

New wayfinding kiosks push Kansas City's Crown Center to the front of the industry

Kiosks unify mixed-use campus and promote live events while serving out-of-town and local visitors

OVERVIEW

Hallmark Crown Center, located near downtown Kansas City, is a multi-use development that offers fine hotels, entertainment, dining, shopping, offices and residences on one campus. Home to the international headquarters of Hallmark Cards Inc., the complex contains three live theaters and attracts more than five million visitors annually.

Digital Evolution Group is a full-service e-consultancy in Overland Park, Kan. Since its inception in 1999, the company has specialized in leading strategic initiatives and developing Internet toolsets and platforms for a diverse group of clients.

Popstar Networks Inc. uses a customer-centered process to develop dynamic digital signage networks in a variety of industries. Popstar's interactive media technology, software development, and creative visual designs have set the trend for the industry.

THE PROBLEM

In early 2008, Crown Center opened its newest entertainment venue, Off Center Theatre. The company wanted to communicate with visitors outside the theater building about the theater's offerings in a dynamic, eye-catching way.

The project principals soon realized that refinements to the shopping center's existing signage and directories were overdue. Crown Center used a combination of basic poster directories and backlit directories that provided shoppers with passive — and perhaps unsatisfying — information about stores and other offerings. What's more, the regular addition of new tenants meant that these directory signs needed updating every month or so, a cumbersome and resource-consuming process.

The project quickly grew more ambitious as communications manager Chris Ronan saw how interactive kiosks could enhance Crown Center. "Of course, we wanted to give all our shoppers more accurate wayfinding information," he said. "But we also wanted to be able to push additional information to customers, cement our role as Kansas City's leading family-friendly destination, and communicate with our convention and hotel visitors who are unfamiliar with Crown Center."

The project team had only 90 days to meet those ambitious goals —not much time to conceptualize, specify, program, and test the kiosks. "Simply put, our kiosks absolutely had to be live in time for our busy holiday retail season, the time that makes or breaks us for the year," said Ronan. "Everyone knew that going in."

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An improved consumer experience is enhanced by seamless integration with Crown Center's web content management system.

THE SOLUTION

Digital Evolution Group, which designed, built and supports Crown Center's interactive strategies and Web content management system (CMS), partnered with Popstar Networks to capitalize on the company's in-depth knowledge of digital signage systems and the complexity of interactive design and deployment.

Early in the process, Popstar Networks conducted extensive, "feet-on-the-ground" customer research with Crown Center customers to find out what features and information they wanted in a wayfinding system. "User testing is a vital part of any interactive project," said Maria Scarpello, sales solution manager for Popstar Networks. "You need to know how your users perceive their environments and how they want to interact with a kiosk." The project partners suggested an interactive kiosk solution, with one kiosk on each of the mall's three floors, plus one in the exhibit hall in the adjacent Hyatt Hotel.

The new kiosks perform their wayfinding functions well while providing the extra features Ronan sought. For example, a shopper can sort stores and venues by category or display directions to a chosen store or venue from the kiosk location with just a touch. Furthermore, mall restaurants have uploaded their menus to the kiosks and all tenants can use the kiosks to publicize sales or promotions. The needs of Crown Center's live theaters are well-represented, too, with a dedicated screen area and built-in audio speakers on each kiosk to promote the mall's entertainment options, including brief videos featuring current and upcoming theater productions and a month-by-month event listing.

This project had an important back-end component, too, since Crown Center wanted to be able to handle routine content updates internally. "It is critical for our clients to have centralized command and control of their digital communications across all interactive mediums and screens. We took all the assets managed through our Site Management System, including the digital Crown Center property map, tenant specials and calendar of events — and integrated our CMS with Popstar's software," said Jeff Eden, vice president of market development for Digital Evolution Group. "The end result is that both the website and the kiosks are updated in real time."

Part of the discussion centered on which changes should be made inhouse and which would require outside support. "We needed to know when and where Chris (Ronan) would want to change the content so we could build it into the project from the beginning. Popstar will manage all changes to the look and feel of the kiosk, as well as handle any structural changes, like changing the navigation," said Scarpello. "This fits with our approach of helping clients solve their signage needs, not expecting them to adapt to us."

"Plus, the system offers a great deal of creative and marketing flexibility — I can upload any graphic design projects as JPGs, as well as tenants' up-to-the-minute sales and specials to a captive, on-site audience. The kiosks are a huge benefit to visitors, staff and tenants alike."

-Chris Ronan

THE RESULTS

The team made the all-important holiday season deadline, debuting the kiosks in November 2008. "It ended up being an efficient process, since Crown Center knew they had to make decisions quickly to meet their ultimate deadline," said Scarpello. "Once we worked out the details, there was no time to second-guess any decisions."

The kiosks have proven to be a valuable tool for the campus and tenants. "We've been pleasantly surprised that the overwhelming majority of shoppers understand how to use the kiosks and seem to enjoy them. The kiosks are more intuitive than we initially expected," said Ronan. "It's exciting to see how much people have taken to them."

The kiosks are also a huge time-saver on the operations end. "Just entering data once and having the CMS simultaneously update both the website and the kiosks has been great," said Ronan. "Plus, the system offers a great deal of creative and marketing flexibility — I can upload any graphic design projects as JPGs, as well as tenants' up-to-the-minute sales and specials to a captive, on-site audience. The kiosks are a huge benefit to visitors, staff and tenants alike."

