

# Digital Signage Content **STRATEGY GUIDE**



Screenfeed®

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## Introduction

It is a well-known shortcoming in the digital signage industry that content is frequently under-prioritized, under-strategized, and under-budgeted for the average digital signage project. This is particularly concerning when its strategy and execution are the linchpins for your network reaching its return on objective (ROO) or return on investment (ROI).

The old adage “Fail to plan and you plan to fail.” could not be more accurate for this key element of your digital signage network.

Congratulations, if you’re reading this guide, it means you’re well on your way to making a plan that will help you find success—however it is defined for your network.

## Getting Started

It is essential to develop a plan for content strategy from the outset. The following ten pillars will help you with strategizing and budgeting, as well as development and optimization of your digital signage content strategy. After reading this guide, you will be saved from many potential stall-outs and obstacles that come from not taking the time to plan.

# 1

## Defining Roles for the Content Creation Process

Ownership for each stage of the content creation process is critical and often undefined to the project's dismay. You must define who is responsible for all the interlocking parts: the gathering of assets, messaging, design, build, approval, and publishing. For a smaller network, this may be a single person who is responsible for doing all this as part of their job description. If this is you, please accept our sincere sympathy—we know how much time and effort this requires! Typically though, the interlocking parts are broken out by expertise or shared among a team of people working together to execute all the content elements that make up a content playlist strategy.

*Note: The team doesn't have to be internal. You may work with an external designer/developer, or outsource your infotainment feed licensing, designing, building, and publishing to a partner like Screenfeed.*

### ROLES TO DEFINE (WHO OWNS WHAT?):

1. Gathering of Assets (licensing)
2. Definition of Messaging (aiming for ROO/ROI)
3. Designing Layout/Storyboard (on-brand)
4. Building Content (image/video/html)
5. Final Approval (from all decision makers)
6. Publishing the Content

Why is role definition a big deal? By defining who owns what in the content creation process, including decision makers (Role 5), you can overcome disruptions to flow; for example, when an unknown decision maker disapproves of the message after content is published on the network, forcing a complete re-work of the messaging, design, build, approval, and publishing steps. For this reason, it is recommended that all stakeholders and decision makers are engaged early on by the person or team that defines the messaging (Role 2).




# 2


## Build a Solid Foundation by Knowing your Audience

Every network must establish the guardrails for decisions made on messaging and design for the content assets that make up the playlist. Defining your guardrails will require you to do some homework to identify your *Audience Personas*, noting the *Environment* for which your content will live, and identifying your *Audience's Journey*.

Building out your *Audience Personas*: Gender, Age Range, Family Income, Race, etc. will have a major impact on your content strategy. If you're looking to engage Generation X with your outdated designed content—good luck. Trendy designs updated every other month via social media platforms have trained Gen X to spot who's worth paying attention to and who isn't. Or, if you're talking about a college loan program in a particular bank location with an audience in their 25–35 age range, think again. The average 25–35-year-old audience won't have college-age kids yet. Both the design and message will significantly increase in their ability to impact your network ROO/ROI if they are tailored to your audience personas.

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### The Rosen Family



**PERSONALITY**

Extrovert	Introvert
Thinking	Feeling
Judging	Perceiving

**MOTIVATIONS**

- Wants more energy
- Desires to live pain-free
- Wanting the latest/greatest "thing"
- How do I stack up to other moms?

**GOALS**

- More vacations with family
- Live an active and healthy lifestyle
- Squeeze joy out of life
- Helping her family be "successful"

**LIFESTYLE**

Healthy & Fit

\$120,000 in household income

Credit Score is Excellent

**FRUSTRATIONS**

- Always feeling tired
- Overcommitted to activities
- Living in pain
- Always coming in "last" to family

**BRANDS**



**Jenna**

AGE	46
OCCUPATION	Stay at home Mom
STATUS	Married
LOCATION	Plymouth, Minnesota
TIER	Enthusiast
ARCHETYPE	Caregiver

a report by Grow LLC

*This summary of Jenna is an example of a defined audience persona for a premium chiropractic network.*

## ENVIRONMENT

The environment where the audience will see content is also a factor to be considered. Common factors that come into play are lighting, background noise, and viewing distance.

