ScreenCloud

Best Practice Digital Signage Guide for Education

A guide for educational institutions who want to create stand-out, measurable, effective digital signage displays.

Beth Gladstone

screen.cloud

For years now, there have been individuals working within schools, colleges and universities to implement a better understanding of digital signage. Many schools have digital screens available but they aren't being used effectively. The reasons are easy to pinpoint: digital signage in the past was too expensive, it took a whole team of IT types to use and the system was far clunkier than any school might want or need.

In fact, here are two comments from schools we've worked with that sum up the difficulties perfectly:

"With school budgets, I found it very difficult to find a good, easy-to-use solution that was flexible enough and cheap enough for us to use, with buying players and so on. It's taken me on-and-off, those eight years to really find a system which I liked enough, which was cost-effective enough." - **Merchant Taylors' Schools**

"After shopping around for about a month or two, it became very clear that there was no way we could afford the "bigger names" in digital signage out there. We signed up for a few trial accounts, but nothing was very user-friendly. On many websites, it was unclear what application/program was being offered, the price of the digital signage, or if there was a trial account I could access right away." - **North Valley Baptist Schools**

After looking at feedback, there's a common thread. It seems that digital signage software for schools needs five things if it is to be accessible and usable.

The magic five are:

1. Simple to use, allowing anyone to control the screen outside of their classroom door.

2. Affordable, even when used on a large or multi-screen scale.

3. A software solution that pairs with affordable hardware.
The means to share and curate content that doesn't put additional strain on marketing and IT departments (i.e. anyone can create content, or utilize content that has already been created).

4. A digital signage organization that listens and responds to feedback, is interested in helping schools to embrace digital technology and not just in the selling of software packages.

5. Without these in place, it becomes very difficult to even consider digital signage that will work (and get sign-of) within a school ecosystem.

In this guide we'll walk you through how to solve the digital signage conundrum and find solutions that make easy work of all five of the points above.

Through seven key chapters you'll learn:

— 6 questions to prepare your digital signage strategy
— How to choose digital signage hardware in education
— How to choose digital signage software in education
— Best forms of content creation and using digital signage apps
— How to use playlists and scheduling
— How to manage your digital screens internally
— Best practice design rules

Bonus material: your digital signage checklist

We love working with educational establishments and are always keen to hear your feedback and views. When you're ready, we'll be waiting to make your acquaintance at hello@screen.cloud or on Twitter @screencloud.

Contents

6 questions to prepare your digital signage strategy

If you know a bit about what digital signage is, or even if you know you'd like to do something cool with the screens sitting on the wall, this is a good place to start.

Digital signage can seem confusing with many different moving parts. Answering these six questions will help to determine the areas you need to focus on and will rule out any irrelevant information, saving you time and possibly money too.

1. Campus or department?

There are two choices when it comes to deploying digital signage solutions across your school. Some schools take a centralized approach - here is our system, we'll use it everywhere. Others decide that digital signage deployment will be department-by-department or campus-by-campus.

The benefit of the former is that you have one central system used across everything. This will save on cost, training time and allow anyone used to your system to make changes from anywhere. In fact, there's really no reason to go for the latter nowadays.

In the past, different departments would need different features so it would make sense to choose the best vendor for each. But with systems such as ScreenCloud, there are features such as custom playlists and scheduling (which we'll go into more in further chapters), meaning you can tailor an individual screen to a department or campus without having to employ a series of different solutions.

This gives you the benefit of personalization without compromising on features. Keeping your message consistent and your onboarding time to a minimum.

2. What screens do you have already?

The type of screen you choose will usually be based on the environment. Where will the screen be placed, how far away will students be when they see it, how much have you got to spend? But don't be put off by thinking you need expensive, fancy screens to get the job done. At this stage, your considerations should focus on size, feel and cost.

Any smart screen, or a screen powered by a device such as a Google Chromecast, Amazon Fire TV Stick or Apple TV Airplay device will do the trick. This means you probably already have some screens knocking around school that you can deploy without incurring additional cost.

