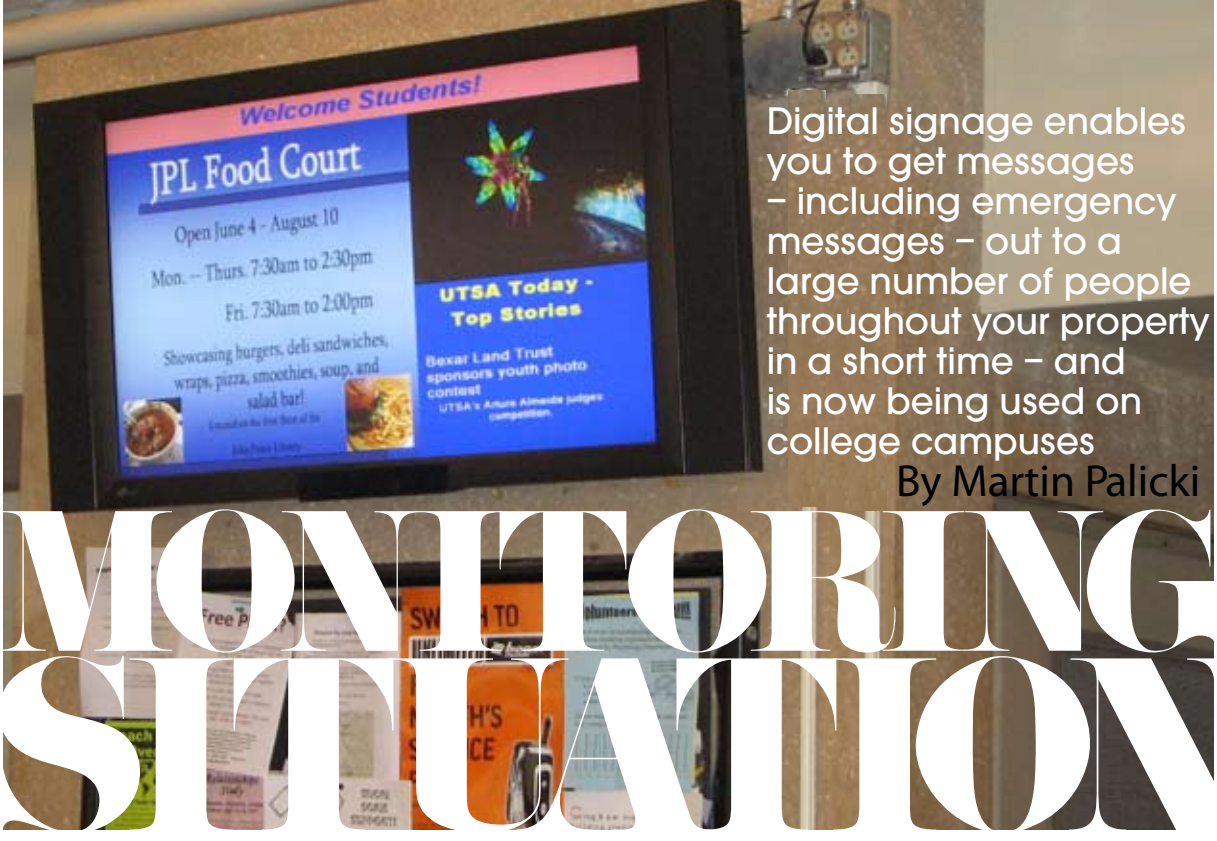

Digital signage enables you to get messages – including emergency messages – out to a large number of people throughout your property in a short time – and is now being used on college campuses

By Martin Palicki

MONITORING the SITUATION

The date April 16th, 2007 is likely to send shivers down any school administrator's spine. Forever marked as the day of the Virginia Tech tragedy, institutions around the world are now faced with the realities of dealing with emergency situations.

"There has been an on-going conversation in higher education circles about how to best handle emergencies," explains Joe DeCristoforo, Assistant Vice President and University Registrar at The University of Texas at San Antonio. It's a conversation that should be happening at all public venues, from schools, to malls to amusement parks.

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In 2006 The University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA) installed eight VitalCAST digital signs throughout its two campuses and already have plans to install 12 more before the end of the year. The signs, provided by Texas Digital, are intended and primarily used for conveying regular campus information to students. According to DeCristoforo, students often were confused about deadlines and important dates. The move to digital signage allowed administrators to be quite clear about information and gives students timely, useful information to make their college experience more enjoyable.

