



Landing Lights Digital menu boards help direct more sales to Chili's Too

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By M.V. Greene

Digital menu boards are emerging as a prime show-case for food retailers seeking to snare on-the-go customers needing to grab a quick meal at public venues like airports, stadiums and malls.

And much to the delight of the retailers deploying them, the vibrant multimedia displays are serving up tasty financial returns, too.



“In airport venues, there are many visual distractions,” says Susan Goyette, senior director, communications and public relations, with Bethesda, Md.-based HMSHost, which operates more than 1,000 food and beverage facilities at airports and travel plazas worldwide under banners such as Chili's Too, Starbucks, Burger King and T.G.I. Friday's.

“Information displayed on digital menu boards stands out and guests appreciate the clarity and contemporary presentation.” And that appreciation often results in larger tickets.

Digital menu boards have become a staple of HMSHost's Chili's Too restaurants, the carry-out version of Brinker International's Chili's Grill & Bar. The rapid development of LCD and plasma technologies that facilitate high-definition images on large screens, in conjunction with real-time computing power, has accelerated market development in the space.

The notion behind the boards in airports and other venues is compelling yet straightforward: harried-yet-hungry travelers are tantalized by pleasing images of food. Digital menu boards give restaurants the flexibility to update pricing and menu items quickly – even to adjust their menu selections to account for product offerings during different day parts.

“Digital menu boards will soon replace many static models,” Goyette predicts. “One day they will be the new standard, and we foresee the technology becoming more interactive and animated.”

HMSHost works with Capital Signs of Lilburn, Ga., on its menu board installations at Chili’s Too restaurants at Atlanta’s Hartsfield-Jackson International airport and other locales. Capital Signs vice president Andy Panos says the dynamic boards give restaurants in busy public spaces several advantages.

“You try to go for two things,” he says. “One of them is drawing more customers in from farther away. People are walking by or standing in a food court and looking at multiple locations to decide where they want to eat. Then once you’ve got somebody in line, you try to get the up-sell by featuring items such as desserts, more expensive items or the combo type items.”

According to Goyette, the average customer check at HMSHost Chili’s Too units is up 3 to 5 percent because of the technology adoption.

Crisp, motion graphics

Capital Signs provides an end-to-end solution for HMSHost in Atlanta, including server hosting, content development, hardware and installation. It, in turn, draws on software developed by Exton, Pa.-based Scala, whose InfoChannel product line is used for dynamic digital media in industries that include retail, education, entertainment and government.

“We focus a lot on the motion graphics to make sure we get the most out of the system by putting something on every screen that moves,” Panos says. “You get crisp graphics that are easy on the customers’ eyes.”

Capital Signs’ animators convert the static menus, product shots and other information provided by its clients into video images and animation. The functionality of Scala’s software allows Capital Signs’ animators to operate multiple digital menus from one server. Signs and content can be repurposed for use at multiple locations — a key benefit in the pricing to restaurants, Panos says.