Even if they're different makes or models this won't stop you from executing a series of beautiful content across all of them. If you do have a budget to spend then you can base your screen choice (LED, LCD, plasma etc.) on individual features rather than having to worry about whether it will facilitate your digital signage solution.

3. Who's in charge of your digital signage software?

Here's a curveball. We at ScreenCloud believe that your digital signage software should be managed by someone who's great at content and communication. Often, this isn't your IT specialist. Yet in universities and schools it's often IT who get lumped with getting screens up and running. Here's the key: powering up your screens with digital signage software is, and should be, easy. With solutions such as ScreenCloud, your digital screens can be up and running with no specialist IT support needed.

4. How will you link the strategy back to your organization?

Just like any other marketing strategy, the objective of your digital signage screens is to improve or enhance your organization in some way. Find out the real benefits, link them back and determine how you will measure each and every one. Do you want to make students better informed about new initiatives? Perhaps you'd like to see staff managing their departmental activity outside of their classroom doors. Thinking about why you will use digital signage and who it is truly for, will help you to create a content strategy that resonates.

5. How will you ensure ROI?

Once your nuts and bolts are in place, consider how, why and when you will measure your digital signage strategy. Measuring ROI in education is slightly hazy. Unlike retail or real estate, it's unlikely you'll be running ads or making money from your screens, so how can you quantify them? In education the effect is longer-term and less easy to quantify. If students come to visit your University and they see great videos in every hall with student testimonials, video clips and "day in the life" type content, they'll be able to better picture what their life would look like on your campus. If parents see the statistics of your school, the happiness levels of students and all of the great programmes and classes you run, they're more likely to want to send their child there.

There's also the benefit of having a digital message board around campus that's live. If an adverse weather condition swoops in you can warn your students. If there's a room change or teacher off sick you can communicate this without having to send emails or rely on word of mouth. In an emergency, alerts can be issued instantaneously. With these types of benefits, the return on investment is clear.

6. How will your campaigns adapt?

Any digital signage rollout requires a level of manning and organization. So the last thing you want is to have to change it all again in a year or two. This is why cloud-based digital signage software systems have risen in popularity within school and university settings. With a cloud-based system everything is done online, so there are no software installations or upgrades needed on your physical screen. Other than a spot of light dusting, you can leave your screens alone. Once your screens are paired, all content editing is managed from your PC or laptop, regardless of where you are.

How to get your videos, social media and images up onto any screen

One the most difficult parts of digital signage implementation is choosing hardware that is cost-effective and does all of the things required to create a great display. Let us start by saying firmly: you don't need the most expensive screen out there. ScreenCloud has been designed to be used with screens you already own, or with any type of hardware and media players that are affordable within an educational IT budget.

When it comes to finding hardware for digital signage school systems with ScreenCloud, you have two primary choices:

1. Android TV + the ScreenCloud app
2. Any other TV screen + cheap media device such as an Amazon Fire TV Stick or Google Chromebit + the ScreenCloud app

In the first instance, if you already have a smart Android TV, you can use the ScreenCloud Android Player app which you can download from the Google Play Store. That's it! All of the hardware you need and you're ready to go.

If you don't have an Android TV, then you can use any screen you have (even non-smart ones), adding a $40 Amazon Fire TV Stick or an $80 Google Chromebit to help make the screen smart.

Once installed, you can download the ScreenCloud app from the Amazon App Store (if using the Fire TV Stick) or the Chrome store (if using the Chromebit). Again, we don't want to make it sound too simple but that's it! You're setup with all of the hardware you need and ready to go.

This means that you can make use of screens you've already got hanging around, or you can buy smart ones that have everything you need included.

