

The changing face of indoor advertising

Indoor advertising has grown from a medium of dubious distinction to a viable advertising vehicle with annual industry revenues exceeding \$20 million a year. What began in the mid-80s as a local “mom and pop” media concept has expanded into several national vendors and nearly 100 local market operators. Advertisers using indoor range from local car dealerships and Realtors to national Dodge and Procter & Gamble campaigns.

Although there are many media forms that are viewed indoors, the concept of advertising in restrooms is what most advertisers consider “indoor advertising.” This is similar to categorizing “outdoor advertising” as being primarily outdoor billboards even though there are many media choices to be viewed outside. Both indoor and outdoor advertising fall into the category of “out of home media.” Over the years the description of out of home media has spilled into many new segments that range from traditional to non-traditional. The definitions have stretched even further over time to describe the latter as “alternative”, and most recently, “ambient media.”

Indoor’s strength lies in its ability to reach a targeted captive audience in an environment free of distractions. Ads are usually located in the restrooms and common areas of restaurants, nightclubs and sports bars. Placing print ads in the restrooms allows advertisers to have their ads viewed by a specific gender—no other medium can do that. Indoor ads can’t be skipped over, tuned out or turned off. Research

has shown that viewers spend up to three minutes with the medium. In many cases viewers say that indoor advertising is a welcome addition because they are looking for something to read.

Until recently, indoor advertising has taken a simple, low cost, print- only approach to reaching its viewers. These colorful print ads are placed in frames and are the epitome



photo by Star Tribune

A digital ad display in the men’s room at Bellanotte restaurant in Minneapolis.

of space-placed media. The signs are typically mounted above urinals in men’s rooms and on the back of stall doors in women’s rooms.

Industry expansion has included the development of Baby Boards, located above or near the baby changing stations; Beauty Boards, located near bathroom vanities and mirrors in restrooms, spas and salons; Bridal Boards, located in the common areas of bridal shops; and Fashion Boards, located in the dressing rooms of department stores. Clearly, the strength of the

media is that it can “chase” a desired audience in just about any venue imaginable.

While flexible and cost effective, indoor print ads do have their limitations. Content is static and new ads are usually posted just once a month. Because ads must be physically changed out, it is difficult to change them on a frequent basis. Some campaigns run up to 12 months and ads can lose their sizzle if they aren’t changed during the term. In some instances, the creative is so appealing that patrons try to remove it and take it with them. In that case, advertisers may lose valuable impressions until the ad is physically replaced.

Despite these minor shortcomings, indoor print has broken through the scores of alternative media options and established itself as one of the leaders in the area of non-traditional media over the past 20 years. It still represents only a very small fraction of the revenue being spent in the out of home media category, but is growing in its appeal and certainly is here to stay.

Now that advertisers have accepted it, what will be the next step for indoor? **Is it possible to move beyond print?**

How about going digital?

A handful of companies whose histories are rooted in indoor print are now blazing the trail for this next generation of indoor advertising. The internet and emerging technologies are being used to create and deliver content and impact that can’t be achieved with static print ads.

Digital indoor is dynamic and targeted. A variety of methods and technologies are used to create and deliver content including full motion video, Macromedia FLASH, and QuickTime. Some incorporate sound, others do not. The capability of changing ads in real time at any venue anywhere in the country is quickly capturing the interest of ad agencies and their clients. Digital has all the positive attributes of indoor print and brings with it more flexibility and scheduling options. The digital signs also allow for multiple advertisers and messages on a board; indoor print usually only allows one. Not only that, but digital also allows the ads to run for varying lengths of time, usually 15 to 30 seconds per ad.

While there will always be a place for indoor print, upstarts within the industry are staking their claim on the new frontier of digital indoor. In fact, many of these new media frontiersmen are bypassing print altogether and focusing only on digital. Others see the value of keeping both media options as an opportunity to provide a better choice for both the venues and customers in their markets.

Installation costs for digital indoor are significantly higher than print-ranging from \$5,000 to \$10,000 per venue. However, the financial risk brings with it an upscale demographic reward. In fact,



Digital ad displays in the men's room at Solera restaurant in Minneapolis.

photo by Star Tribune

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it is the higher-end venues that previously would not have considered installing indoor print that have welcomed digital indoor with open arms.

Fine dining restaurants, popular nightclubs, and trendy bars that attract a high-income clientele see digital indoor as a necessary component of their upscale establishment. Attractive viewing cases with flat screens often match and enhance the restroom's

decor and play multiple ads that include in-house ads for the venue.

Ad content can even be changed to target consumers at different times throughout the day and night.

So keep your eye on restaurant bathrooms near you. The rush is on to reach captive, upscale audiences in an entirely new way. If history is any indicator, the indoor industry is in for another wild ride.