- Will the environment have a lot of ambient light all-day or part of the day, requiring day-parting to a light version or dark version of the content? The brighter the ambient light levels, like in a sun-drenched entrance lobby, the more diminished black levels will appear on your screens, decreasing the overall contrast and lowering your audience's ability to perceive content details between true black and white. For darker environments, the issue is reversed.
- The level of background noise in your environment is important to consider if your content requires audio.
- The audience's average viewing distance will have a direct impact on your minimum text size and length of message, as well as zones if you're considering more than one zone. For example, if you have a FHD (1080p) 50" screen 5.5' off the ground, and your average audience viewing distance is 20' away, consider starting with a text size of 60px for primary messaging. Keep in mind, however, an example like this, or laboratory tests in your office, never compare to actual, get-out-of-your-seat, view-it-yourself testing in the live environment. Variables such as lighting, weather, movement, or even other objects blocking the screen at certain angles (a pillar or competing signage) can only be taken into account in the real-world scenarios.

All of these environmental variables will make a big impact on guiding every content piece you create.

## UNDERSTANDING YOUR AUDIENCE'S JOURNEY

Another key factor in knowing your audience is understanding your *Audience's Journey*. Where are they coming from and where are they going? What is their intent in your environment? For example, if your audience on a Tuesday evening is likely a parent filling up the minivan with gas on the way to drop a bunch of kids off at soccer practice, an hourly weather forecast will be far more engaging than a financial update. Whereas, showing traffic content in your corporate communication lobby at the end of the day is likely more valuable than displaying it in the morning after commuters just got into the office. Therefore, taking advantage of basic digital signage tools such as day-parting to your playlists, rather than having the same playlist all-day-everyday, will be imperative to stay relevant.

The more you understand your audience and work to make your content relevant to them, the more likely you will engage them and create the ROO/ROI impact you're hoping to accomplish.



# 3

## Strategic Playlist Planning



Planning your playlist requires a consideration for the following five key variables amidst the backdrop of your budget and network objectives:

- Playlist Length
- Dwell Time
- Refresh Frequency
- Audience Return Rate
- Effective Frequency

First, *playlist length* must be in step with audience *dwell time*. Dwell time is how long someone will pay attention to your screen. Make your playlist too long, and it will be a waste of network resources; too short, and you will forfeit opportunities.

Also, your *refresh frequency* is how often you refresh the playlist with new content. Your *refresh frequency* needs to take two things into account: your *audience return rate (ARR)* and the principle of *effective frequency*. Effective frequency is the number of times a viewer needs to be exposed to a message before it is thoroughly communicated, which is typically 3-7 times.

*Note: **Effective Frequency** crosses mediums of communication. So, if you send out an email on the topic to your customers or employees or they see a printed ad in the lobby as well, those also count as impressions to be added to the equation.*

*Also, feeds like those provided by Screenfeed can update every 15 minutes or many times a day, increasing the perceived freshness of a playlist in order to extend the life of the custom ads and messages in your playlist.*

### HERE IS A QUICK CALCULATION:

*Refresh Frequency = Audience Return Rate x Effective Frequency*

Example 1: You're a bank lobby and your most loyal patrons return once every two weeks. Therefore, you should refresh your marketing messages no less than once every ~2 months. *14 (days) x 4 times viewed = 56 days*

Example 2: You're a Corporate Communications network and your employees see your screens 2 times a day. Therefore, you should consider trying to refresh your entire playlist no less than once every ~2 business days. *.5 (days) x 4 times views = 2 days*

Other ways you can look to optimize your playlist for strategic impact include day-parting, triggers, feeds, templates, or logic that activates different content depending on time, data, actions, viewer mood or demographics.

## 4

# Leverage Existing Content Assets



Taking stock in your present content assets is a key step to setting out on your content creation journey. You cannot assume that the image or video files on your website, email blasts, or tv/magazine ads will be transferable to your digital signage network.

### **AS YOU GATHER YOUR ASSETS, HERE IS A QUICK CHECKLIST OF ITEMS YOU WILL WANT TO CONSIDER:**

- Do the current assets have a high enough resolution to support your digital signage content strategy? (potentially 1080p+ or even 4K?)
- Do your current assets require audio?
- Is the text on the content asset large enough to be read for your audience's viewing distance?
- Is the content licensed for digital signage? (your stock tickers on your internal website, or your developers' solution to "scrape" code from a 3rd party website, is not licensed for commercial use in your lobbies—see Pillar 5)
- Can you get vector versions of your content? (AI, EPS, or SVG, etc.)
- If your Marketing or a 3rd party content agency built content in After Effects or Photoshop, can you get access to those source files to tweak so you don't have to start from scratch? (5 minute video doesn't work for a 30 second dwell time)
- Can you set yourself up for success for this checklist moving forward? (Can the digital signage content become a part of the workflow for future content creation plans and execution already owned by Marketing/Communication departments?)