Here is a list of devices where you can find ScreenCloud hanging out ready to be installed on your hardware:

— Google Play - (from your Android TV or tablet)
— Amazon App Store (if you're using the Amazon Fire TV Stick or another Amazon product)
— Chrome store (from desktop, Chromebox or the Chromebit)
— iOS app (for iPads, Macbooks and iPhones)
— Google Chromecast (download the remote player for Chromecast on Android and iOS)

If you aren't sure what hardware you have, or the best media device to choose, visit screen.cloud/devices where our hardware selector tool will walk you through the steps needed to find your best solution.

How to choose digital signage software in education
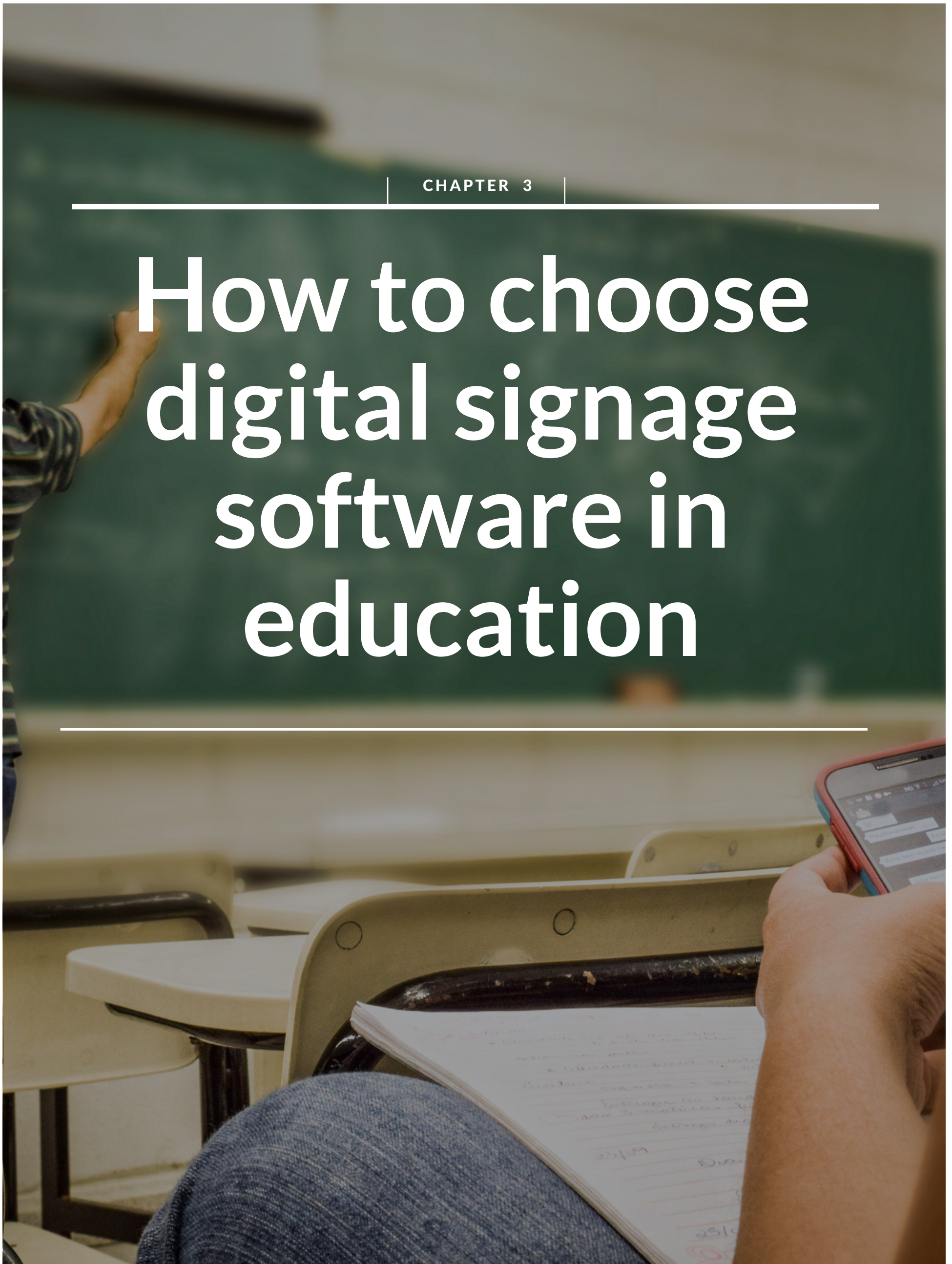
Digital screens attract attention, but they have to share relevant, timely information for students and teachers to come back for more. This all comes down to the software chosen. If your software system is clunky and difficult to use, if it takes three weeks to change or can only be managed by the side of the screen, you're not going to make the most of your content.

