Interview with Nick Johnson, CEO and Co-Founder of NowSignage Ltd.

Digital Signage Advancing an Information Society in the Pandemic

By *Japan SPOTLIGHT*

These days it is common to see many colorful digital messages in big cities and towns in developed nations that not only provide the time and the weather forecast but also local news or information on new products and services. The current pandemic has added to this list, with information on public health, such as keeping sufficient social distance at big supermarkets. Healthcare venues or places of education where the virus is often found in clusters are also sites where digital signage would work well.

Japan SPOTLIGHT interviewed Nick Johnson, CEO and co-founder of NowSignage Ltd., another UK high-tech venture specializing in digital signage.

(Interviewed on April 14, 2021)

Introduction

JS: Could you give a brief introduction of yourself and your company?

Johnson: I am Nick Johnson, the CEO and co-founder of NowSignage. We founded the company in 2013. NowSignage is an award-winning digital signage contents management system (CMS) that enables users to upload, schedule and manage content across screens at the click of a button. It is a very simplistic approach to getting content to a screen. We operate across all industry sectors, and we are ideal for any sized digital signage network, whether that is a single location with a handful of screens, or multiple global locations with thousands of screens *(Photos 1-3)*.

Over the past eight years, our very simple go-to-market strategy and Software as a Service (SaaS) business model has allowed us to grow and establish our reach on a global scale, and we are now implemented across over 30 countries and trusted by many of the world's biggest brands.

Need for Digital Signage

JS: In terms of hospitals and clinics, is there a growing demand for digital signage following the pandemic?

Johnson: Digital signage is relevant across all industry sectors although what we have noticed since the pandemic is that some


Nick Johnson

sectors that were previously buoyant – such as our retail or digital out-of-home sectors – have become less proactive, and areas such as healthcare have come under the spotlight. Because of our broad range of features and also our hardware agnostic approach to digital signage – NowSignage can be loaded on pretty much anything – this has made us very proactive in the healthcare sector as we can be easily deployed and implemented across a mixed estate of System-on-Chip (SoC) displays, media players and video walls.

NowSignage allows our customers to easily take control of their screens through one centralized CMS. Because we are purely software-focused we can work on any hardware and operating system. We have also developed some niche features during the pandemic that have made us relevant to healthcare and other sectors including industrial and manufacturing.

An example is our integration with digital hand sanitizer dispensers that monitor and track sanitizer solution levels to send automated refill alerts. This is seeing vast uptake across public space and public transport locations. Another example is our integration with Hikvision camera-sensors that monitor room capacity and display this as live dashboards on digital signage displays. We're finding rapid uptake of this product in smart offices, factory floors and retail stores.

With regards to health care, our hardware agnostic approach and also ease of use are attractive. We have also found that for all industry sectors there is now a need to display health and safety messaging more importantly, and digital signage is a very effective
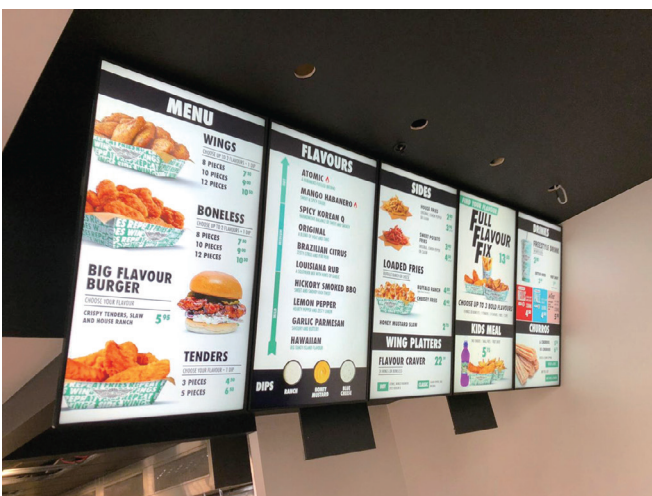
Digital Signage

way to display this messaging as rules and regulations are constantly changing, for example with regards to social distancing. Print signage is not so effective for constantly changing messaging, while digital allows you to tailor it to the scenario where it is being implemented.

JS: Is there a growing demand for digital signage in the United Kingdom and also in the world?

Johnson: Yes, absolutely. The application for digital signage use-cases is always growing. The ongoing advancement of both hardware and software technologies within the digital signage sector means that where and how digital signage can be implemented is ever expanding.

These factors are making digital signage more and more relevant to all industry sectors across the world and increasing demand. What we're seeing is a point where digital signage is now becoming more of an operational need than merely nice to have, because it is delivering critical information like health and safety information or integrating with software to be used as an operational tool.

