

Anode signs speak volumes

TECHNOLOGY

By Don Mooradian
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Mark Magnuson has always made sure his communications company, Anode, knows its way around the newest technologies. The company strives to be a leader in the field, and has just rolled out a third version of a digital signage software, Firesign, that enables business users to integrate video, audio, text and graphics into an ever-changing presentation that can be sent to one or many different monitors.

The concept for Firesign came about when Anode was working on a project for the visitor's center at Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia. The goal was to provide information about various tour packages to people waiting in line, not only to speed up ticket sales but also to sell higher-revenue tours.

Magnuson had seen a similar text-only messaging system when he was in Paris waiting in line at the Eiffel Tower.

"I thought instead of using just LCD [liquid crystal display], why not go multimedia?" he said. And Firesign was born.

The targeted markets for the software are banking, health care, education, corporate headquarters and museums.

Locally, the Frist Center for the Visual Arts uses it to promote current and upcoming shows to museum visitors. The Ensworth School in Nashville has used it to help students with orientation and to provide information to them during the school day. The Hunter Museum of American Art in Chattanooga also uses the product.

"It is good for anyone looking to communicate in public places," said Dave Williams, Anode's director of sales.

Firesign is proprietary software that plugs into off-the-shelf hardware. The product is sold through companies that build audio-visual systems (called AV integrators), and a typical setup costs about \$10,500, which includes the software, hardware and one plasma screen.

The newest Firesign is totally Web-based, which means software no longer has to be installed on a specific machine. In fact, Anode will do the hosting and much of the



Photo by Mike Strasinger

Mark Magnuson shows off Anode's Firesign, software that allows business users to integrate video, audio, text and graphics into an ever-changing "sign."

other needed work to help clients use the system.

Although Magnuson will not release specific figures, Williams said Firesign is used by big and small companies all over the world.

In projects for clients such as Bridgestone Firestone, the company uses whatever medium is appropriate for the job — everything from traditional print to up-to-date Web design to "business theater," in which the client might be encouraged to present information to a group "in-the-round" instead of from behind a podium, in order to better connect with the audience.

And it doesn't hurt to include drama, emotions and some theatrics, Magnuson said.

"So many people produce material and say, 'Here it is,'" Magnuson said of traditional public relations and advertising companies. "The key is to make the informa-

tion stick. We try to make it a little more entertaining, a little more engaging."

Magnuson has always tried to think and work ahead of the curve when it comes to communications.

After working in the 1980s at Creative Technologies, a groundbreaking computer graphics design firm in Washington, D.C., Magnuson joined a Nashville company called Digital Image, which, he said, was one of the first digital design companies in Tennessee.

Magnuson formed Anode in 1991 in his house, with three employees. The name is from Greek and means "positive" or "a way up." Its market is both business-to-business and business-to-customer.

Anode now has 22 employees and is located at 105 Broadway, next to the former Acme Feed Store, in the building renovated by the short-lived Gaylord Digital.

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