ScreenCloud Signage software makes it easy for you to update content, change it and optimize it for ultimate positioning, even when you aren't near to the physical screen.

Here's how that works.

Simple CMS

The ScreenCloud CMS design has been created with one thing in mind: let's be easy for anyone to use. With a drag and drop interface, content folders and playlists and schedules, it's simple to make and schedule content. The CMS requires no training. Anyone can log in, have a play around and be uploading content independently within seconds - trust us, we've not met anyone yet who struggles with getting to grips with it.

Upload content

ScreenCloud makes it as easy to upload content to your school screens as it would be to upload an image to Facebook. ScreenCloud allows you to upload files from wherever they're saved - your computer, Dropbox, Google Drive, OneDrive and so on, so it's easy to manage your brand content. ScreenCloud also supports the majority of file types including jpeg, gif, png, and svg, PDFs, powerpoints and Office/iWorks formats to make uploading your content easier.

So you can upload timetables, images, class notices, extracurricular information, student videos and more, with just a few clicks.

Change content anytime, from anywhere

You know what happens. You spend ages creating the latest class timetable, upload it onto your screens and that's it, job done! Or it is until a class gets changed or a teacher is sick.

With ScreenCloud, none of this matters. Simply change the content and re-upload into your playlist and schedule. You don't even have to be anywhere near the screen to do it! Just visit the CMS from your laptop or PC, sign in and you have access to all of the content showing from wherever you are.

Content control

Upload any content type including videos, images, documents or advanced dashboards - and put your content into playlists. Schedule the playlists to screens or groups of screens, for full control over what shows where, all from a central dashboard. This allows you to manage content across multiple screens, across multiple areas.

Team and user permissions

We'll talk in more depth about this feature further on, but team and user permissions allow you to assign different screens to different departments. This allows you to give responsibility to teachers and even students, allowing them to manage the content shown on your digital screen. Because no one needs to mess around with the screen itself, there's simply no room for error.

Design your screen

ScreenCloud offers a choice of screen design types including portrait vs landscape and zoned displays, either using our zone templates or by creating one of your own. This gives you more flexibility regarding what you show and when.

Content creation and digital signage apps

Once you have your hardware chosen and the ScreenCloud app downloaded it's time to focus on the great content you want to show. One mistake many schools make is looking at the technical specification and displays from an IT perspective, forgetting to focus on content. How to feed the beast should be your first and foremost consideration. Here are a few ideas of the type of content ScreenCloud can facilitate:

Images

At the basic level your screens can be used to pull through a series of school images. Use Dropbox Gallery to share images direct from folders, upload images one-by-one and created content folders to divide into different playlists and schedules.

Videos

Playlists of videos keep your screens engaging and give visitors something to watch as they pass through the halls. From school showreels, to filmed events and even the school production, your students will love seeing their faces up around campus.

Departmental social media feeds

Students now attending schools are part of the digital generation meaning they've grown up with social media like most grew up understanding television. Digital signage and social media are a great match as once your social media apps are added to your screen the content updates itself.

With faculty-specific social media feeds, the department heads and professors can create new content, provide last minute updates and lesson plans and students can check the walls as they walk to class to see what's new.

With moderation and 'safe' filters like the one on our Twitter app, you can ensure that any content shown is suitable for school too.

