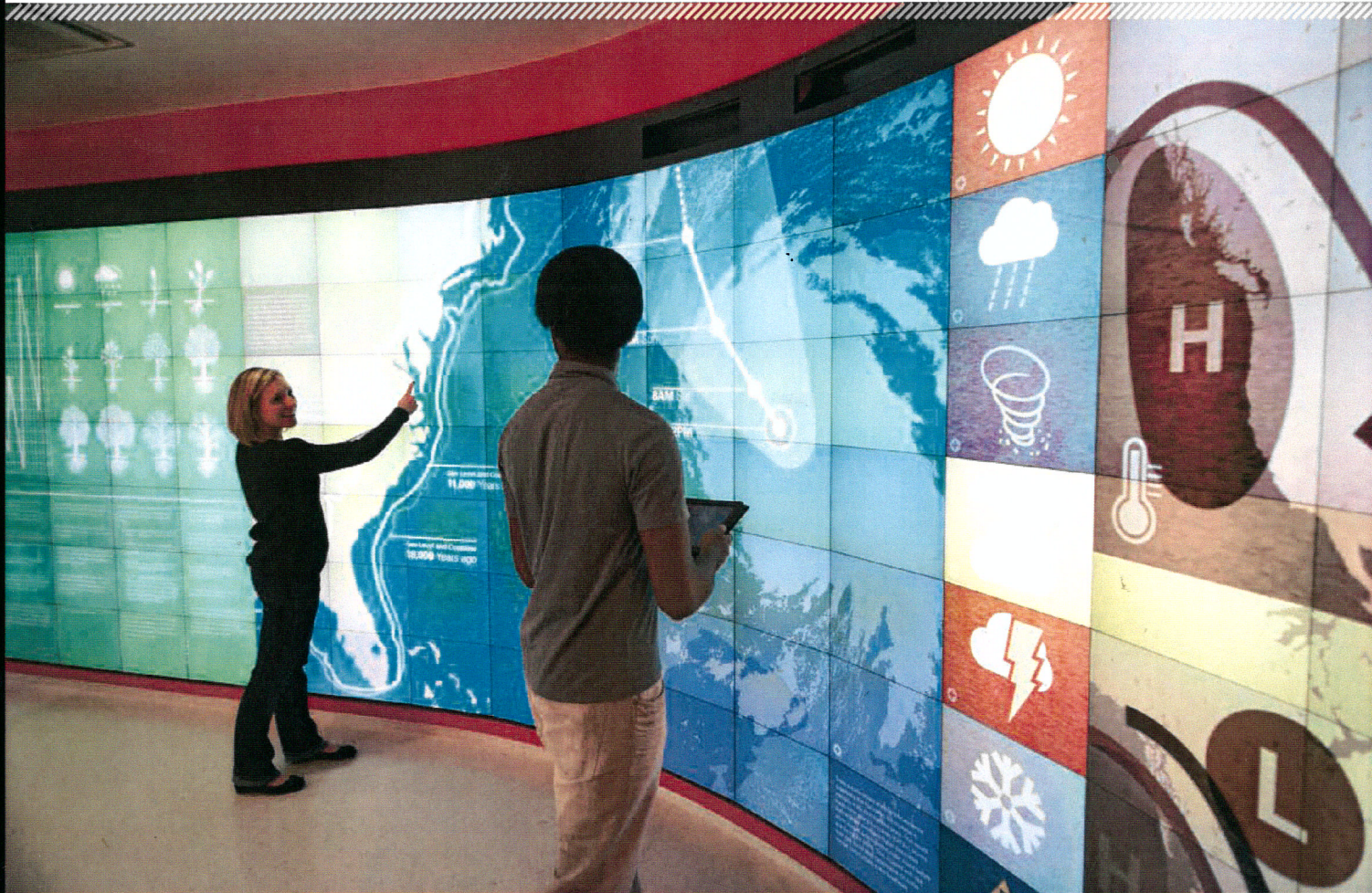


SHOWCASE OF CAMPUS DIGITAL SIGNAGE



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Planning Ahead

At the University of Northwestern-St. Paul, strategy is key.

By Tim Kridel

One indication that a college's digital signage network is well done is when it inspires other networks at the same school. That's the case at University of Northwestern-St. Paul, where signage in the Billy Graham Community Life Commons has prompted other departments around campus to implement their own signage, including using the same Samsung displays.

Graham Commons opened in October 2011, but work on the AV aspects began about three years earlier. That's noteworthy because, in higher ed and other commercial real estate projects, AV systems typically aren't considered early on.

