Digital Signage **Campaigns**
Engagement through Storytelling

DIGITAL SIGNAGE WHITE PAPER

Table of Contents

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Narratives for Engagement

Modern communications are more about narratives than notices. Younger generations respond less to direct sales approaches (e.g. "Buy X now because it's great/will make you happy") and more to indirect sales methods, like content and influencer marketing (e.g. "Things you didn't know about X"/"Seven ways to increase happiness and Product X is number five on the list"). And they respond to longtail campaigns and message narratives – a series of linked messages that unfold over time telling a story, and even developing characters that people begin to care about. Since digital natives are the fastest growing segment of the workforce and marketplace, it's time to start adapting to what they respond to. From advertising and social media to Netflix or Amazon original content, long form is in and likely to stay.
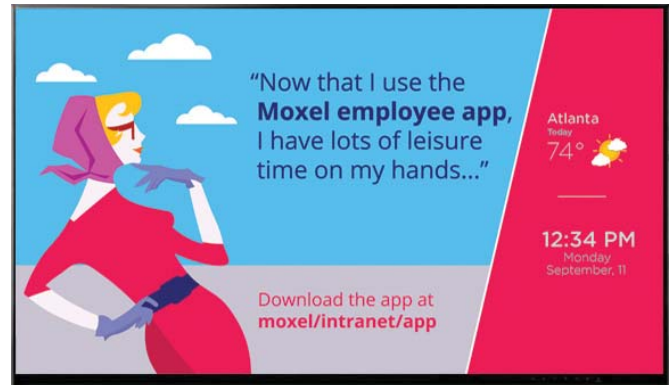
The word "narrate" comes from the Latin word narrare, which means to tell, and that word comes from gnarus, which means knowing. So, narratives are connected elements that tell a story, so the audience can know something they didn't know before. There's an idea called Organizational Storytelling in management and organizational studies – this looks at humans as predominantly storytelling creatures (homo narrans). Traditional storytelling often tries to pass on wisdom or lessons through a narrative that makes the lesson or information easier to remember. Businesses prefer information that can be categorized, classified and analyzed, especially "know-how" and "know-who" information.

In 2005, Nicole Giroux and Lissette Marroquin wrote an article ("L'approche narrative des organisations", published in the Revue française de gestion) listing five perspectives to organizational storytelling:

- **The Functionalist Perspective**: Storytelling as a management tool, especially top-down communication. It aims at transmission efficiency - the narration needs to be succinct and consistent with objectives.

- **The Interpretative Perspective**: An organization puts out certain narratives about itself, then sees what other people who interact with the organization have to say. For example, Company A may use the tag line "Because We Care" – then people who buy the products or services, or who work for or with that company, have their own narratives which may reinforce (e.g. "I really had great customer service from them") or contradict (e.g. "Just another corporate behemoth") their own narratives. It's a sort of living story that is two-way in nature.

- **The Process Perspective:** An organization is an organizing process that focuses on interaction and co-constructing narratives. This is especially clear in times of change or controversy. All people inside and outside the organization have a native narrative intelligence which shapes an ongoing two-way dialogue, where each informs and affects the other.

- **The Critical Perspective:** Narrative focus on asymmetrical relationships within organizations. Taking the example of pay gaps in companies by gender. This perspective tells the story of how these discrepancies arise and are perpetuated, as well as the attempts to throw light on and correct them.

- **The Postmodern Perspective:** Context is everything when shaping and interpreting narratives, and there are many different voices to be heard, including marginalized employees or customers.

These different perspectives are not necessarily exclusive – an organization can have top-down communications, survey their audience and adjust their message, have a dialogue, critically think about problems in the organization and encourage multiple viewpoints all at the same time.

In the modern age, there are numerous tools to help with all these Organizational Storytelling Perspectives – notably social media and digital signage.

Why Storytelling?

We remember things better when they're framed inside of a narrative because we use more of our brain. Studies show that not only are the language centers activated during a story, but the parts of the brain that would be used if we actually experienced the events are as well.

So, if we're listening to or reading a story about a sailboat caught in a storm, we experience milder versions of what would really be going on in that situation – fear, the thrill of danger, competency in piloting the craft, pride at surviving, etc. To some extent, it's like we lived through it ourselves.