Presentations

A presentation of school notices and reminders is a way to utilize your screens as another member of staff. What lets presentations down is when they're out of touch and out of date. Change messages quickly, remove irrelevant slides and add in any last minute room changes or notices with ScreenCloud's easy to use interface. Allowing you to change content at anytime, from anywhere without even needing to be physically near the screen.

Live URLs

Your school's website is your shop front and a gateway into all that you offer, making it perfect for your digital signage displays. Similarly, you may have a guest speaker, visitor or school association who wants to provide information to students. Using your screens to channel HTML content through live URLs is a great way to do this.

News and world events

As a student, staying up to date with news and world events outside of the school "bubble" isn't always easy. With digital signage, you have the opportunity to add news feeds that automatically update with the latest headlines to campus corridors. Suddenly walking to class, waiting out a study period or entering a lesson all become opportunities for students to brush up on the latest headlines.

Some of the news and world event apps you could add to your digital signage screen using ScreenCloud include:

—BBC News
—Bloomberg
—CNN News
—The latest currency rates
—ESPN
—Sky News
—Reuters TV
—A daily live feed of Stock prices

Dashboards

As well as apps that import information that's already created such as social media and news feeds, it's also easy to create your own. Dashboards provided by our partner apps like Dash give you the tools and templates to create dashboards of information. Combine different verticals such as weather, news or add widgets like charts, tables and gauges. This would be great for keeping track of college soccer games, house tables, different sorority memberships and anything else you like really!

Room bookings

One thing that can be managed more efficiently using digital signage is room bookings. Okay so you know who's in which classroom at which time, but what about who's booked into the sports gym or library for a session? Digital signage screens (or tablets for that matter) can easily be installed outside of rooms to give a clear view of who's using what, when. This saves time and confusion as well as making sure that all of the space on campus is being used more efficiently.

Empty space rental

If you know that your school gym is only being used around college hours, sitting empty and unused at the weekend, why not make more of it? Using digital signage, set up a Twitter feed and a display that shows the empty slots when the gym isn't being used. This can be seen by the public and students, making it easy to rent out the space. When the space is full it pays for itself and maybe even a few extra digital signage screens too!

Digital menu boards

For the cafes and bars on campus a digital menu board could help you sell more products and provide special or seasonal offers. Digital menu boards can be updated instantly to show specials, menu changes and even allergen information.

Presentations

A great presentation never goes out of fashion. With easy access to Google Slides you can create presentations online or upload ones you already have, ready to share on your digital screens.
No need to let content run out of date either - it's simple to add a slide, take one out or quickly add in an image from anywhere you have internet access.

Playlists and scheduling

Playlists and schedules. Those magic words you've been waiting for.

With your excellent content and our excellent digital signage platform, all you need now is a way to organize your content and show it in all the right places, at all the right times. This is where ScreenCloud's playlist and scheduling features come in.

Create playlists for specific days and hours, then fill them with rich content - from school timetables, to images from your latest events and notices or web content. Once your content is uploaded, you set the order in which it shows and how long it shows for.

Once you've decided on the best playlist for each day or department, it's time to create a customized schedule for when it will show.

ScreenCloud's scheduling feature allows you to select specific playlists to play on specific days and at specific times. So perhaps you show important information and notices each morning, then images and videos for recess when students have more time to stroll and reminders and extracurricular activities for late in the afternoon.

Playlists and schedules truly do give you the flexibility needed to manage great looking digital signage displays that last.

Digital playlist best practice guidelines

Here are some tips on creating the optimal playlist for viewing within a school or university:

— As a guideline, each piece of static content should play for **eight seconds or less** to ensure it captures attention. In areas of high footfall (i.e. school corridors) lower the duration of content to **five seconds only**.

— If your content contains complex elements (i.e. animations, lots of text), extend the length of content - it takes the brain much longer to process motion graphics or animation.

— As a test, you should be able to read your message three times over in the allocated time frame. If you can't, make the message shorter or easier to digest.

— Some studies suggest that six pieces of content create the optimal playlist format.

