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Time-O-Matic

10 Facts About Electronic Message Centers
Helping to Build Safe, Vibrant, Growing Communities

Introduction

If you are a member of a citizen review board for community planning or zoning appeals, a professional planner, or a municipal attorney, please view the information in this white paper as a straightforward attempt to present the facts about electronic message centers (EMCs).

On-premise EMCs have many potential benefits for a community — their unique visual power leads to thriving businesses and a growing tax base. But too often the discussion about EMCs gets infected with misinformation, preconceived attitudes, and the repetition of disproven myths.

This white paper examines 10 facts about electronic message centers. We hope it will form the beginning of a new and respectful conversation about how to effectively approve, install and use EMCs. After you have read this brief but informative document, we believe there will be new agreement on one central goal: that planners and businesses should work together to build safe, vibrant, growing communities.

Examples of typical electronic message centers.

Fact 1: EMCs Help Build Successful Businesses

Effective signage has four primary functions that support local businesses: identify, inform, direct and promote.

In today's noisy and often chaotic mobile society, businesses are searching for effective tools to convey unique messages to the public, especially to potential customers. Many decisions are made at the street level, and the connection between a business and a customer must be made effectively, efficiently and safely.

To support these critical functions, EMCs create the means for a retailer or other business or organization to quickly form a connection between store and shopper, between a driver and a decision. Information is delivered cost-effectively to a broad number of consumers. Customers find their way to the business, and that business thrives. EMCs make this connection possible in real time, in the real world. And those thriving businesses become the foundation of vibrant, growing communities.

Local governments work hard to construct sign codes that support businesses, which helps local economies. The American Planning Association reports that more communities around the country, communities like San Antonio and Seattle, are recognizing that digital signage can support and grow the local economy[1].

"Our Watchfire sign helps us attract new retailers and customers. Our leasing activity has increased, and our tenants are reporting increased sales."

— Clark Gilhart, Executive Property Manager
Tri-County Towne Center

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[1] Marya Morris, AICP, "Looking Ahead: Regulating Digital Signs and Billboards," *Zoning Practice*, April 2008, http://www.planning.org/zoningpractice/2008/pdf/apr.pdf.

Fact 2: EMCs Inform and Help Drivers

Some critics consider EMCs disruptive to traffic, but the Federal Highway Association and research organizations have found no link between accidents and EMCs[2]. In fact, organizations such as the California Highway Patrol and the North Carolina Department of Transportation rely on electronic message centers to inform drivers of adverse weather, dangerous traffic conditions and other emergencies[3,4].

Why? EMCs broadcast information to busy roads and highways, so drivers are aware of conditions no matter where they are. Unlike static signs, digital signs allow updated information to be delivered clearly and consistently to multiple locations at once.

It's simple. They work.

Fact 3: EMCs Reduce Visual Clutter

Consider the plight of the neighborhood retailer who wants to effectively market to the community. Of course, an investment in an on-premise sign is one place to start. But many businesses resort to unfortunate and unnecessary steps to advertise to passing drivers. Consider the business that:

• Plasters its windows with posters (unsightly and often unsafe)

• Displays tacky yard signs or sidewalk signs

• Strings pennants and banners across its sign or front façade

• Still uses "portable arrow" reader boards

• Employs a sign spinner, man in a gorilla suit or other distracting "attention-getter"

There is a better solution. Electronic message centers can clean up the visual clutter found on many streets, both at the pedestrian and driver level. They allow a business or organization to present a consistent brand and professional face to the community. EMCs support strong businesses while following reasonable guidelines that stipulate message duration, transition time, colors, sizes and designs.

Well-written sign codes address unsightly visual clutter, cleaning up a community's image and outward appearance. But these same thoughtful codes can allow EMCs precisely because they are such a powerful tool for building business. Imagine your local landscape without letters falling off a manually adjustable reader board and without more "make do" window signs trying to pass for advertising.

The best digital sign manufacturers have experience working with local governments and design their EMCs with features that ensure signs comply with local codes. That way, everyone is satisfied with the new EMC — residents, public officials and business owners.

BEFORE

AFTER

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[2] John E. Farbry et. al., *The Effects of Commercial Electronic Variable Message Signs (CEVMS) on Driver Attention and Distraction: An Update*, Virginia: National Technical Information Service, (February 2009):14, http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/realestate/cevms.pdf.

[3] University Enterprises, Inc., "Sacramento State Digital Sign: Frequently Asked Questions," California State University, Sacramento, accessed October 11, 2012, http://www.enterprises.csus.edu/sign/faq.html.

[4] Morganton News Herald Staff, "I-40 DOT digital signs will provide road information," *Morganton News Herald*, July 26, 2012, http://www2.morganton.com/news/2012/jul/26/i-40-dot-digital-signs-will-provide-road-informati-ar-2466602/.

