

Digital Signage's Role in the Boston Marathon Crisis

Written by Bob Snyder
29 April 2013



We tend to think of digital signage mostly as advertising or wayfinding—until there's an emergency or crisis. **Clear Channel Outdoor** in Boston shows us (via their Facebook page) how digital signage can transform into a vital public safety communication system when necessary.*

The tragedy of this year's marathon, the inconceivable act of blowing up athletes at the finish line of a contest of personal endurance, stunned the American city of Boston.

The bombers, while on the run, decided to rob a grocery store to finance their run and to hijack a car for transit. One MIT campus police officer was shot to death in his cruiser, and another police officer wounded in a shootout.

With killers on the loose and in their midst, Bostonians, still reeling from shock, managed to cooperate with one another, assist proper authorities, and improve upon an anxious and confusing situation. And they did this with technology...with smart devices, internet, and social media. And they did this because local technology stakeholders, like Clear Channel and its digital signage network, contributed to the urgency of the civic cause.

Have a look at the photos on Clear Channel Boston's Facebook: they tell a chronological story

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of how digital signage played a role in identifying and finding the suspects, keeping more innocent citizens from harm, and calming the population through constant communication. None of this would have been possible with traditional billboards.



The day of the Boston bombings, Clear Channel Outdoor Boston worked with the Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency to use its Boston billboards to steer motorists clear of the square where the explosions took place. Later the billboards would feature photos of the suspects and eventually a "Wanted" photo in the search for the surviving fugitive. With a killer on the loose, the signs also ran new messages telling Bostonians to stay home out of danger. And the same signs told the people when they could return safely to the streets and thanked them for the cooperation.

This chronicle of Clear Channel Boston helps to answer the critics who call America's digital billboards "TVs-on-a stick" that "devalue private property, distract drivers, tarnish the beauty of our natural and built landscapes and negatively impact the quality of life for many people."

With less than 1% of America's billboards converted to digital signage, several hundred thousand could come on-line in the upcoming years.

We know what side the FBI is on because they actually maintain [a web page documenting the assistance of digital billboards in American law enforcement.](#)

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The FBI joined with Clear Channel last year in launching a digital billboard initiative in 20 cities across America. Since then they've added three more partners: Adams Outdoor, Lamar Advertising, and the Outdoor Advertising Association of Georgia. That gives the FBI access to more than 1000 digital billboards nationwide.

The FBI says those billboards have led directly to the capture of at least 14 fugitives, plus many more indirectly (ie., in combination with the federal agency's overall publicity efforts). And all at essentially no cost to the American taxpayer.

From humble beginnings, digital signage is coming of age of as the Great Communicator.

Go [ClearChannel Boston Chronicles Their Efforts](#)