— When thinking about repeating playlists or schedules, the viewer should have chance to see the content seven times. This will help show how often your content needs updating within your school (or whether to use content that updates itself such as social media).

— The text within each piece of content shown on screen should be a maximum of six words. Rather than creating text heavy content, create messages that are short and can be repeated often, to increase chances of retainment.

— Place the most important piece of content first in your playlist or at the top of the page within a static piece of content. Remember that messages that can't be absorbed in 2-3 seconds or less, are unlikely to be retained.

— Educational content can be extended to up to two minutes, as it is proven that the brain retains this easier than say, social media or advertising

Managing your digital screens
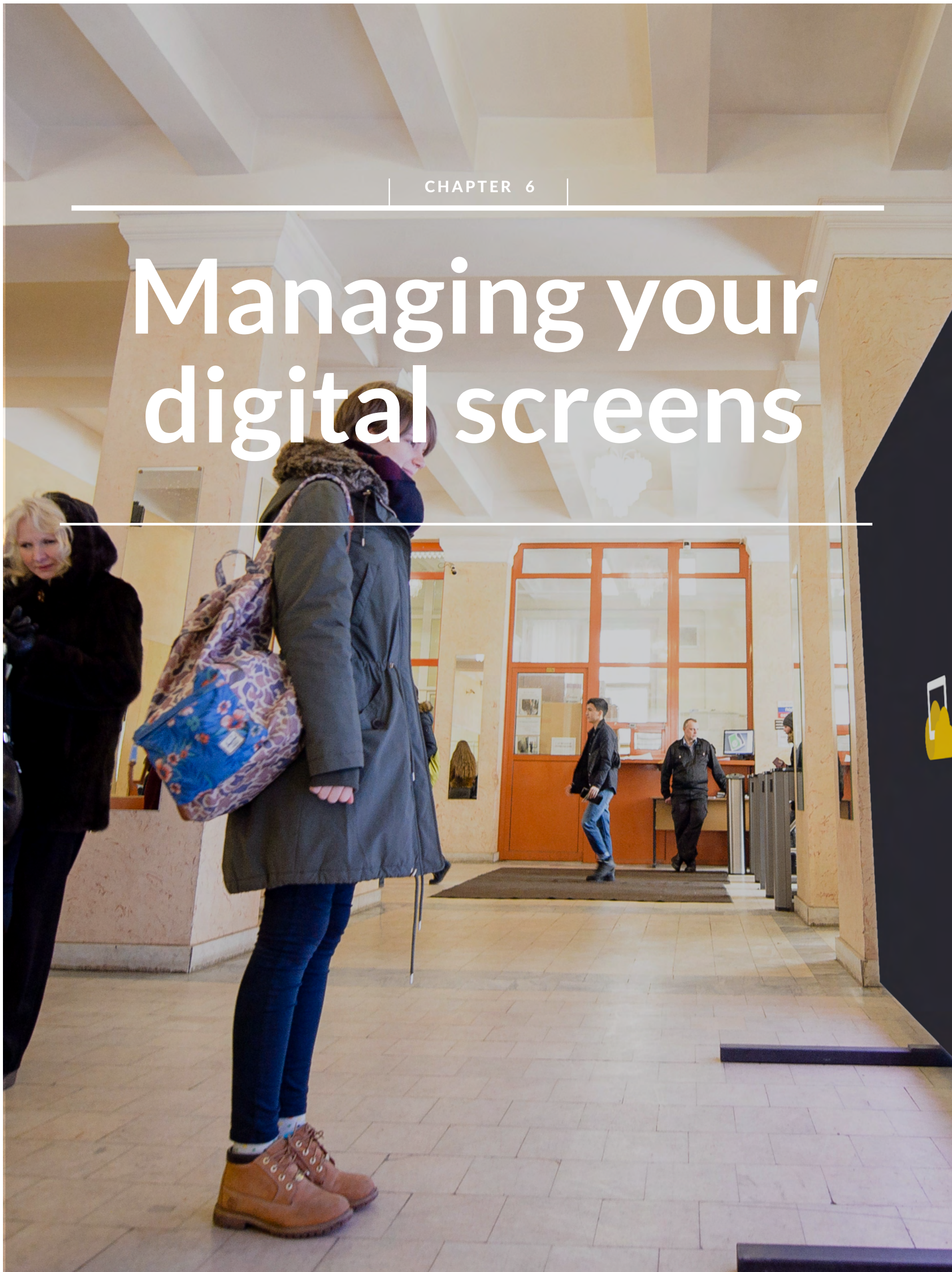
One of the benefits of using cloud-based digital signage is that you don't have to be anywhere near the screen in order to manage it. This throws up many other benefits too. Like when you want to assign different departments to manage different screens. Or when you want different school districts even, to take control of their own digital signage displays.

