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Digital billboards offer creative choices

Message clarity, flexibility appeal to advertisers

The Business Journal of Milwaukee - by [Ryan Furlong](#)

Travelers cruising along Milwaukee-area freeways may be experiencing a Times Square feel to the landscape lately.

But relax, your eyes aren't deceiving you. Chances are you probably just passed a digital billboard.

"Think of it as a giant computer," said Paul Sara, president of the Milwaukee division for **Clear Channel Outdoor**, which last November launched six digital billboards in the Milwaukee area.

The flashy new billboards, which form images through small light-emitting diodes, can be seen from a half-mile away. Clear Channel Outdoor estimates the billboards reach about 600,000 people every day.

According to the **Outdoor Advertising Association of America Inc.**, there are more than 500 digital billboards scattered throughout the United States. The latest in billboard design has opened up new and exciting opportunities for both billboard companies and advertisers.

Unlike traditional billboards, digital billboards have the ability to rotate advertisements every six to eight seconds. In the Milwaukee area, however, laws limit rotations to every 30 seconds, allowing billboard companies to open up high-traffic areas to multiple advertisers.

The out-of-home advertising industry, which includes billboard, bus, taxi and other types of outdoor advertising, is a \$6.8 billion industry going through a change. Digital billboards have become the fastest-growing area of out-of-home advertising with a spending increase of 55 percent in 2006 to \$233.3 million, according to a study by PQ Media, Stamford, Conn.

Industry experts cite flexibility as key to the early success of digital billboard advertising. Most notably, it offers the flexibility to advertise on certain days of the week, at certain times of the day and at prime locations.

This has eliminated fixed costs associated with the traditional billboard format and allowed



Scott Paulus

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billboard companies to charge higher or lower rates based on location, time and traffic.

Digital billboards allow advertisers to transmit and customize real-time information. A company can now advertise one product in the morning and another in the evening. Lottery jackpots, mortgage rates, interest rates, price reductions and merchandise sales can all be updated from one location at any time.

"This is our version of what is happening in the e-world," joked Sara, adding that companies can, if they choose, update their advertisements in a matter of seconds.

"The real power is the clarity of the message and the ability the advertiser has to change their message as many times a day, with no production costs," he said.

In the short time they've been in use, digital billboards have not just been limited to advertisements.

Last fall, Clear Channel's Digital Outdoor Network in Milwaukee broadcast, for 24 hours, artwork created by 12 of Milwaukee's most-recognizable artists. The digital billboard art exhibit was the first in the country and helped publicize their use in the Milwaukee area.

On National Missing Children's Day on May 25, Clear Channel, in conjunction with the U.S. Department of Justice, successfully tested Milwaukee's first digital Amber Alert on six area billboards. The Amber Alert system provides early notification to the public of missing children.

Digital players

Various advertisers are taking advantage of the digital billboard technology. Both Clear Channel Outdoor and Lamar Advertising, the two major digital players in the Milwaukee area, said most of their business is for local advertisers.

Chula Vista Resort in Wisconsin Dells and WISN-TV, Milwaukee, are two of the 45 different companies opting to advertise on Clear Channel's Digital Outdoor Network since it launched last fall.

WISN-TV advertised for two weeks during television's May ratings sweeps.

"We were really pleased with the resolution. It created a very dynamic look and gave a very good impression," said Jim Windsor, director of creative services at WISN.

WISN is still evaluating the impact of its digital billboard ads, but the station fared well during May sweeps and placed tops in all local news time periods, Windsor said.

New technology does not come without concern, however, as some critics argue digital billboards can be a dangerous distraction to drivers.

"I don't believe it's a distraction," said Kurt Weis, vice president and general manager at **Lamar Advertising of Milwaukee**.

Los Angeles-based Lamar Advertising has four digital billboards in greater Milwaukee.

To minimize driver distractions, area digital billboard operators are prohibited from including advertisements that contain animated, scrolling, flashing or video material.

"It's not moving. It's like a traditional static ad," said Weis.

On a national level the response to digital billboard distractions has been mixed.

In January, a judge ruled that Minnetonka, a Minneapolis suburb, was within its rights to order the power cut off to two of the eight Clear Channel digital billboards in the area.

However, Minnetonka eventually reversed its decision.

Milwaukee, on the other hand, seems to be having a different experience.

"There have been absolutely no problems that we have been made aware of," said Sara.

Representatives from both Clear Channel Outdoor and Lamar Advertising expressed a positive and welcoming experience from the Milwaukee community.

With the onset of digital billboards, could it be the traditional billboard may be on its way out?

"Not in the immediate future or probably our lifetime," Weis contends. "Traditional billboards have been the backbone of our industry."

Regardless, digital billboards are adding to the advertising mix and are here to stay. By 2010, it's estimated that 75,000, or about 15 percent, of total billboards nationwide will be digital.

In a technology age where we can bypass commercial radio by listening to an iPod or fast forward through television commercials via TiVo, the only way we won't see digital billboards is to not look out the car window.

With billions of advertising dollars at stake, chances are digital billboard technology will become increasingly prominent across our landscape.

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