Since more of the brain is used, more is stored in memory. The story is easy to remember and easy to repeat to others, which reinforces the story again in our own minds. So does encountering it again ourselves. And, the simpler the language, the more likely it will be remembered. People can't react to and process something if they don't remember it.

Your digital signs show a message, displayed twice an hour every day for a week: "Timecards deadline – Friday the 19th at 5pm". Hopefully, people will see the message enough that it sticks in their minds, but chances are there will be quite a few stragglers who "just forgot", causing more work for your teams. Adding a bit more, like "or paychecks can't be issued", might catch a few more – because they now have an incentive to comply with the deadline.

But, instead of simply repeating the same static message again and again, consider turning that into a story, related in a series of messages over time. It could be something like this:

The story of Patricia and Jim: Each day, there's a new "episode" of the story – Patricia organizes herself and gets her paperwork in by Friday, gets paid on time, and enjoys life with her friends – going to a movie and having dinner in a nice restaurant. Jim procrastinates, files late, and spends a couple of sad, lonely days at home, eating frozen dinners and watching his goldfish, waiting for his pay to come through.

It's the same message, but instead of saying the same thing in the same way over and over again, you're saying it in what feels like a new way each time, so your audience is more interested, and will more likely remember it. They might talk about the tale of Patricia and Jim over lunch or in break rooms, reinforcing and repeating your message to others. And they complete the story themselves by taking action – in our example, by getting that paperwork in no later than 5pm on Friday the 19th.

It doesn't matter what the subject matter is – following guidelines, taking advantage of training opportunities, working toward sales goals, registering for classes, going to a company picnic, etc. – turning your messages into stories that are memorable and relatable will increase awareness, pique interest and motivate your audience to take action.

There's an interesting thing called Narrative Transportation Theory, which says that when people lose themselves in a story, they temporarily change their attitudes and even opinions to reflect those that are dominant in the story. This happens through empathizing with the characters and their struggles, combined with mental imagery the story generates. When using narrative tools with digital signage, you are supplying some of the imagery as well as the characters and story, giving you even more of a chance to focus the audience in the direction you want them to go.

Once Upon a Time

In order to really think about how to use storytelling techniques in organizational communications, it might be helpful to first take a look at what constitutes a narrative in Western culture.

Narrative Techniques

To tell a cohesive story, you must choose the point of view, or perspective; the voice, or who narrates; and the time, or when the story takes place relative to now.

- **Point of View – the perspective of the story**
  - First-Person: I do/did/will do this and that; sometimes We – the protagonist is telling their own story or a story from their own perspective
  - Second-Person: You (singular or plural) do/did/will do this and that - the audience becomes a character in the story
  - Third-Person: He/She/It/They do/did/will do this and that – narrator is unspecified and not a participant in the story
  - Alternating-Person: Combining two or all three of the above techniques in a single story

- **Voice – the format of the story**
  - Character: The story is told from the perspective of a particular character, called the viewpoint character – not necessarily the main character (think of Dr. Watson writing about Sherlock Holmes)
  - Epistolary – The story is told through documents such as letters or reports – can have either multiple narrators or considered to have no real narrator at all (possibly just someone who has assembled all the documents)
  - Objective: The narrator is an uninvolved onlooker who tells the story of the characters' actions and words, but not their thoughts, feelings, etc. – sometimes known as "fly on the wall" or "camera lens", often used for news stories
  - Omniscient: The narrator is reliable and knows everything about the world in which the story takes place as well as the characters' actions, thoughts, feelings, etc. – most common voice for novels; Universal Omniscient narrators also have information the characters do not, reinforcing that the narrator is not connected to the story at all

- **Time – in the past, the present or the future - determines the grammatical tenses used in telling the story**
  - Past: The events happened before right now, are part of history and unchangeable – most common Narrative Time in English
  - Present: The events are told as if happening right now, in real time – can create a sense of urgency and immediacy
  - Future: The events happen at some future time – rarely used in English, gives a prophetic tone to the story

Narrative Structures

You need to choose which of the four main types of Narrative Structure you wish to use:

1. **Linear Narrative:** Events happen mainly in chronological order (the order the events occur), though flashbacks are permitted provided it is clear where they are in the chronology.
2. **Nonlinear Narrative:** Events are told out of the order in which they occurred or in a way that makes it less clear which events caused which.
3. **Interactive Narration:** A Linear Narrative that is driven by the audience's interaction with the story – think of modern video games, where the audience must complete a task or solve a puzzle to progress to the next part of the story.
4. **Interactive Narrative:** A branching narrative structure where what happens next in the story depends on audience interactions – there could be many possibilities or endings that the audience never interacts with (some video games, gamebooks such as Choose-Your-Own-Adventure books, and immersive or improvisational theater pieces use this narrative structure).