Having one central management system where you can look after all of your screens is great. Having one system where you can set different users and teams to manage different screens, is even better.

How to set up users and teams with ScreenCloud

Within ScreenCloud Signage you can invite multiple users to join your organization and split them up into teams. The permissions, and abilities, that each user has is determined by which team they belong to, and what their given role is.

This gives you the power to allow different teachers, departments and districts to manage different screens throughout your network. Yet still keep all of your screens and content under one central management system.

Here's how that works.

Create users and team

How it works: Split your organization into individual teams and assign users to those teams.

Why it's useful: Great if you want to manage screens and people across different school districts, stores, teams or offices.

Assign screens to team

How it works: : Swap screens between teams and give permission to users to manage screen content.

Why it's useful: Makes it really easy to manage your screens and only allows specific people to change what shows, and where.

Copy playlists, schedules and content between screens

How it works: : Have a really great playlist you've created? Copy it from one screen to another.

Why it's useful: : Allows you to create uniform content across screens, or provides a template for other team members to work from.

All of these features are designed to make managing multiple digital screens as easy as possible.

Best practice design rules

There's more to a great digital signage display than just knocking out some content and putting it up on the wall. Like any piece of visual content, things like color, composition, sound and imagery all make a big difference. Digital signage screens draw attention and you want them to be as effective as possible.

Here are some best practice design rules to follow to make your displays as visually pleasing to students, teachers and stakeholders as possible.

Sizing your text

Can you still read the text shown on screen if you move back a step? What about 10 steps? When we write copy, we become immune to its power. This makes it difficult to decipher whether your text is clear, concise and big enough to be read from a distance. Your audience is likely to have varying abilities of eyesight, so it's better to assume that they can't see well than that they can.

Here are some guidelines that can help:

— Most digital signs are viewed from a distance of 7-10 feet away
   (although in school corridors this may be less)
— Sans-serif typefaces are the easiest to read. This can be a font such as
   Arial, Helvetica or Verdana.
— A 20-point font can be seen from 7 feet away, whereas a 100-point
   font can be seen from 26 feet away.

The 3 x 5 rule

If in doubt about how much text to fill your screen with, use the 3 x 5 rule. As the name suggests, this is where you stick to three lines of text with a maximum of five words per line, or the other way around. This will ensure your message is always succinct and easy to read by your students or teachers, even if they are just quickly passing by.

Color and composition rules

There are rules around color and composition used in disciplines such as photography, and they can be great guides for laying out your screen content.

Use the "F Pattern" to lay content from left to right, following the natural eyeline (assuming you're in a country where they read left to right and not right to left!).

You can also use the rule of thirds, where you place key components on the intersections of your content, which is supposedly more pleasing to the eye.

Lastly, when it comes to color, less is usually more. Use contrasting palettes—light text on dark backgrounds and dark text on light—to ensure readability. Avoid colors that clash (unless you're trying to make a statement) and balance the use of color across your layout

The eyeline rule

Here's something we see all the time: you have a great screen and great content. Then it's put up on the wall where no one can see it. If you screen is too high, or the text is placed too far up in the layout for the discerning student to distinguish, then the message won't get through. Similarly, if the screen is too low, it can be blocked by passing traffic or students in the corridor. Think not just about the layout of your content but also the layout of your screen, ensuring it is within the eyeline of your viewers, regardless of the scenario.