JS: Are there other utilities for digital signage, for example for companies promoting new products or businesses? PR activities could be another big target for digital signage.

Johnson: Definitely, both internally and externally. Internally, digital signage can be used to inform and educate staff. So in large businesses where there are constant developments and new products being released, not all staff will be aware of what is happening so it can be used internally to inform staff of progress and to keep them aligned with company objectives.

Externally, from a PR point of view, digital out-of-home networks are expanding, and can be implemented into small hand sanitizer units or in small tablets in kiosks. The out-of-home network lets companies target an audience specific to any location and it makes it very cost effective. If they are a pharma company, they might not want a large billboard as they are targeting a small pharmacy, so they use a smaller screen. Also digital platforms like NowSignage have features such as our proof of play functionality, which allows us to track the exact number of times an advert is played on a screen, the number of impressions it has had, and even understand the audience demographic that are viewing the content.

JS: On that point, is digital signage service expensive for advertisers? Also, the message provided by the digital signage would need to be impactful in order to attract people to a specific product or service.

Johnson: With the advancement of cloud-based digital signage, and also with platforms like NowSignage that are hardware agnostic, we are no longer reliant on selling a piece of hardware. In the last few

years, SoC technologies have really improved, so you have products like Samsung and LG where they are building the hardware into the display. Because software is no longer insisting that you have to have a certain media player attached, the cost of delivering services is reducing.

We are focused on our software license, just one product, and so we can deliver a very efficient service and the end-user's price for both hardware and software is coming down, which makes it a lot more palatable and easier for them to onboard digital signage. The ease of onboarding is also a lot simpler – you can just remotely download the applications in the cloud and go straight onto the display. So the ease of deployment is improving and so is the cost, bringing down the cost for the end-user.

The cost of advertising spaces can be more configurable and defined so you would not need to block out a whole month of slots, because with digital signage you can schedule exact timings for advertising.

Regarding your second question, the creation of content is essential to getting the digital signage message out. Essentially, we are providing a tool, a software for displaying content, and the hardware providers are just providing a display, a mechanism for showing that content. So the element that really brings all of this to life is the quality of the content in how it communicates with the end user and engages with them to have an impact for the brand.

The NowSignage team is built up of a broad range of skills and talents, but the real success of NowSignage is largely based on our alignment with our vast partner eco-system. This comprises the world's leading technology solution partners and channel resellers who operate with NowSignage across strategic regions and sectors on a global level.

Our eco-system is like our family; and like a family each of our partners brings different strengths and capabilities that can work together in harmony to provide the ideal solution to our mutual customer. For example, through NowSignage we can bring together content creators, animators, advertisers, AV integrators, data analysts and custom applications to deliver one seamless digital signage experience. In terms of us as a team, we rely on our eco-system of bringing together skills and specialties to deliver a full service.

Good Partnership as a Key to Success

JS: The key to your success seems to be contingent on what type of partnerships you can achieve.

Johnson: It's all about our partnerships, and we realized early on that we are specialists in creating great software. We aren't specialists in content creation or integrating hardware or installing digital signage networks. So we have worked hard to build a global network of partners and align ourselves with all the leading providers and leading software companies and the social networks, because these partnerships drive our business and enable end-users to get a range

of content in different sectors.

We very quickly realized that we needed to build our partnership network, so we started close to home to build our reputation and our brand here in the UK and in the rest of Europe. We are also very well aligned with a lot of North American and European-based solutions partners. We are now a global partner with Phillips, and also a global partner with BrightSign, so by leaning on the reputation and building our alliances with these leading brands, we are able to get a footprint and experience our growth globally. We have a close alliance with LG in Frankfurt and so as they secure projects, they reach out to us to deliver projects together, which is beneficial for both parties as we have a very clean, seamless and cost-effective CMS that works on their hardware, and we enable them to win projects that they maybe couldn't have won with their previous partners.

Potential of Asian Market

JS: Do you think Asia would be a big market now and in the future for digital signage?

Johnson: Asia has always been at the forefront of technology. Asia is one of the biggest markets for digital signage now and in the near future. It's clear to see how immersed Asia is in technology. The majority of all hardware product innovations are driven by vendors based in Asia, an example being the dominance of vendors such as Absen and Unilumin in the global LED market, and also many of the world's largest LED manufacturers.

This hardware trend will only continue and accelerate over the next few years, partly driven by ever increasing competition within Asia between Chinese, Korean and Japanese technology companies.