On a daily basis, most of the information on the displays is student oriented. UTSA utilizes several screen formats. One common format shows the screen divided into three areas. The larger area consists of a series of powerpoint slides, displaying dozens of information items on anything from graduation schedules, new parking permit options, the alcohol awareness education program, Student Government meeting schedules, and many other key information items. Another corner of the screen plays through a variety of videos, with accompanying audio broadcasting through each display. Videos range on student-related topics from campus police safety tips to clips from recent athletic events. The other corner contains a live RSS ("Real Simple Syndication") feed that rotates between New York Times headlines, the UTSA Today news, and current weather conditions, as well as the area forecast. Another common screen format shows the screen divided into one large area with a scrolling message at the very bottom. The main large area contains a listing of event schedules for the day, including event start times, building and room locations, and the duration of the event. Group meetings, music and art performances, and community events are all listed; conveniently, the operating software removes expired items from the list, ensuring only valid, upcoming events are displayed. The smaller, scrolling message area at the bottom of this screen shows key deadlines, such as the last day to drop a class or when students need to make final fee payments. This scrolling message area can and has been used to display emergency messages.

One of the criticisms levied against Virginia Tech was their use of email to notify students of the first shooting on the campus. "Sending out 28,000 emails at once takes a fair amount of time," explains DeCristoforo, "whereas information on the displays can be updated in less than five minutes." Thankfully, the school has not had an emergency situation that necessitated the use of the displays, though they did come in handy during a technical problem last semester. The school's computer network crashed, but IT staff was able to contact the Registrar's office, which immediately put a notice on all of the displays indicating that the network was down. A similar message was broadcast once the network was restored.

The system's speed is thanks to VitalCAST's VGA/CAT 5 Extender/Receiver components that ensure the signal is transmitted clearly over the few hundred feet distance

Photo courtesy of Texas Digital

between the media player and the displays at each location. VitalCAST is a network enterprise solution for creating and managing visual content that is displayed on plasmas, LCD's or TV's driven by one or more media player PC's (Texas Digital uses custom-built PC's, manufactured by Dell, Equus, and AOpen). These systems are available in a single-output, small footprint PC, or in tower / rack mount configurations. VitalCAST can be used to control media driven by one or thousands of media players that are spread out over multiple geographic locations and communication occurs over the organization's local area network (LAN), wide area network (WAN) or through the Internet. Each media player has its own unique IP address to allow for back and forth communication.

Digital signage's ability to get a message out to a large number of people in a short amount of time is one reason the local police department contacted DeCristoforo this spring to see if they could post information on the displays. Five minutes after a phone call to DeCristoforo's office, the campus signs can broadcast missing person information or suspicious activity announcements, similar to Amber Alerts found on highways across the country.

The updating procedure is surprisingly simple. When a user edits and updates content in the Administrator program, (ie. clicks the "Update" button), the Admin connects to the VitalCAST Server to notify it of the changes. The VitalCAST Site Manager service controls updates to all media players at its location and periodically connects to the VitalCAST Server on a timed basis to "check in" (it can be set to check in every few minutes or once a day in order to address bandwidth concerns) and to get any new configuration changes. Whenever the Site Manager receives new configuration settings or media files, it will immediately and sequentially connect to each media player at its location and forward the updates to them. After a successful update, the media player application will implement the new changes.

Though the likelihood of a large-scale emergency is slim, the displays have been helpful with another potential disaster, one inflicted by Mother Nature. With the live weather feed, any warnings are immediately and automatically broadcast to the displays, without any initiation from administrators. "The system has been incredibly easy to use," said DeCristoforo. "Our office is not staffed with digital signage tech-savvy people, but we've been able to adjust and enhance the displays with very little assistance."

The flexibility of the system is one of its best features. Initially, the displays were zoned to only show events at their own campus, but administrators soon realized that many students who took classes at the downtown campus also take classes at the school's 1604 campus. Now, special events such as plays or performances show up on both campus displays

It has been this combination of flexibility, practicality, and safety that has encouraged the school to more than double the size of the system. "The VitalCAST system's versatility makes it an effective tool for communicating information to a large number of people rapidly," explains Matt Wheat, Texas Digital's National Sales Manager. Amusement parks and water parks especially are prime to take advantage of digital signage's features. With weather a daily concern for parks, weather updates can help guests swim and play safely.

"Obviously no one wants to be faced with a tragedy," said DeCristoforo, "but having open channels for communication in place can help minimize problems down the road." • • •