Sound rules

It's likely you've already considered whether or not your screen will play sound. TV screens using sound can be great for live videos, streaming, news feeds, YouTube and social media. If you're playing content that requires sound, firstly ensure that it is clear enough to hear and secondly, that it is appropriate for the environment.

Our YouTube app can be customized to show just your own playlist, but with music videos and even live TV streaming to an extent, the risk of a sound you don't want to hear is worth considering.

The zoning rule

Using a zoned digital signage display can be a great way to maximize on-screen space and show multiple pieces of content at one time. In our zoning library, you'll see a series of zoning templates which can help you determine how to split your screen into sections.
Here, we've made some zoning rules for you, such as using one "hero" zone with two supporting zones and not playing two videos at any one time.

You'll also find that some apps won't be compatible with your ticker tape (which works best with social media, news and RSS) or with the sidebar format. Our zoning rules help to ensure that your zoned display is as awesome as possible, the result of us testing hundreds of different formats and layouts!

Screen resolutions

Most standard TV screens work at a resolution of full HD (1920 x 1080). This makes it simple for designing content, as you can set the content to the same amount of pixels and voilà—a full screen! If your screen has a different resolution, you may want to consider how you will adjust your content as a result.

Timing rules

Part of the design of digital signage content comes down to knowing what content to show and when. As a rule of thumb, you can use the guidelines below to determine how long your content will show for:
Short-term viewing (passer-by, busy school corridoors: 30 seconds
Mid-term viewing (reception area, waiting area): 30 seconds - 2 minutes
Long-term viewing (school cafeteria, gym, classroom): 2 - 30 minutes

The refresh rule

Unlike static signs, digital signs can be refreshed whenever you like. Your digital signage layout might be excellent, but if the offer expired 10 days ago, your audience is going to be irritated that they wasted the time on it. Keep your digital signage content up to date and use updates which automate content for you, making fresh displays a breeze.

Bonus: your digital signage checklist

Before you get started

- [ ] Check you have one or multiple screens
- [ ] Check you have an internet connection - either through your smart TV or a media player (don't worry if it isn't that reliable - ScreenCloud works offline too!)
- [ ] Sign up for a ScreenCloud account at signage.screen.cloud
- [ ] Ensure your screen is paired with your ScreenCloud account
- [ ] Think about the content or apps you will use
- [ ] Determine viewers, time of day, popular viewing points and the message you would like to promote

When setting up

- [ ] Add any content you own and set duration
- [ ] Choose your apps and set duration
- [ ] Add all apps and content to playlists
- [ ] Add all playlists to schedules
- [ ] Determine who is in charge of screen switch on and off (if applicable)
- [ ] Content check

Is your content easy to understand?

- [ ] Can the text be read easily and from a distance? Or within a busy corridor?
- [ ] Is the content relevant? Is it showing information that fits in with the day, time, season and age of every audience?
- [ ] Is the content suitable for your audience? (non-offensive, in line with your school policies?)
- [ ] Is there a call-to-action? What do you want your students or teachers to do next?

One-month check

- [ ] Is the content still relevant to your students and staff?
- [ ] Can you see real results?
- [ ] What is the feedback to the digital signage solution in general?
- [ ] When will you next change the content or update what is shown?
- [ ] Is there a big event or special occasion coming up that you should push?
- [ ] How could you improve your text/images/playlist order/scheduling?

ScreenCloud

Thanks for reading

If you've made it this far, we'd like to thank you for reading and also congratulate you on working towards change within
your organization.

To start your free 14-day trial trial of ScreenCloud, no sales calls needed, head to

screen.cloud

For other ways of getting in touch, you can contact us on the

channels below:

@screencloud

hello@screen.cloud