

## The 25 Gotchas of Digital Signage

by Mike White

*The 25 Gotchas is a five-part series presented by Mike White on Digital Signage Today.*

Throughout the years, Multi-Media Solutions has seen its fair share of easy digital signage deployments — and troublesome ones, too. But through it all we persevered and learned from all the experiences, which ultimately proved to be more important than any profit from any specific job.

Below is a list of our most memorable (and painful) mistakes, numbers one through twenty-five of the 25 gotchas of digital signage.



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### 1 Last minute content

Beware of the impact of urgently adding untested and untried content into your digital signage system. Be sure to define, in writing, that the launch of your network will be with tested content, and that you have it in your hands for at least a week before you go live. Your customer will likely not adhere to this, but you need to protect yourself and have a contingency plan.

### 2 Installation conditions and timing

Make no assumptions on the conditions of where your team will have to work. Many fine pieces of hardware have been destroyed by construction workers and the dust of last-minute work. Most of the time, the AV company is an afterthought and when they build their time lines for completion, they generally don't consider your need to get into the work zone and safely finish the job. Also consider overtime requirements, security access and liabilities.

### 3 Firewalls and fixed IPs

Digital signage is all about getting information from one location to another, so don't forget about firewalls a customer might have in place and don't expect getting a fixed IP to be simple or timely.

### 4 Acts of God

Nothing is worse than lightning hitting a location where you have installed a digital signage network, unless if your team happens to be working at the time the storm hits. Both have been true for my team and I strongly suggest that you have built into your contract that you cannot be responsible for equipment that is damaged because of Acts of God.

### 5 Operator competency

This one should be obvious. It is best to have a discussion up front about who will be trained to operate the network.

### 6 Security – Who stole my equipment?

We have paid the price many times for assuming our equipment was in a secure location. You will likely not get any support from your insurance or your customers if something is lost, because they will be pointing fingers at each other. Lock it up until your customer signs for it.

### 7 Shipping and receiving

Be very proactive on shipping and receiving and make no assumptions about how the products will be received and secured. We have lost more than one flat panel because we didn't know who signed for them. They were received but conveniently lost.

### 8 Electricity – Do you know what else is on that circuit?

This one is self-explanatory, but you must make sure that your electric source is clean, up to spec for load and not on a switched circuit.

### 9 Warranty period service

Everyone in the industry knows this, but if you don't cover this with your customer, you will end up on the wrong, and costly, end of the deal. Make sure that the customer understands the warranty on the product does not cover logistics and installation. If you are going to do a service contract, which is encouraged, take this expense into consideration.

**10 What constitutes an emergency?**

No one has ever died as a result of a plasma screen not working, but to a customer on opening day, a failed panel is a matter of life and death. If there is a problem they will surely let you know about it. So prepare for the calls, help the customer understand the problem in their terms. Your definition of the issue and the customer's will most likely differ.

**11 Realistic completion timeline**

As I mentioned earlier, the AV Integrator is very seldom considered a vital part of a project until the last minute and then it is their fault if open deadlines are not met. So be very proactive with negotiating your legitimate time needs in the project and do not assume it will work immediately.

**12 Who says it is finished?**

"Finished" is a broad term that will plague you strategically and financially. I highly recommend a very well written definition of "finished" into your contract and get the customer to agree up front. I suggest the use of the term "substantial completion" and have 90 percent of your billing completed under that term. Then define "finished" and establish a completion checklist so you can get paid.

**13 Working with a consultant?**

Many consultants are really great and very qualified, however, I have had my share of working with ones that aren't educated enough and develop impossible concept ideas. Making the impossible happen is part of the job, but don't underestimate the cost of doing so.

**14 Working as a sub-contractor**

A strong suggestion: don't work as a sub-contractor. It is far better for everyone, strategically and financially, if the AV team has direct contact. But, if you do have to work as a sub, make sure you read the fine print and make sure you know what you are agreeing to.

**15 When do you get paid?**

You should set up your contract so that your payments come in as progress is made. I use a 30-30-30-10 plan for invoicing: 30 percent is due upon signing of contract, 30 percent upon delivery of hardware and software, 30 percent upon substantial completion and the final 10 percent due upon the final list sign-off. I make sure that the customer understands that invoices must be paid in the terms on the invoice. But don't assume that just because you invoice, they will pay. You should have a contractual agreement that states if payments are not made, work ceases. I know that sounds harsh, but the AV company too often has to serve as the bank and the company gets caught in the middle. That can put you in a cash flow crunch and possibly out of business.

**16 What can you be charged for?**

On one job, we had multiple projectors blended into one large image and like many projects, we had to install the projects while other parts of the building were being completed. One of the projectors, because of the dust, had to be repaired. Guess who had to pay big bucks for an emergency rental of a spare projector? You get the idea. This should have never been the integrator's liability.

**17 Impact of distance installations**

Seek and find local contractors that you can call on when emergencies happen. If you don't have some organization you will end up with very expensive flights to locations and all sorts of extra expenses that you never considered. It is worth paying another company to come in before you finish the job and familiarize them with the location and top-level layout of the system.

**18 Backups**

You would be surprised, but most high-end digital signage projects don't have adequate backup systems. Build it into your budget and tell your customer that this is a required insurance policy.

**19 First-time configurations**

We have grossly underestimated integration of many new products into our digital signage networks. My strongest caution is to build contingency into your budget if you have a project where you are using several new components. This is especially true if you are running software that you have never used.

**20 Train who and how many times?**

You've finished the product and you think you have seen the worst, but if you have not defined up front who you are going to train and their competency, you are about to experience a very costly "gotcha."

**21 Change orders**

I believe those words provoke more bad feelings than any other. My experience tells me that no matter how much experience I have and how well I've prepared, there will always be something that I did not think about when writing the contract or proposal. You must proactively establish how you are going to handle change orders and what will define a change order. Remember, failure to consider the other gotcha's are not grounds for change orders; they are challenges that you will have to eat financially if you do not plan for them.

**22 Contracts and understandings with big companies**

Most big companies will not directly sign our contracts. They will send it to purchasing and they will issue a purchase order that we work from. It is very important to do everything you can to get them to reference your contract and understanding on the P.O. At a minimum, get a

clear understanding and buy in from the most senior manager you can. The bigger the company the more likely you will have a challenge with this.

**23 Can you take pictures and video of your work?**

Make no assumptions on this. Get a clear understanding in writing up front that you expect and want to take pictures and possibly video of the job upon completion. Remember that sometimes the only evidence you will have after the job is pictures and video.

**24 Putting all your eggs in one basket**

Never have just one person trained to do a specific task. That will make you vulnerable and hiring someone at the last minute to finish a task could cost you more money than you have budgeted in profit for the job. If you have only one person trained and that person quits, get sick or hurt, you pay big time.

**25 When the nuclear option happens**

Just know that sometimes no matter how much you prepare, no matter how hard you work, no matter what, your loving customer is going to press the "nuclear button." They panic, send out a ton of emails, and usually target the integrator as the origin of the problem. My suggestion is to meet with it head on and fix the problem to the best of your ability. Running and hiding is simply not an option. If you are not a person of integrity and ready to stand accountable, you should not be in this business.

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