If you're starting from scratch, it will be okay! There are other shortcuts to look into which will be covered in Pillar 7.



## Ensure all Content is Properly Licensed



Content licensing does not abide by the “finders, keepers” rule. Possession of an asset does not necessarily confer the right to display it in a commercial setting, even if it was acquired “for free”—a reality sometimes difficult to accept in a world where side-stepping costs are often possible. However, several lawsuits over the years have been brought against digital signage companies whose network owners failed to negotiate an agreement (either in the form of a one-time payment, or an ongoing subscription) with the owner of every asset in their playlist. Given the costs incurred by such a lawsuit, it’s essential to address licensing costs early and often, and to ensure that a line item appears in the budget from the very beginning.

“But that CNN feed is free... they don’t ask for a credit card!?” For example, look again at the terms in the image below. Free news feeds, and most free or inexpensive weather feeds, are available only for non-commercial use, require a functional link to their website (impossible unless you have a touch screen), and could be cut off at any moment.

**TERMS OF USE**

RSS (really simple syndication) service is a means by which CNN.com offers feeds of story headlines in XML format ("RSS Content") to visitors to CNN.com (the "CNN Site") who use RSS aggregators. These Terms of Use govern your use of the RSS service. The use of the RSS service also is subject to the terms and conditions of the [CNN Interactive Service Agreement](#), which governs the use of CNN's websites, information services and content. These Terms of Use and the CNN Interactive Service Agreement may be changed by CNN at any time without notice.

**Use of RSS Feeds:**  
 RSS is a free service offered by CNN for non-commercial use. Any other uses, including without limitation the incorporation of advertising into or the placement of advertising associated with or targeted towards the RSS Content, are strictly prohibited. You must use the RSS feeds as provided by CNN, and you may not edit or modify the text, content or links supplied by CNN. For web posting, reprint, transcript or licensing requests for CNN material, please send your request to [licensing.agent@turner.com](mailto:licensing.agent@turner.com).

**Link to Content Pages:**  
 The RSS service may be used only with those platforms from which a functional link is made available that, when accessed, takes the viewer directly to the display of the full article on the CNN Site. You may not display the RSS Content in a manner that does not permit successful linking to, redirection to or delivery of the applicable CNN Site web page. You may not insert any intermediate page, splash page or other content between the RSS link and the applicable CNN Site web page.

**Ownership/Attribution:**  
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**Right to Discontinue Feeds:**  
 CNN reserves the right to discontinue providing any or all of the RSS feeds at any time and to require you to cease displaying, distributing or otherwise using any or all of the RSS feeds for any reason including, without limitation, your violation of any provision of these Terms of Use. CNN assumes no liability for any of your activities in connection with the RSS feeds or for your use of the RSS feeds in connection with your website.

*An example of the fine print on a free feed that most miss  
(or choose to ignore).*

## 6

## Prioritize your Content Budget within your Network Budget

The question of budget must be addressed both early in the strategic planning phase, and regularly throughout the life-cycle of the network, for content carries a cost not only to create but to maintain. The audience return rate and relationship it bears with the effective frequency (see Pillar 3) gives content a limited shelf-life, and while you would ideally have a surplus of content from which to choose, and/or assets with an automated feature, the project will require ongoing programming, editing, and management. True, most digital signage software has a CMS (content management system) that supports advanced scheduling, but someone will still need to actively oversee that task. The success or failure of a digital signage network therefore will depend on your ability to accurately and creatively manage the *fixed initial costs* and *variable ongoing costs* to collect, license, and schedule content assets all powered by the most costly line item—human capital.

Therefore, ensuring you have a content budget that will give you a fresh and effective playlist not only on day one, but also on day 30, 365, and year three is imperative to the success of your network. How impractical is it to spend \$100,000 or a million dollars on a network but keep the same content showing for three months when your audience is returning every week? Unfortunately, it happens all the time.

## 7

## Stretching the Content Budget Strategically

Were money not an obstacle, we would all hire Netflix or Disney to build out our playlists and keep them fresh. But money is an obstacle. It is a key ingredient to the calculation of ROO/ROI for the network. Budgetary constraints will indeed come into play for every decision when building your digital signage network. Unfortunately, content is the most flexible item in the budget next to your hardware and therefore is the easiest place to cut costs. You'll want to fight for the middle ground and be strategic on every dollar allocated from the budget.