Many comic books and graphic novels use a linear narrative structure called **Graphic Narrative Structure**, which follows the classic Western three-act story structure. This is especially useful when thinking about storytelling through a visual medium such as digital signage. There are four stages:

1. A situation is set up. This includes the time, place and circumstances that exist before the complication, plus the characters who will be affected by the complication. Act I.
2. There's a complication or development. Act II.
3. There's a resolution of the complication or development (this can continue multiple times until the very end of the story, where the final resolution is the climax). Act III.
4. There's a final section where everything is resolved, and the audience sees if the struggles of the characters were successful, or partially successful, or not successful at all (denouement, which, like the climax, only happens once). Epilogue.

The most obvious choice for creating a digital signage campaign is a linear graphically-informed narrative. Like a comic strip, the digital signage narrative consists of a series of panels in which the story develops. The character or characters exist in a certain situation that can either be just fine or less than ideal; dissatisfaction or trouble comes their way, forcing them to act; their actions cause a new, better situation to arise, and everything is better than before. The denouement of the story is when your audience takes the call-to-action that your narrative is hoping to encourage.

You'll want to map out what it is you hope to accomplish (what action(s) you want your audience to take), then decide on the character(s), the story that takes them on their journey, and the call-to-action you will prompt your audience with.

How many separate messages will you need to tell that story? At least two – one to give the situation and complication, one to show the resolution and denouement (which is your call to action). But two connected messages aren't really much of a campaign. How can people get interested and invested in characters they only encounter twice – at the beginning and end of their difficulties? You'll want at least three messages to give your audience a chance to engage with your characters and story. Expand the number of messages by making the denouement a separate message, extending the complication and resolution over several messages, or having multiple complications and resolutions.

However, you could use other types of structures as well. Just as different cultures have different poetry forms (haiku and waka in Japan, patha vat in Cambodia, Indian epic poetry, Russian chastushka, etc.), there are different narrative conventions in different cultures (for example, Latino narratives tend to de-emphasize chronological structuring and emphasize characterizations, especially family relationships; Japanese narratives sometimes employ a four-act story structure called kishōtenketsu that contains no conflict at all; Arabic literature sometimes uses embedded narratives, or stories contained within stories; etc.). It might be interesting and useful to research narrative styles from other cultures, especially if the organization has regular contact with people outside their home cultural context.

