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## Architectural New Media Captures Attention

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**A** growing number of corporate lobbies, retail locations, university campuses, banks and civic spaces worldwide are integrating powerful media capabilities into their architecture. Informing, entertaining, inviting feedback from key audiences, or merely enhancing the environments, these interactive exhibits and video displays range in function from straightforward utility to architectural ornamentation, and often to substantial art.

Build  
Boston

Listen to Kay Van Valkenburgh discuss the topic from 1:30 p.m. - 3:00 p.m. on Wed., Nov. 19.

Integrating new media offers compelling returns in many indoor and outdoor environments. Creating and maintaining them presents challenges, but best practices and technology have matured significantly in recent years, enabling specialist project leadership to help clients and vendors meet the challenges confidently.

Numerous successes – including several outstanding examples in the Boston area – have proved that a well-planned and coordinated approach results in robust, engaging messaging tools.

The most obvious benefits of new media installations come from reaching target audiences while they are most focused on their relationship to a company or organization – that is to say, while they are on a firm's premises. Whether they are clients, stakeholders, employees or casual visitors, this is a prime opportunity to assist them, inform them and otherwise touch their thinking.

A building and grounds already speak volumes to them, creating high-level, complex impressions. Media well-integrated into this vocabulary and well-suited to an audience's intended activities offers more specific, timely articulations. It invites an audience to participate in, wander around in and respond

individually or collectively to an identity, ideas and values. These on-location capabilities successfully connect with audiences in ways that no other means of communication can – not even the Internet.

### Time Tested

For precisely these reasons, and long before the Internet existed, forward-thinking organizations began exploring how rich media could enhance built and natural environments. Many of these efforts resulted in very successful messaging initiatives that continue to engage people in significant ways after many years.

Still, the numerous corpses of failed media installations, bearing the post-mortem bandages of scotch tape and out-of-order signs, deliver stark reminders of the potential pitfalls. Notably the successes, many which date back several decades, each bear similar traits: They are reliable, usable and focused on a clearly defined purpose. All of these characteristics are directly attributable to good project leadership, well-chosen team members, and a clear understanding of the capabilities and demands of new media installations.

The importance of effective project leadership is most evident when considering the diversity of experts needed to complete successful installations. The typical initiative involves electronic content, a system of source- and playback-equipment, physical fixtures to house displays and user controls, and a method of placing everything appropriately in its surroundings.

As with building industry initiatives in general, these disciplines have developed largely in isolation from each other. Just as electrical and flooring trades focus little on each other's concerns, graphic artists and fixture fabricators rarely understand the requirements of each other's work. They think differently from each other, use different terminology, have

different aesthetic criteria and follow strikingly different development processes. Yet the work of one must continue the other's as precisely as an electrician's and a carpet installer's must to complete a mid-floor electrical outlet.

Effective leadership requires three rather specific and complimentary perspectives to integrate the variety of concerns: overall management of the initiative to unify the disparate efforts; creative direction to identify and establish continuity of message across the physical and electronic elements; and technical direction to assure the message is fully supported across system, content, fixture and environment.

Project consultants with expertise in these disciplines typically join a client's exploratory team as they begin discussing the idea of a media installation, and stay with the project through the conceptualization, creation, implementation and post-commissioning maintenance phases. Thorough planning around each phase from the points of view of project management, creative direction and technical direction will result in smoother execution, considerable cost savings and substantial enhancements to the quality of the audience experience.

The balance swings two ways in selecting consultants. Those who come with their concepts, specifications and alliances at-the-ready may be product representatives of sorts. The down side, if this is the case, would be one-stop, one-size-fits-all designs, systems or fabrication capabilities. The up side is that when the characteristics of their products match up with a communications strategy, audience and space, these consultants are in a good position to help implement a well-tested system that can save money on the project.

If on the other hand, the needs involve a specific vision, a drive to innovate and distin-

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guish, and an organization has the stomach for prototyping, consultants who arrive with an open mind and introduce themselves with a strong, diverse portfolio may be the better choice. With extensive experience, the latter consultant may even be able to offer the best of both worlds.

### Know the Audience

One more word of caution: Don't overlook the step that is standard among communications projects. Kick off your efforts by building a detailed understanding of the audience, the message and the opportunity. A common tendency is to skip right to discussing the technology and appearance. This is a short path to an expensive system that sits unused. Recall how often beautiful plasma screens in high traffic areas are showing cable news and, out of courtesy to nearby offices, play no audio. An expert who understands media installations, audiences and appropriate use of space can guide this needs analysis effort and identify worthwhile, audience-specific objectives, as well as appropriate methods and suitable locations for reaching them.

Three easy-to-visit examples in Boston hint at the range of purposes that can be accomplished with well-conceived and implemented

installations. These are the newly renovated Hall of Ideas at the Christian Science Center, the Current Science & Technology stage at the Museum of Science, and a small shoe display at Crystal's of Boston on Winter Street. They set out, respectively, to provoke contemplation, provide an interactive discussion forum and communicate brand and product information.

The installation in the Hall of Ideas is especially remarkable for the sensitivity with which the message and delivery method are integrated into the environment. In this tranquil, neoclassical hall, projected words flow from beautifully sculpted fountains, swirl across an expanse of floor, and come together on the walls in quotations from great thinkers like Gandhi and JFK. The projectors, computers and robotics that produce the effect are tucked out of the way, and the focus is on how people and ideas react to each other. The activity is triggered by the proximity of people and adjusts to engage individuals, small groups and larger crowds as appropriate.

For the historical perspective, "Where's Boston," a multimedia show first launched in 1976 as part of the bicentennial celebration, is probably still the most famous example in New England. It stands as a testament to the longevity and power of media in purpose-built

environments, whether they are lobbies, retail spaces or semi-temporary structures. For a good decade, this show charmingly rifled through 3,200 slides in an elegantly choreographed barrage of light and sound. Its well-crafted message, relayed via 40 slide projectors, eight screens and a massive surround-sound system, produced an immersive experience that remains in our collective memory over 27 years after the show opened. In fact, an updated version of "Where's Boston" is currently being revived with an eye to the Democratic National Convention.

Also in the area, the MIT Museum occasionally exhibits advancements in media technologies, and a new museum in Central Square, Art Interactive, often features an artistic breakthrough in interface design.

Beyond the specially built theaters and the exhibit-ready museums, everyday environments are taking on rich communication capabilities to enhance their traditional functionality. Lobbies are built to introduce those in arrival to the building's occupants and services, as retail spaces are to connect customers with merchandise and services, and so on with a variety of spaces. Integrated media environments are viable – and arguably necessary – tools for further those purposes. ■

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