The best way to stretch a budget is to maximize the value of your content over time, as opposed to maxing out your resources on a few initial assets, leaving your budget incapable to pivot, optimize, and refresh over time. This can be done in a variety of ways, including investing up-front in *custom templates*; *reusing assets* that your company originally used elsewhere; leveraging *user-generated*, and *data-driven* content; strategically *recycling* content; and outsourcing parts of your playlist to *licensed feeds* or *competitively-priced creative agencies*.

## Choosing CMS Software, Players, & Connectivity with Content in Mind

There are benefits to defining your content strategy prior to selecting a content management system (CMS), media players, and connectivity strategy. Your content should drive the choice of those systems, the systems shouldn't decide what content you are capable of.

### **KEY QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER AS YOU CHOOSE A CMS, MEDIA PLAYER, AND CONNECTIVITY STRATEGY ARE:**

- What format(s) will your content use? (HTML, image, video, audio)
- Will a content creation tool benefit you?
- Do you need to update content in an automated fashion?
- How will the content get delivered?

### **WHAT FORMAT(S) WILL YOUR CONTENT USE?**

The purpose of a digital signage network varies greatly. If your need is to simply display required notices that are already designed by HR, a very simple CMS software and player option will suffice. You can likely save money by purchasing a lower-cost media player that may bundle in free software with the limited features you need. Since you've identified what your content need is, you can make the appropriate choice and save money.

If the purpose of your digital signage network is to capture the attention of an audience and keep it, while displaying real-time information, you will need to use a media player that supports HTML animations well and can integrate dynamic content and data. Though rare, some digital signage software solutions still don't support HTML content. HTML makes it easy to visualize real-time information such as news, traffic, flight boards, weather, stock prices, company news, or sales metrics. Animation can be created with HTML to help attract attention to your screen, and it's important that your media player has the processing power in order to render those animations smoothly. You'd be surprised how some lower-cost media players struggle to present HTML animation. Some media players are tweaked to display 4K video extremely well, but chug when displaying a scroll of text across a screen. So, defining your content prior to selection of a media player can keep you from making an investment that will limit your creative capabilities.

### **WILL A CONTENT CREATION TOOL BENEFIT YOU?**

Much of your content may need to be created internally by you or your staff. Sure, you can subscribe to ready-made content from Screenfeed for many reasons, but you likely have messages you need to get across to your audience as well.

Are these messages already created by a third party, or within another program such as Sketch or Photoshop? If so, then there is no benefit to your software allowing you to design and layout messages within their software. As many software options do not provide this tool in their solution, knowing you don't need this opens you up to a wider field of options.

That said, if you have a team that doesn't know how or doesn't have access to Photoshop, Sketch, or some other content creation tool, you may really benefit from the ability to login to your digital signage software to create a message and publish it to your screens quickly. Updating a message manually would be an easy process as well.

So, determining how you will create and update content first will help you expand your software options or save you time by selecting one with a content creation tool.

### **DO YOU NEED TO UPDATE CONTENT IN AN AUTOMATED FASHION?**

If your content needs to update frequently, such as several times a day or week, you are likely going to want to take advantage of automated processes for updating content. Let's review two scenarios.

Let's say you run an event center with outdoor activities daily. You may want to display a daily weather video forecast. You don't want to have to manually update this every morning, you want it to simply update on its own. Screenfeed, for example, offers a daily weather video forecast that can be delivered by Media RSS, Direct URL, or FTP. You would be surprised at how many digital signage software solutions do not have the ability to update a video on a daily basis. You should check the features of your software before buying to ensure they allow this feature if it is important to you.

Another scenario would be to display company sales metrics on screen. Does your software allow you to pull in a data feed and update the values shown on screen? If not, you can leverage tools such as Geckoboard and schedule the content as HTML, or work with Screenfeed to create a custom-designed presentation of that data as HTML or an image.

As you can see in a number of ways, your content needs should drive the decision on software and hardware, not the other way around.

### **HOW WILL THE CONTENT GET DELIVERED?**

Finally, careful thought should be put into your connectivity strategy. It may shock you but there are still some networks today that send out a USB stick to update all their locations' content (WHAT!?). No, don't do it. The real decision is whether or not you will connect your network to the Internet of Things (IoT) via wi-fi for which you pay with a monthly bill, or through a mobile provider that you pay by the gigabyte—a costly proposition if your playlist includes large video files, or frequent content updates. Now that 5G is on the table, however, and data fees by the gigabyte or even unlimited plans, are being offered at discounted rates specifically for digital signage use, the option is becoming more economical. There are some

networks that have decided to default to a wi-fi connection provided by the property but fall back to 5G in the event that option one goes out due to the mission-critical information their network is responsible for delivering.