Story Types
There are lots of ways to categorize types of stories. Looking at plot types, conflict types and format types, there have been many lists created over the years. Conflict types include Human vs. self/human/nature/environment/technology/supernatural/god.
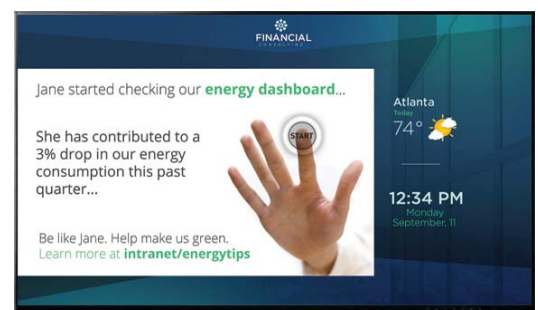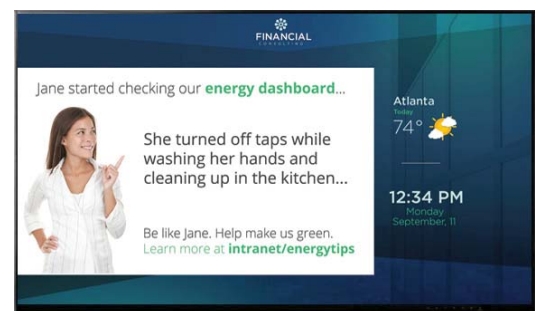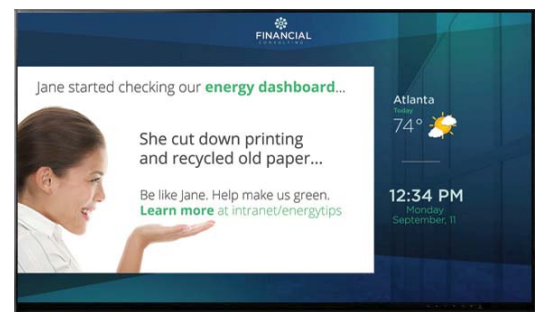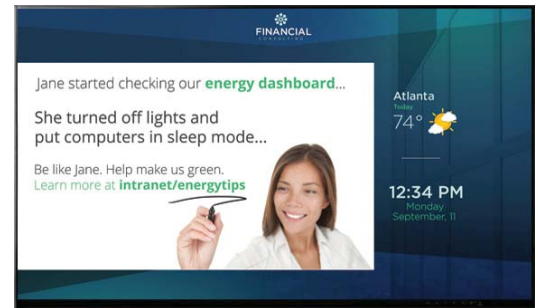
Plot types could include:
- Overcoming the monster
- Out of the Bottle (Wishes and curses)
- Rites of Passage
- Superhero story
- Dude with a Problem
- Quest/Adventure
- Pursuit
- Escape/Rescue
- Riddles
- Underdog
- Transformation
- Friendship/Love
- Sacrifice
- Discovery

Then there are formats of stories – anecdotes, jokes, fables, ghost stories, parables, popular misconceptions, satire, tall tales, urban legends and many, many more.

Short-Term Narratives

Each one of these plot types and story formats has their own conventions, any one of which might work well for digital signage messages and campaigns. Some things, like an anecdote or joke, really only need one messages to get communicated. Riddles could be one or two (question in one messages, answer in another). A parable or lesson-teaching story might use three-to-five messages to get the story across effectively.

The point here is that you can use narrative concepts when crafting even single, one-off messages. Think how much more engaging a message that has a picture of a woman drinking a nice cool iced coffee, obviously refreshed, as sunlight streams through the window behind her with a narrative anecdote "On a hot day, I'm really glad X Café is having a special on iced coffee drinks. That really hits the spot!" can be, as opposed to just a picture of an iced coffee with the message "Iced coffee specials at X Café today."

What you want to do is influence behavior in some way – get people to take that call to action your message provides. First you need to get people interested in what's on the screen, then engaged with it. Using narratives to show examples of the behavior you want the audience to emulate is far more effective than simply telling people to do something.

The trick is to find ways to enhance the audience experience, rather than intrude upon it. People are used to tailoring their own interactions with digital information, and in-your-face methods are being increasingly seen as negative experiences. You want content that's not only appropriate, but interesting and fun. Engage with your audience, rather than just talking at them.

Make Use of Influencers

Influencer marketing is another trend in the rise. This is information and recommendations by trustworthy people – who could be characters or spokespeople you create, executives in your organization or anyone on the scene.

The message example above – the woman cooling off with a refreshing beverage – has elements of the Escape story (escaping the hot day), Discovery (wow – the café has these drinks and they are also on sale) and Transformation (she was hot, now she's refreshed). You can re-use the same woman for other messages, creating a sort of character or mascot that's recognizable and familiar. The woman becomes a type of influence marketer – people like and trust her (because she has steered them right before), and so are likely to continue to follow her advice or example.

Humans are social creatures and like to do things that other people are doing. It's still a truism that the single best marketing tool out there is word-of-mouth – Person A likes something, suggests it to Person B, who then tries it, likes it, and does the same to Person C. Even your audience can become influencers in their own right.

Consider getting testimonials, reviews and opinions from your audience. People love to see themselves, and research shows that people are far more likely to share something if they or someone they know is shown or tagged in it. When you have an event, or a sale, or some other function, have someone take pictures of participants and put them on your social media and digital signs, again with ways that make it easy to share them. Let's say it's a blood drive – you want people to sign up and donate blood, so you get people who have done so in the past to share their quotes and stories, which encourages others to do the same.

