dictated the sophistication of the system?

MS: The key requirements were: flexible scheduling, being able to run portrait-mode screens, synchronisation, integration with FIDS [flight information display systems], multilingual capabilities, dynamic RSS feeds, and zoning.

TAKE IT OUTSIDE

DS: Tell me some more about the outdoor screens.

MS: The external sites at Terminal 2 generate revenues through key categories such as Automotive, Banking Finance and Airlines.

The 'Departures Drop off and Gantry on Shiers Ave signs' were selected by SACL and APN Outdoor to upgrade into 'LED Iconic Media Locations'. This was because we had a demand to develop sites for arriving and departing passengers in the same format. As static sites, both locations were providing a decent occupancy, however we were limited to the creative flexibility these sites could provide. Clients are now able to change artwork when they like thus improving the flexibility of the sign and ease of use for the client.

The Domestic terminals do have a much higher frequency of passenger, thus the combined traffic numbers of T2 & T3 are approximately 23 million.

Now that we've changed these sites to digital we have increased our incremental revenues and are thus meeting our expectations.

RETAIL HEAVEN

DS: I mentioned in my intro how digital signage and airports go together like the proverbial horse and carriage. Is that how you're seeing it?

MS: Inherently it is the best place for brands and services to engage. Dwell time is significant, minds are open and the audience has the means and is generally A/B demographic – a fertile playground for brands to engage directly with the audience. Like I mentioned earlier, it differs to the shopping centre malls with a far greater reach with less frequency.

DS: Hence the big investment: digital signage ticks all the marketing boxes?

MS: Sure. It is the new medium with fast turnaround and speed to market, flexibility of message, dynamic visuals and generally greater revenue potential. ✒

Just the Tonic: SACL's captive area network (CAN) is a network of LCD panels that allows advertisers to reach passengers several times on their journey from check-in to take-off. The CAN will display an ad-only feed at times and incorporate non-branded content like ABC live news in dwell areas.

BEHIND THE SCREENS

TechMedia is the Australian support and distribution office for global digital signage specialists Scala, and consulted with Sydney Airport Corporation Limited to develop a versatile platform plan to allow central management of a wide array of different media types and digital campaigns and integration with a number of different live data and content sources. The network of screens is diverse, featuring outdoor and indoor LED, portrait, landscape and video wall LCD, down to multiple zones of media on some single displays. With such a diverse range of display technology in a single network, it was imperative SACL deployed a highly flexible connected signage platform like Scala. For the international terminal, TechMedia deployed a number of Scala products and TechMedia developed integrations.

Some of the highlights of the network are the ability to synchronise scheduled content and advertising slots across a number of separate groups of displays or zones of a display. In an environment where a number of screens are visible at once, this provides an elevated level of impact for the advertiser. The synchronisation also provides a clean, uniform feel for the network of screens helping them gain more focus in the environment. Many of the key screen installations feature a Scala player capable of integration with live pay or free-to-air TV. The live feed can be used full screen or in a window, perfect for special promotions or significant events like the World Cup and Commonwealth games.

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