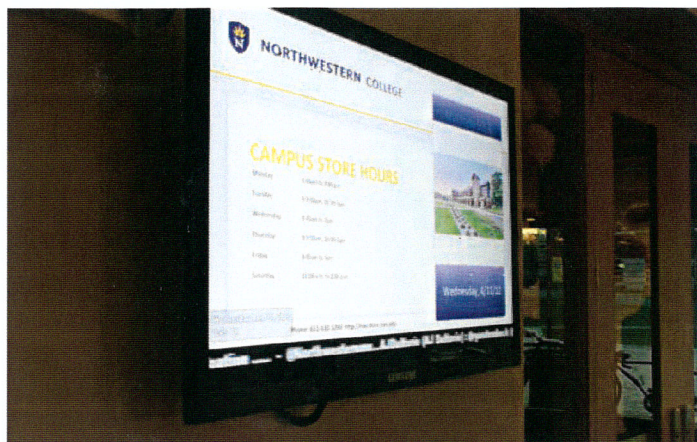
"All projects I've been involved in, the AV usually is coming in at the tail end," said Scott Evans, the school's head of audio visual services. "It's something we've been working to educate the university: that we're involved in some aspect of every room. It's a matter of getting them to understand that we're part of the core infrastructure."

The 70,000-square-foot Graham Commons has 24 Samsung EX Series displays, whose LED backlighting makes them a good fit for a project that sought LEED certification from the beginning. "I can run all [24] of them off a single 20 amp circuit if I had to," said Evans.

Ample natural light was a big factor, not only for LEED certification, but also in terms of finding the right location for each display so it wouldn't get washed out by sunlight. By involving AV early on in the project, the school avoided expensive problems, such as having to move displays once the building was nearly complete.

By working with the architects, Evans had access to 3D mockups, which helped identify potential issues such as viewing angles, where light would fall, and traffic patterns. In cases where only blueprints were available, Evans built 3D models using Google SketchUp. All of the information gathered from the 3D mockups and models enabled Evans to identify the best locations for the displays and then present that to the architects, whose initial approach might not have been as workable. "They weren't inherently wrong," Evans said. "They just hadn't factored in the traffic flow in and out of the space."





The audiovisual team says that it's critically important for the university to understand that AV is "part of the core infrastructure" of every room.

For signage and other AV systems, Evans advises meeting with architects, engineers, and other stakeholders to make sure everyone understands the consequences of each option. For example, the architects and engineers had already decided where the main cable tray would go in Graham Commons. When Evans arrived on the project, he explained why that

location wasn't ideal, including the additional costs of keeping it there. In the end, it stayed, but the meeting eliminated finger pointing later on.

"Make sure everybody at the table is aware of the options and the ripple effects," Evans said. "Make sure that everyone takes ownership: 'This is what we decided.' Avoid those silly conversations later: 'Why did we do this?'"

One question that came up is why the network needed so many media players. The answer was future-proofing: With all of the hardware in place, the system would have plenty of flexibility for delivering content, such as creating zones.

ENVISIONING WHAT'S POSSIBLE

Northwestern also planned ahead when it came to the signage software. For example, the AV team decided that it wouldn't be involved with content creation, which meant non-technical people would be responsible.

"That right there told us we needed a drag-and-drop, streamlined way for people to get their content up quickly," Evans said. "That narrowed the field pretty quickly when we started look at all of the software."

One challenge was educating the system's users about all that today's signage can do. "They don't grasp the capabilities and possibilities," Evans said. "So part of our job was to understand the software and understand the potential for what they could do."

That process included meeting with the departments that would run the network, and asking questions, such as what they'd like to do if they could put information in front of students. Their feedback helped winnow the field of solutions from the initial six or so, to Tightrope Media Systems.

"Tightrope kept coming to the top of the list," Evans said. And although Evans didn't initially know it, Tightrope is based in St. Paul—not that the proximity has come in handy. "I haven't had to call them for a service call yet," Evans said. "No player failures or software issues. It just runs."

Evans also had to educate the departments about the amount of work required to generate the fresh content that's necessary to condition faculty, staff and students to pay attention to the signage.

"The content piece probably is the biggest thing that is forgotten in the AV design," Evans said. "People don't grasp the concept that it's no less than a part-time job just for content creation."

A network the size of Graham Commons requires at least a three-quarter-time position. Making that case before the building opened wasn't easy.

"Three years later, that's a much less difficult conversation to have because people have seen digital signage—and more importantly, they've seen when it doesn't work: every day, it's the same thing, and you're not reading it any more."

"The content piece probably is the biggest thing that is forgotten in the AV design."



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