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Cyber-billboard sign of times

Northeastern Pennsylvania sees a display that offers advertisers great flexibility.

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Mary Ellen Coleman remembers when it took painters hours to install a new billboard design.

Now, with just a few computer keystrokes, she can instantly change the image and message on a digital display billboard miles away.

"These ads are state-of-the-art and really esthetically pleasing," said Coleman, vice president and general manager of Lamar Advertising's Northeast Pennsylvania division. "Basically, they're clean, clear and current – the three C's."

Lamar recently unveiled its first digital display billboard on the Cross-Valley Expressway in Pringle, where it catches the eye of drivers heading toward the Back Mountain. The second in Luzerne County, along state Route 309 in Wilkes-Barre Township, will be operating by the end of next week. That will make six within the 400-square-mile region covered by Lamar's Scranton office.

The billboard, which can accommodate six advertisers at once, uses light-emitting diode technology, or LED, a semiconductor device that emits narrow-spectrum light.

An advertiser pays \$3,000 a month on average to have a message appear for about six seconds before it automatically changes to another client's ad.

Operating 24 hours a day, each client's six-second spot will appear 2,400 times a day, Coleman said.

"It's a series of static still displays with no movement to it," she said. "Because of the flexibility, both in timing and messaging, the message can be posted immediately. It also can be removed just as rapidly."

The largest of the LED billboard units costs \$1 million, she said, and is operated through a modem via satellite. The Lamar regional office sends artwork to the corporate headquarters in Baton Rouge, La., which forwards it to the designated billboard.

Lamar also offers trivision billboard advertising, which costs advertisers between \$600 and \$1,200 a month, depending on the location and size. A trivision billboard, which costs \$25,000-\$35,000 to construct, is a rotary sign that allows up to three ads to be placed on the same board at the same time. They're the billboards that you can notice as they're turning and changing messages. Lamar has six trivision signs in the county – on Kidder and Mundy streets, on Route 309 in Shavertown and on the Cross-Valley.

Being able to change an ad at a moment's notice was a big selling point for Wyoming Valley Health Care System, one of the first local LED advertisers, according to Kim Kindler, special events coordinator.

"It's only been up now for a few weeks and we keep a message up for about three days," Kindler said. "It's really nice, especially if we want to promote a special event or recognize employees. We can change it as needed."

One of the images used in the health-care system's ads is the trademark lantern, and the new technology has an added benefit.

"That works out for us since the lantern looks like it is lighted," Kindler said.

Coleman said that being able to change ads frequently is an attractive option for fast-paced business, like real-estate companies and car dealers.

"Some companies want to advertise just one home or just one car and when it sells, they can automatically change it. We do all of the artwork and there's no production cost. Some people change ads six or seven times a day. To make this work, clients need to change their advertising at least a couple of times a week."

State Department of Transportation regulations limit digital displays to still images that remain unchanged for a minimum of five seconds along PennDOT roads. Flashing lights, sudden bursts of light and animation are all banned.

Municipalities can add additional restrictions but since the technology is so new, few local governments have addressed the issue.

Coleman, who has been in the billboard business since 1988, marvels at the advancements. When she first got into the field, painters were using stencils and paint to create billboards.

Lamar's regional goal was to install seven of the LED billboards this year – a number it should reach by June. The company hopes to have 21 in place over the next three years.

Light-emitting diode is a semiconductor device that emits narrow-spectrum light. This effect is a form of electroluminescence.

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