

Digital wanted posters help find fugitives

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

Digital billboards help law-enforcement officials in their search for fugitives

Only a fraction of all billboards are digital, but their use is spreading

MOBILE, Alabama (AP) -- Between ads for hamburgers and liposuction, the giant digital billboards flashed an image of Oscar Finch's face taken by a surveillance camera. The young man wasn't selling anything. He was running from police.

A billboard on Airport Blvd just west of Interstate 65 shows a wanted poster of Oscar Finch.



Finch was a suspect in a bank robbery last month. More than a week after the crime, authorities obtained the photo and immediately posted it on 12 digital billboards in Mobile, using the eye-catching electronic signs as digital wanted posters.

The billboard showed a grainy mugshot of Finch taken during the November 20 heist. The image, which was mixed in with commercial ads, included his name, his alleged offense and a phone number to contact police.

The 21-year-old Finch, who was the first suspect featured on an electronic billboard in Mobile, surrendered on

December 1 -- just a day after his picture appeared. Police spokeswoman Nancy Johnson said he apparently turned himself in after seeing news coverage of the billboards.

"We had been looking for this individual for 10 days and turned it around in 24 hours," Johnson said. "So we're thinking it's going to be highly effective. I think it's a great asset for us."

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Wanted posters have been used to find suspects for generations. Sketches of criminals in the Wild West were tacked onto trees and buildings. In more recent years, photos of the FBI's most wanted fugitives have been displayed in post offices.

With digital billboards, police can now display a suspect's face to thousands of people, sometimes almost immediately after a crime is reported.

"We can be up in 15 minutes" of getting a suspect's photo, said Troy Tatum, general manager of Lamar Advertising, the Baton Rouge, Louisiana-based company that provided free use of the billboards in Mobile as a public service.

When the electronic boards aren't showing suspects, they display regular advertising in moving, full-color images that stand 14 feet tall and 48 feet wide. They can also be used for AMBER Alerts for missing children and to deliver weather bulletins.

"We have a special slot set up for local emergencies," Tatum said.

Mobile Police Chief Phillip M. Garrett doesn't want to give such prominent display to "every lawnmower thief" wanted by police. He said the billboards will be used only in high-profile cases or in searches for missing people.

Only a fraction of U.S. billboards are digital -- 500-plus out of an estimated 450,000 total signs, according to the industry. But production of electronic boards is expected to grow.

Police in other parts of the country are also beginning to use the billboards.

In September, Florida authorities arrested a drug suspect two weeks after his photo was displayed on a billboard in Daytona Beach. A tipster who saw the suspect's picture found him sitting in a McDonald's.

The billboards have also been useful in disasters. When an interstate bridge collapsed in August in Minneapolis, billboards displayed an emergency message within 15 minutes.

The signs also have critics. Mobile City Council member Connie Hudson has proposed a temporary moratorium on any new billboards, saying the city needs safety regulations to control the number and spacing of the signs because they may distract drivers.

The full council has not acted on Hudson's concerns.

Ken Klein, vice president of the Outdoor Advertising Association of America Inc., in Washington, D.C., said billboard wanted posters became more common after a young woman was slain in 2002 in Leawood, Kansas.

The victim's father, Roger Kemp, approached Lamar Advertising for help, and the company posted a composite sketch of the suspect on a conventional billboard. A tipster who saw the sketch led authorities to Benjamin Appleby, 31.

Appleby was convicted in 2006 and sentenced to life in prison for killing 19-year-old Ali Kemp.