Fact 4: Towns with EMCs Don't Look Like "Vegas"

Your town won't look like Las Vegas just because you have EMCs. Each community's sign codes are different, and a good code will determine reasonable guidelines on sign design and size. But if this argument has been made in your town, we think this simple visual will illustrate the difference between Las Vegas and a typical Main Street EMC.

See the difference between a 150 foot tall, Las Vegas "spectacular" and a 30 foot tall sign that is typical of an electronic message center on most any Main Street? The scale of the Main Street sign is not even in the same stratosphere as the Las Vegas spectacular.

But the two signs do have one similarity: effectiveness. Las Vegas signage is designed to catch attention, without a doubt. While on a considerably smaller scale, Main Street markets are finding that electronic message centers deliver similar visual power.

Las Vegas Spectacular

150'

30'

Typical Main Street sign with Electronic Message Center
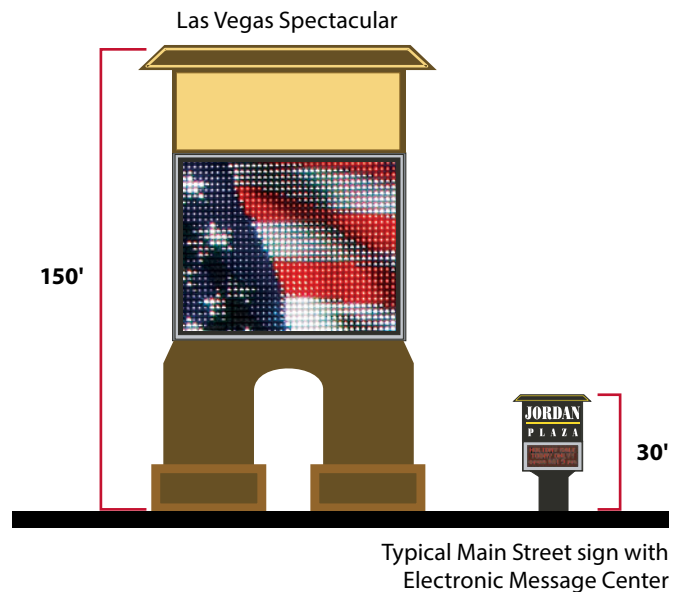
Fact 5: EMCs Don't Flash, They Advertise

"No flashing signs." If this term is still in your sign code, it is outdated and applies to a restriction which is meant for older and now increasingly ineffective signs. Consider the current standard established by the Federal Highway Administration which states that electronic message centers are not "flashing" signs[5].

The U.S. Coast Guard defines a flashing light as "A light in which the total duration of the light in each period is clearly shorter than the total duration of the darkness and in which the flashes of light are all of equal duration[6]." Clearly, that doesn't describe the appearance of an electronic message center.

EMCs display advertising, and two new terms describe the way the sign behaves. "Hold time" is the duration of each advertisement. A typical on-premise sign code will stipulate a hold time from 8-10 seconds, but hold times can vary from a few seconds to a minute or more. "Transition" describes the manner in which the advertisement changes from one message to another.

Since the days of codes that stipulate "no flashing signs", sign technology has changed and improved. It's time to update outdated sign code language, too.

5   Shintaro Okazaki, ed., "Public Opinion Towards Digital Billboards in the United States," *Advances in Advertising Research (Vol. 2): Breaking New Ground in Theory and Practice (2011):* 377, DOI: 10.1007/978-3-8349-6854-8_24.
6   U.S. Coast Guard, *U. S. Coast Guard Light List: Volume One Atlantic Coast (St. Croix River, Maine to Shrewsbury River, New Jersey)* (2012): XVIII, http://www.navcen.uscg.gov/pdf/lightLists/LightList%20V1.pdf.

Fact 6: EMCs Are the Future of Advertising

Electronic message centers are a big improvement over less dynamic advertising methods. It's not unusual for business owners to experience both sales increases and advertising cost reductions after switching to EMCs. That is what makes an electronic message center such a powerful tool for business-building.

EMCs' flexible advertising capability makes them popular in industries like quick-service restaurants, where changing menu items and promotions can be easily featured[7]. User-friendly digital signage software gives business owners greater control over advertising, potentially boosting its effectiveness and building their business faster. The best EMC software will allow a sign owner to easily customize their ad design, even providing artwork 'clips' and design advice to enhance advertising impact. Advanced features, such as ad content based on RSS feeds, social media and custom-designed art can make the most of an electronic message center's advertising capability.

EMCs are tools to build local businesses and communities, helping planners and government officials fulfill an important mission.

Updating an electronic message center: easy, professional, safe.

The old way: inefficient, clumsy, uncomfortable, and labor-intensive.

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[7]   Alicia Kelso, "Not just menu boards: QSR letterboards going digital," *Digital Signage Today*, May 29, 2012, http://www.digitalsignagetoday.com/article/195125/Not-just-menu-boards-QSR-letterboards-going-digital.