Other factors to consider will be whether or not you will send content directly to the player, or if there is a server layer in between where the content's first passes through. The decision to go through a server may be for security reasons (firewall considerations) or it may be to minimize bandwidth costs and increase content reliability.

There is no wrong answer (besides the USB manual stick strategy!), just a matter of selecting the right solution that best fits your content strategy.

## 9

# Create Value with your Digital Signage Network and Content

The first thing to define before anything else, including your content strategy, needs to be the objective you aim to meet through your digital signage network. That objective may be financial, like “increasing the revenue for specific point of sale items” (ROI) or abstract, like “decreasing the perceived wait time of your audience” (ROO).

From your viewers' point of view, a digital sign is not much different from a traditional printed sign, or tv in the lobby playing local programming. Both boil down to a message on a wall or general entertainment.

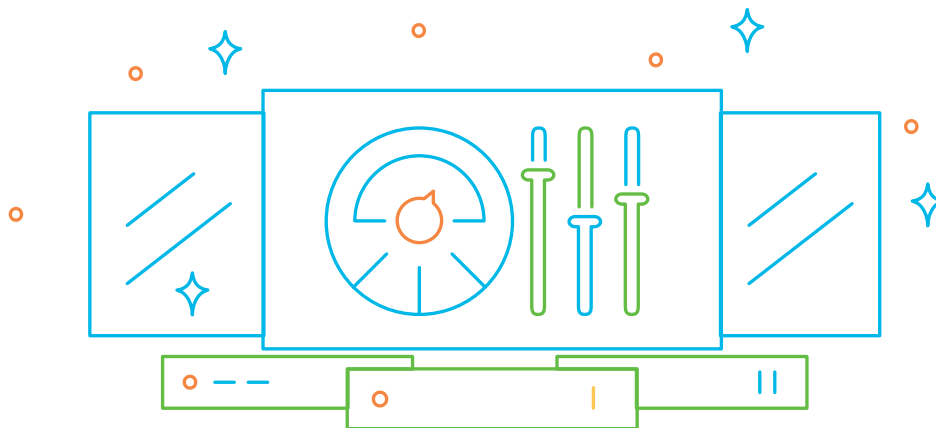
*“The value of your network then is not the mount, player, screen, or software, but the quality of your content strategy and execution that will make your 2-million dollar investment in digital signage worth one million, or three.”*

Funneling every piece of content through your network objectives (ROO/ROI) is the aim to which you should direct your primary energy as a network operator both on day one and year five. Keep in mind, you may need to include content in your playlist that does the job of attracting a viewer's attention and keeping it—so that they also see the content related to your ROI.

## 10

## Optimize your Content to Increase the ROO/ROI for the Network

The effectiveness of your content directly correlates to the quality of your messaging, so it's important to run temperature checks on even the most thoughtfully-designed content campaigns. You can do this with regular, controlled tests of effectiveness known as *A/B testing*. *A/B testing* is the easiest, most affordable kind of assessment, and can bring to light adjustments likely to increase the value of the content. For example, how did one store do with the recent promotional content asset versus the other store that didn't have the promotion running, or using the same content in two different locations with a slight change to the call-to-action (CTA)—did it create a lift in sales? Audience engagement and reaction to the message, CTA, and design are surprisingly difficult to anticipate; that which is relevant, which resonates with viewers, and speaks to them in “their language” changes all the time—so, if effectiveness is your end, self-assessment is your means.





## Conclusion

As you continue on this journey of building and optimizing your content strategy it may help to put yourself in a good position when things don't go as planned.

*Here is a quick checklist of all the 3rd party vendor contact/s you may want to be written down in a central place to plan for that dreadful day when the content isn't working as it should, or, even worse, the screen goes black altogether.*

- CMS Digital Signage Software
- Custom Content Agency
- Screenfeed 😞
- Location Manager (On-site)
- AV Integrator
- Installer
- Display Manufacturer
- Connectivity Provider
- General Solutions Provider
- Consultant

Make sure to have their email/phone number, as well as a backup email/phone number to another contact at the company or a general email address and phone number. Share this list with everyone on your team (Pillar 1) in case you're on vacation or sick. No one wants a call about screens going down while sipping a piña colada on the beach.

Taking the 10 pillars into consideration when putting together your content strategy will help you establish a sound content strategy, and will surely help you optimize your content to build a successful network that helps you achieve your ROO/ROI goals.



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