Longtail Campaigns

Instead of just a one-off message, or a short series of messages spread out over a week or so, think about telling a story that can go on for weeks, even months. This allows you to develop your characters and fine-tune your message, and generates buzz as people talk about what happened in the last "episode" or speculate about what will happen next.

Retail companies routinely do this, and there are many examples of consumer brands promoting products and services to the public, or increasing brand awareness through extended advertising themes. But long-tail narrative campaigns can also work for more specific audiences that receive organizational communications.

This works best with something that takes a long time, is ongoing, or has multiple components. You're doing more than just telling your audience about something, you're encouraging them to change in some way (by taking the action you want them to). And you do this by showing them examples of people who do or don't take that action, and how their life as a result of the choices they make. This pushes emotional buttons for people, especially modern audiences who are used to watching films, TV shows and web videos. With emotional engagement comes more buy-in, which is more likely to lead to action.

Using this method is effective for things that have a deadline far in the future, things that require registering or signing up, or things that are always relevant. Some examples:

- Rolling out a new benefits package
- Launching a new product or service
- Reinforcing mission statement and values
- Special events, like blood drives or company picnics
- Reinforcing health and safety standards

This works well for new initiatives, but also for repeated information that is always relevant. Maybe you have some messages that always need to be up – safety reminders and the like. Using narratives and campaigns can get the same message out there while still making it feel new and fresh by telling parts of an ongoing story.

Integrate and Expand Your Campaigns

Take a page out of Omni-Channel thinking – deepen the integration of your campaign into every single communications tool at your disposal, using multiple channels to tell your story – digital signage displays, webpages, social networks, YouTube channels, and so on. This allows you to saturate your audience with your overall message while keeping it all feeling fresh.

Short video episodes are one obvious way to tell your long-tail story. A video or film is, by definition, a series of related stills that run together to create the illusion of movement. However, you can just as easily accomplish this with a series of still messages on your digital signs. Publishing the episodes on your intranet helps keep your story in employee's minds as they wait for the next episode. Adding each part to your website lets the general public get in on it as well, as does putting it on your social media pages (and that also allows comments and input from others, plus it lets you monitor how interested people are).

Your digital signage system is the cornerstone of a good campaign. Your audience is already used to getting information from your screens, and you can drive traffic to other communication channels by simply using your displays to advertise those portals. And the converse is also true – a post on a social media site might remind people to look for some specific information on screens on a certain day. And because viewers see your digital signs many times a day, they're a great way to get your message to stick in people's minds, and help them remember all the different elements you bring to bear in your campaign.

First, you need to know who your audience is. Not just "employees" or "visitors", but their demographics – genders, ages, backgrounds, and their psychographics – their interests, behaviors, attitudes and motivations. Create some surveys and polls, talk to your HR department, or just walk around and watch people who come through your facility. You need to know who they are, where they're coming from, and what they like and don't like.

Once you've figured out who your message is for, pick which channels to use in your campaign. Don't use Facebook just because it's in the news all the time; if your audience doesn't use Facebook much, then you're wasting time and resources by integrating that channel. On the other hand, if they are big Twitter users, it would be foolish not to use it. Concentrate on channels that make sense for your audience, as well as the objective of your campaign.

Your overall campaign message should tie in somehow with your core brand values and mission statement. If you're a manufacturing company that touts speed and accuracy, try to make the campaign about workplace safety also have something to do with speed and accuracy, or about how those two things balance with safety rules and procedures.

You also need to be consistent. No one will know it's an integrated campaign if everything looks different in each place. Choose colors and design elements that remain the same no matter where they are. Creating a specific logo or mascot for the campaign might also make it easier for people to recognize that things are part of the same overall message. Use the same or similar wording across all channels, and always have a call to action so you can measure what's effective and what isn't.

However, you may need to tailor some things to the specific medium you're using. A message on your digital signs needs to be fairly short, a webpage can be longer, and a tweet is limited to 140 characters – but they all need to have the same essential information and call to action.

The different communications that you use need to be logically connected and reinforce one another. The goal is not just to hit as many communications channels as possible, but to add elements together to make something that is greater than the sum of its parts – a synergistic whole.