Fact 7: EMC Model Codes Build Community Consensus

Model sign codes give planners and government officials examples of functional sign laws. These model codes, like the one designed by the International Sign Association, were designed to help communities craft sign regulations that work for the city, residents and the business community. Model codes provide information — based on real sign codes in communities across the country — about land use, sign design and related issues[8].

As Craig Vogel from the University of Cincinnati stated recently, "City planners and designers at all levels must navigate the ocean of issues that confront stakeholder tension: companies attempting to communicate, the signage industry looking for growth and new revenue models, and communities and individuals attempting to design the quality of their living environments… These positions require thoughtful compromise and the ability to find new solutions."[9]

Model sign codes can serve as an important starting point for consensus-building and compromise, so city planners and business leaders can work together to create a path for growth.

"The main goal of the sign was to reach more people with messages about township information and events, and the sign most definitely delivers."

— Missy Van Meter
Shawnee Township

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8 David L. Williamson, "Sign Law and Policy: A Second Model Sign Code," *Sign and Digital Graphics*, February 1, 2010, http://sdgmag.com/article/business-marketing/sign-law-and-policy-second-model-sign-code.

9 Craig Vogel, "The Culture Value of Signage: Using Social, Economic and Technology Factors to Drive Pragmatic Innovation and Effectively Find Our Way Through Time & Space," presented at the University of Cincinnati, 2012 National Signage Research & Education Conference, October 2012

Fact 8: EMCs Improve Public Safety

Fire and police stations, hospitals, town halls and schools across the country use electronic message centers to educate and inform their communities. That's because EMCs can be updated immediately to keep residents informed. And EMCs throughout a fire protection district or municipality can be networked to provide a single source of vital emergency information that can be updated easily and consistently.

EMCs can keep a community informed about:

• Road closures and weather bulletins

• Shelter locations, boil orders, and emergency instructions

• Crimestopper information, public safety information

• Educational programs, fire safety week and blood drives

• Events, fundraisers, parades

• City regulations and policies

• Amber Alerts and Silver Alerts

In fact, the Federal Emergency Management Association (FEMA) and the Office of Homeland Security provide grants for digital signage and their backup generators because EMCs are effective tools to inform communities[10]. In past emergencies, EMCs were especially informative when traditional media was overburdened or inaccessible to the local population[11]. Electronic message centers help schools, police departments and other municipal buildings display useful information 24/7.

Fact 9: EMCs Have Adjustable Brightness Settings

A community may consider certain reasonable restrictions on electronic message center displays. One concern that is sometimes expressed is that EMCs will emit too much light at night. The best EMCs have internal brightness settings that are set to automatically adjust brightness to be higher in the day and lower in the evening. Nighttime settings are typically 5–7% of daytime brightness.

Some of the best sign manufacturers can also set brightness limits at the factory according to your particular sign code. That way, EMCs will communicate clearly and fit into your community, not fight against it.

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[10] Federal Emergency Management Association, "Welcome to the Assistance to Firefighters Grant Program," U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2012, http://www.fema.gov/welcome-assistance-firefighters-grant-program.

[11] Federal Emergency Management Association, *Outdoor Warning Systems Technical Bulletin (Version 2.0)* January 12, 2006: 12, http://www.midstatecomm.com/PDF/FEMA_guide.pdf.

Fact 10: EMCs Become Community Landmarks

Electronic message centers can become rallying points for, and landmarks within, a community. No wonder so many schools, churches and government facilities use electronic message centers to proudly display messages valued by the community. Shaping your city's identity and building your tax base are just a few of the things an EMC can do for your community. Use EMCs to:

- Welcome new residents and visitors

- Highlight local events

- Give businesses a targeted advertising tool

- Generate ongoing municipal revenue

- Spark interest in local attractions

- Engage and serve the community with PSAs

Electronic message centers offer an unmatched ability to captivate, to sell, and to serve a community and its businesses. We support your efforts to create a safe, vibrant, growing community. Harness the visual power offered by electronic message centers to create a contemporary signage solution for your community.

10 Facts Recap

ELECTRONIC MESSAGE CENTERS:

1: EMCs Help Build Successful Local Businesses

2: EMCs Inform and Help Drivers

3: EMCs Reduce Visual Clutter

4: Towns with EMCs Don't Look Like "Vegas"

5: EMCs Don't Flash, They Advertise

6: EMCs Are the Future of Advertising

7: EMC Model Codes Build Community Consensus

8: EMCs Improve Public Safety

9: EMCs Have Adjustable Brightness Settings

10: EMCs Become Community Landmarks

When Ten Facts Aren't Enough

Watchfire understands that you need detailed information to make digital signage work for your city or town. EMCs are not only the fastest, most effective way to build business; they can be an informative and attractive addition to any community.

Call us today. We're happy to answer your questions and provide more facts about electronic message centers.

Bring the power of EMCs to your community.

Call 800-637-2645 or learn more at watchfiresigns.com.

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