**What to Consider When Choosing a Digital Signage Media Player**

Note: This is NOT a commercial message – only a helpful guide with a checklist of things to consider IF your museum is considering purchasing media players.

**Overview**

Players are designed with different features and functions and meant for different purposes. Depending on how you will use the player, meaning what content or messaging you wish to run, is vital to choosing the right player for your needs.

**Purchase Considerations**

*Capabilities* – Media players also have different capacities and capabilities. They are powered differently, have different processors, operating memory or content storage and may or may not have a separate graphics processor, which is important if your content will be graphics intensive.

*Resolution* – If hi-res imaging is important for displaying products or product features, you may wish to compare images rendered in 1080p HD and 4K. Be aware that there are usually cost and other considerations.

*Operating System* – Computers run on different operating systems such as Android, Chrome, MacOS or Windows/Linux platforms and have varying degrees of processing power or memory. Some manufacturers design their products on only one platform others design for more than one to give customers additional choices.

*Ease of Use* – It saves IT staff time if a media player is easy to set up and saves administrative time if the product is easy to use. But amazingly, not all players are designed with users in mind. Some players are feature rich but set up is not intuitive and the design inadvertently creates obstacles to use. Make sure that set up and operation is something your team can easily handle.

*Connectivity* – Depending on whether cabling is available in the physical locations where screens will be positioned, it is also important to note that some players are cable-ready via Ethernet (PoE) or WiFi compatible, or both. While a cabled connection will always be more dependable and in most instances, faster than a Wi-Fi connection, there are some physical locations for which running cable is not an option.

*WiFi “Optional* “– Be aware that some players specify Wi-Fi as an “option,” which may indicate that the device will need to be adapted for, rather than having been initially designed for Wi-Fi use. (Hint: This is another reason for carefully planning screen placement not only to take advantage of high traffic areas, but to anticipate and avoid unnecessary installation challenges.)

*Screen Configuration* – If your screens will be positioned in either a landscape or portrait configuration, or both, be sure that the media players you choose can support the configuration(s) you need.

*Consider Your Present & Future Needs* – Don’t “over buy” and pay for features you don’t need but stop to consider the possibility of growing your network or requiring it to do additional things. Depending upon how you envision your organization’s growth or changing needs, you may wish to consider players that will continue to meet your needs as your network needs grow and change. If the budget won’t allow you to be that forward-thinking, prior to making any purchase inquire about or negotiate an “upgrade” program that will allow you to upgrade your players should you have the need to do so.

*Warranty* – Invest in a technology that has a proven track-record but buy a product with a warranty. Not all suppliers provide a warranty (consumer-grade options, which are not built for the same type of continual use certainly do not) and warranty periods and what they cover differ by manufacturer, so it is well worth the time to investigate.

*Customer Service* – Also compare customer service options. If something does go wrong, how quickly will the manufacturer respond? What kind of resolution can you expect? It’s nice to have chat and email options, but will you actually get to speak with a live person?

*Security* – Network security is crucially important. Your players should have a built-in firewall that limits access only to authorized users. It should feature HTTP and HTTPS security protocols, support LDAP authentication protocol and have VPN capabilities for secure remote access. While security issues may be more of a consideration with open-source players, you want to be sure that along with free software updates for any player you choose, your player choice includes free security updates as well. It would be smart to ask about the security history of the device you are considering and find out how often the manufacturer may have had to issue a “patch” to solve security problems in the past.

*CMS* – If you already have a Content Management System (CMS) or will be choosing a CMS as well as a player, be sure the software is compatible with the players you are considering. That is if software does not already come preloaded in the player. If the software is preloaded be aware that it may or may not be “free” even if it says so.

**How “Free” is Pre-Loaded Software?**

Many players come preloaded with software – but only a few are really “free.” Really free means you are NOT charged for licensing, renewal or upgrade fees. “Sort of free” means the software “license” may be free, but there will be an annual charge for renewal, or fees applied to accept upgrades, or both. In other cases, preloaded software is sold back to the user on a subscription basis, called SaaS (software as a service). Another thing to look for is whether the software that comes with the player is “open sourced.” If NOT, then those players will NOT be compatible with or integrate well with other applications.

**Different Player “Grades” and “Levels”**

There are dozens of player choices from as many vendors with descriptors that can be confusing, such as: “commercial,” “industrial-grade,” “rugged,” “slim,” “fan-less,” “looping,” “interactive,” “multi-screen,” “entry-level,” “budget,” “standard,” “professional,” “lite,” and “enterprise. Choosing from among these descriptors depends on how and where the player will be installed.

***Player Grades & Types***

If your network will be running continuously it would be most economical in the long-run to purchase a ***Commercial-grade*** player which will function 24 hours a day, seven days a week, for years with little or no downtime.

An ***Industrial-grade***player is also designed to play continuously 24/7, but they are designed with additional features that protect them from vibration, pollution, dust or moisture.

***Rugged-grade*** players, which are built for external use in harsh environments and have built-in protection against extreme weather and may also be ***fan-less*** or ***fan-less and non-vented*** to deal with these conditions including heavy dust.

When forced to install screens in very tight spaces, ***Slim*** or ***Compact*** players are easier to accommodate.

Content applications also dictate choice of player…

***Interactivity*** – Content applications that need to engage with viewers require media players that have interactive capability. Interactive players can be programmed to show a looped message to attract viewers then switch to alternate content dependent upon a viewer’s reaction.

In some cases, it is optimal to have the player sense the viewer’s presence and respond with the correct content depending upon the viewer’s selection. Interaction can be touch, multi-touch or a choice of haptics such as gesture, waving or infrared triggers generated by built-in sensors for those who would prefer to provide contact-less alternatives to touch.

In other situations, an application may require information to be repeated for new audiences based on foot traffic and dwell time. These can best be handled with ***Looping*** players, which are designed to replay information continually.

***Player Levels***

The “levels” of players refer in a general sense to an organization’s size and budget, but more specifically to the pricing levels of each solution based on the number of screens that will be deployed across the network and the features required of the player solution.

Entry-level, budget and lite describe products designed for single screen, simple deployments, or those funding initial network investments where growth and scalability are not considerations.

Standard options begin to offer more bells and whistles, while pro or enterprise solutions tend to be feature-rich.

**Next Steps**

I have worked in the digital signage space for 16 years. If you have any questions about media players I would be happy to help put things in perspective for you based on your museum’s needs. Feel free to reach out at gwolff@market-works.com or call me directly at 561-660-7919 if you need some feedback. I would be pleased to help if I can.

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