

7 keys to integration

Considerations for qualifying a turnkey digital integrator

By Rick Davis

Technology has become an integral part of retail and restaurant environments. Spaces that were once expected to be functional and productive now must offer more than just a product or service—they must also provide a unique, memorable experience.

This is especially true in retail, where the physical store is an element of the brand experience. In many cases, the store *is* the physical brand experience, and the “dot-com” is where the actual transaction takes place. As a result, brands today are trying to determine how to integrate technology into their physical spaces. Retailers are integrating solutions ranging from digital signage and menuboards to mobile apps, interactive kiosks, beacons, and wireless power. The growing need for an enhanced customer experience has created a dramatic surge in digital integration; initiatives are rolling out on a chain-wide basis in stores and restaurants across the country. For many brands, these initiatives require an integrated approach, often involving marketing, store planning/merchandising, construction, IT, and other departments to plan for and support a single initiative.



But the biggest challenge is frequently in the deployment of these technologies at each location. While digital signage and other technology upgrades have become more popular than ever, the ability to execute these initiatives remains fragmented. It can be difficult to coordinate all of the specialized resources and vendors. What’s really needed is a turnkey solution. Here are considerations for brands to qualify providers:

Experience

When selecting a partner for a digital signage, menuboard rollout, or other technology program, the most important qualifier is turnkey experience. Quality and results are just as important as quantity of installations. Successful integrations in many locations help to develop best practices. Experience of the partner is key to predicting how well a company can develop the most effective rollout plan, identify in advance how to handle unforeseen challenges, and adapt to scope changes while maintaining quality, consistency, timing, and budget.

Program management

A seasoned integration team should have established partnerships with crucial people and businesses in the program cycle: content providers, hardware manufacturers, other equipment providers, and millwork providers. The best integration resource will be able to manage the program and work as a liaison between the brand and the many providers for the program. This expertise includes identification of resources, sourcing, scheduling, logistics/consolidation, verification that technology is working at each location, and many other procedural requirements.



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Minimal disruption

For retail and restaurant brands, closed doors equal lost profits. It is critical for the integration partner to understand the importance of performing work in an open-store environment. This means professional attire/presentation, respectful and ethical service, and efficient execution. Successful suppliers often use their own employees to oversee and execute the onsite work, which allows them to validate the caliber of person showing up at the jobsite. Then, a phased approach to execution greatly reduces any disturbance and assures little to no interruption to regular operations, store personnel, or customers.

Restaurants, which place a high priority on health and cleanliness, need a resource that can perform work around nonpeak hours and/or at night, especially when the work is extensive and involves back-of-house or a significant area of the front-of-house.

More than installation

A turnkey provider should be able to do more than hang a screen. In fact, it's rare that a rollout would be that simple. A provider with a broad skill set that ranges from technical to carpentry is preferred. From minor interior updates and full-scale remodels to site preparation and electrical and content/connectivity verification, retail and restaurant brands need a team with the proficiency to make change happen at each location.

Franchise solutions

In retail, digital initiatives are usually a company-led program being executed in corporate-owned locations. However, for many restaurant chains—QSR, in particular, these rollouts not only must be presented and sold to franchisees, but also coordinated and funded through those owner/operators. This level of service complicates the process and is often challenging for digital integrators, many of which do not have the infrastructure to support the communication and process requirements. The best provider will be able to accommodate the franchisee's individual needs and achieve corporate's overall program objectives by offering an in-house franchisee expert and a dedicated team to facilitate the management and execution of the program with all vested players.

Reporting

Using technology to complement the management and execution of the digital rollout allows for greater efficiency and visibility throughout the rollout. Today, mobile apps can enable the real-time transfer of store/restaurant data to a centralized, secure client website for robust program reporting. A turnkey solution that can provide value-added services, like technology-based reporting, will further ease the process of rolling out a major initiative across the chain.

Ongoing maintenance

Given the breadth and expertise needed to install and maintain a fleet of digital screens, a resource with a strong, nationwide presence is preferred. The average lifespan of a digital screen is four to seven years, depending on usage and other factors. So a retail or restaurant brand may need to retrofit an existing design or to roll out a technology upgrade as part of an anticipated and budgeted maintenance plan. Establishing long-term partnerships with an integration team brings greater credibility and reliability of technology performing correctly at each location for future programs.

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