Having said that, the UK also has a strong reputation for advancing and setting software innovation standards, and as such we believe that our strong software credentials married with our compatibility with all the hardware products coming out of Asia make us a very desirable solution across Asia.

As previously mentioned, our biggest growth sectors over the past 12 months have been the healthcare sector and the industrial sector, and we believe this makes us a very relevant product for the Asia-Pacific market.

One specific feature that has driven a lot of our growth in the industrial sector is our integration with business intelligence platforms such as Microsoft Power BI, which allow factories, warehouses, manufacturing plants, building sites, and control rooms to display a wide array of business-critical data securely and in real-time, such as sales metrics and dispatch information or business data.

JS: In Japan, South Korea, and China, would you face any language barriers in promoting your business?

Johnson: We certainly will be improving on our multilingual capabilities this year. However, we do already have over 300

customers across Asia, so we are already well-deployed. Some customers have one or two screens, while some have hundreds of screen licenses.

The reason for this brisk uptake is our ecosystem of partners, and re-sellers who are able to act as a local source for delivering that service. So if you have a local company, we will have a local partner that can deliver that service. We also have very good alignment with partners and brands like LG, Samsung, Hisense and other brands coming out of the region.

There is certainly a lot of work as we continue to grow internationally as we need to bring in multilingual versions of the platform, but because of our local partners and ecosystem it has not held us back as yet. Also, one of our main unique selling propositions (USPs) is that we are a very intuitive and easy to use platform, and with some simple video guides and a very graphical interface, a user can quite easily grasp how to utilize the platform without the need for lots of text.

Future of Business

JS: Will you need to develop new technologies further even after the pandemic for survival, given the serious competition, as technology for digital signage seems to be changing so rapidly?

Johnson: Because we identified early on, we are specialists in software, our whole team internally is based around software development, which means every single day we are focused on advancing our NowSignage platform – that is our sole focus. Just this past year, we have integrated capacity management solutions, hand sanitizer solutions, room-booking services, audience measurement softwares, trigger-based technologies for passive infrared sensors (PIRs), and screen synchronization for the quick-service-restaurant (QSR) market – we are constantly advancing the NowSignage platform.

Digital signage is ever-changing. If you logged into NowSignage today then it is not the same product as it was last year, or last month or even last week – that's how fast the industry and platform is moving. It's constantly changing and constantly evolving.

This approach is exactly how we stay at the fore. We provide all our features out-of-the-box under one single license fee, and we guarantee to all our customers that as our platform advances they will always have access to the latest and most advanced features at no additional charge.

This commitment to our customers means that we are future-proofing their investment. They are not just purchasing a digital signage solution that meets their needs today, but also one that adapts to meet their needs of the future. That is our ethos with the software; we are future proofing them by always introducing new features on a weekly basis that are naturally available to all our customers.

JS: Perhaps the shape of cities will change after the pandemic. Might that create new needs for digital signage?

Johnson: There are so many hardwares that can be incorporated into different buildings: there are fantastic LED walls that are curved and wrap around buildings, there are small tablet-sized screens that can be recessed into a wall, there are smart environments with touch kiosks that can advertise when they are not being interacted with. In many smart offices and smart cities people can actually interact with signage via their own smart devices, so you can go up to a screen and use something as simple as a QR code to interact. The technology is becoming so submersed that you can target that content, because with software and integrations with things like audience measurement software with cameras built-in, we can understand what is looking at a screen and serve content relevant to them. Because digital signage can be interacted with either by touch or smartphones, we can then serve them content relevant to their own personal device.

JS: If possible, could you tell us about your future business strategy?

Johnson: Yes certainly, our business strategy is very simple. At NowSignage we want to drive the uptake of digital signage through the advancement of cloud-based technology innovation, without ever compromising on affordability or accessibility to the customer.

We see that this will be achieved by becoming more integrated with the technologies that surround us on a daily basis. NowSignage is no longer just a means of a platform that lets you upload images and video and then schedule that to a screen; it is actually a lot more immersed in third-party software, and the integration with that software is key. As well as integrations with Microsoft and Google Maps, there are more consumer-focused integrations such as social media integrations with the emergence of Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and Tik Tok. We are even seeing Tik Tok content become relevant within digital signage. Through these third-party integrations, digital signage will become relevant to all audiences and all industry sectors.

We are focused on technology innovation, but we won't compromise on affordability or accessibility to the customer, and we are doing that by constantly building our ecosystem and integrating with different software that becomes more and more relevant to different industry sectors and audiences.

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