One way to integrate multiple channels is by using hashtags. It's best to create a unique one that is just for your specific organization or campaign. If you use something general, like #BreastCancerAwareness, your messages are likely to get lost in the clutter out there, as many other organizations will be using the same hashtag. But how many will be using something like #HufflinBCA (meaning Hufflin – the name of your company, and Breast Cancer Awareness – or BCA)?
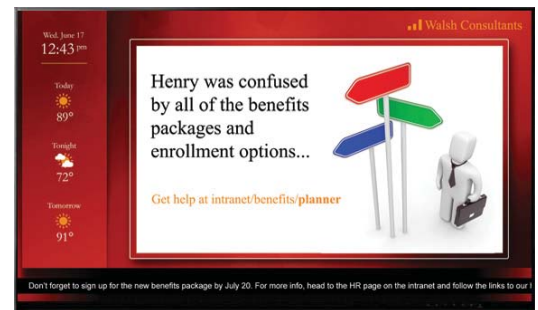
When people encounter your hashtag on the web, simply clicking it lets them see all the other webpages, social posts and videos you've created and given the same hashtag to. And when they see it on your digital signs, they'll easily remember it for the next time they're on the web. Essentially, you're creating a smaller sub-brand, and you want it to stick in your audience's minds.

Make sure anything you create for your campaign, like URLs or usernames, are also consistent. You could make a webpage called something like www.hufflinBCA.com, with a log in name of "Hufflin Awareness" to access the site. Each time people use your "tagline" to log in, they're interacting with your overall message. And then your message is reinforced again when they view all of your info on that webpage.

And you must track everything. Every single part of your campaign needs a call to action that you can monitor and track. You can then evaluate how effective each element is by the responses you get, letting you eliminate or tweak low-performing elements, and expand or augment high-performing ones.

Yes, it can be a lot of work to concept out and plan a long-term integrated campaign, then monitor and adjust it as it's running. However, you're probably already doing this for product marketing. And, when it's done right, there is simply no more powerful way to get your message out there and into your audience's minds to translate into real-world actions.

If you need some inspiration, search the web to see what other organizations have done, or model your campaign on retail advertising efforts (there are some great campaigns out there). Then think about who your audience is, and what might engage them. By creating a long-tail campaign that unfolds over time, you'll not only get people interested, you'll keep their attention.

Conclusion

There is no more powerful way to get information across to an audience than through telling a story – whether it's short-term or a longtail campaign that goes on for weeks. And there's no more comprehensive communications tool at your disposal than your digital signage system. Combining the two allows for unprecedented influence over your audience while not feeling intrusive.

Narrative extends and deepens your message. Viewers become invested in the messages they receive and are far more likely to follow that call-to-action. And they'll remember your communications better as well.

When people engage with your story at a deep level, they engage with your digital signs, and so they engage with your organization.

Want to learn more? Contact us at **salesteam@visix.com**.

Quick Tips!

10 Things to Consider
When Designing a Campaign

1. Know who your audience is, what they need or are interested in. If necessary, conduct some sort of research beforehand.

2. Make sure you always have some sort of human element in your story – it's hard to get emotionally engaged with statistics and numbers.

3. Make your characters seem real and authentic – base them on actual people and situations, if you can (you can even use real employees or managers to tell their stories if they are compelling enough). This is true even if you are using a cute animal or robot as your main character.

4. Keep everything short, simple and straightforward.

5. Be inclusive – people respond better to a "we" than they do to "them", and include shared values.

6. Repeat phrases and sound bites that will stick in your audience's minds.

7. Add in plenty of detail and hidden "easter eggs" (even in-jokes) for people to discover and talk about.

8. Plan out your entire story arc in advance – with a beginning (the set-up and context for the story), a middle (the conflicts and action) and an end (a conclusion that wraps it up in an emotionally satisfying way).

9. Divide the whole story into discrete segments of narrative action – what are called narremes – and plan one message per narreme. Think of ways to keep upping the ante, creating suspense in your audience so they keep coming back for more.

10. Make scheduling part of your campaign plan – how often will you repeat an "episode", and when can people expect the next installment? It is every Thursday, or every eight days or three times a month?