

The Rise of Displays

A closer look at this diversification strategy

by: Brent Hoskins, Office Technology Magazine

Well before the arrival of COVID-19, office technology dealers were looking for ways to diversify their product offerings. The range of new pursuits is broad — from water coolers to VoIP systems to managed IT services. Such forays point to the reality that the industry is in transition, with dealers increasingly moving away from being solely reliant on imaging products.

Among the new offerings by some dealerships are display-based products, such as interactive solutions for collaboration and sharing information, as well as digital signage. One could argue that the nature of the expected changed business environment post-pandemic could drive increased demand for such products. Time will tell whether such speculation proves to be true.

Below is a brief look at the display-based offerings of three manufacturers. Perhaps it is time for you to take a closer look at this diversification strategy.

Ricoh U.S.A. Inc.

About five years ago, Ricoh began offering through dealers its interactive flat-panel displays (IFPDs), positioned as workplace services products. The initial traction among dealers was “a little bit of a slow run at times,” says Steve Burger, head of engineering and vice president of technology marketing at Ricoh USA Inc. “Today, we’re at a pretty good pace and dealers are really liking it.”

To illustrate the level of success dealers can achieve, Burger cites the largest deal by a dealership to date, which involved an organization with the goal of updating classroom technology and enhancing the student/teacher experience. “The dealer was a trusted partner in imaging for more than six years,” he says. “Through a consultative approach, the dealer proposed Ricoh IFPDs and Qwizdom education software [a third-party solution] providing, in part, the ability for students to connect



interactively to the IFPD from their tablets and PCs. That led to the placement of almost one hundred units.”

Today, Ricoh offers five IFPDs, ranging in size from 32 to 86 inches with ever-broadening capabilities. “We’ve created an embedded Windows controller; it’s completely open,” Burger says. “So, you can make an IFPD an Office 365 client. It is literally a device on the network where, in the past, some panels were just screens. Now, they are fully integrated in a network environment.”

Ricoh has partnered not only with Qwizdom, but with Vizetto as well, allowing the IFPD to take advantage of

REACTIV Suite, a presentation and collaboration software designed to make meetings more efficient and productive, “extending the capability of the IFPD both in the conference room and virtually,” Burger says. “The legacy thinking was, ‘we have these IFPDs and we can all interact in a conference room.’ Now [faced with the pandemic], it’s ‘wait a minute, there is an additional way of thinking.’ I know of one dealer who is using a 32-inch IFPD herself to communicate with her executives remotely via the PC client and REACTIV software.”

Today, dealers are talking “to customers in a way they never did before,” Burger says, noting that IFPDs are seen as a silver lining in an otherwise difficult business environment. “In the last two months, we’ve had dealers sell 40-plus IFPDs into educational environments where they are trying to do distance learning,” he says. “So, it’s like being in a lecture hall, but students are just looking at the screen of their computers. We have seen remarkable success lately with a couple of key dealers placing IFPDs.”

IFPDs are not relegated to the education market, Burger says. “In health care, doctors are using IFPDs to consult with others regarding X-rays and medical imaging,” he says, adding there is also rising demand in the manufacturing sector. He also encourages dealers to be aware that IFPDs fit the “razor

and razor blades model,” given that with IFPDs “you sell software at a monthly subscription charge.”

Sharp Imaging and Information Company of America

Saundra Merollo, senior sales engineer for PRO AV at Sharp Imaging and Information Company of America, sees a silver lining in today’s business environment as well,

reflecting on the needs of many of today’s companies. “They have to have strict messaging and communication,” she says. “Displays are perfect for that because they can’t just use cardboard signs for ‘25% Occupancy or Less’ or ‘Remember: Social Distancing.’”

However, Merollo says, while COVID-19 is driving some display sales, the rise of the display market started around two years ago, prior to the arrival of the pandemic. “It was the result of the blend of generations in the workplace,” she says. “A lot of it comes down to the new generations — the ‘digital natives.’ They expect collaboration in the conference room; it’s about people coming together, working together and exchanging ideas.”

Merollo emphasizes how the generations more recently entering the workplace “collaborate differently” and have always been accustomed to video conferencing, as well as digital applications such as FaceTime and instant messaging. “So, we started to see a lot of digital transformation and the need, if you will, for upgraded technology ecosystems, including displays within conference rooms in different vertical markets,” she says. “We also started to see a huge increase in digital communications — so, digital signage needs as well. People love to see animation. They love to be immersed in communication, and digital signage is a great way of doing that.”

Fortunately, Sharp is poised to address the changing needs of the workplace with its commercial displays, Merollo says. “We have so many pieces for the changing ecosystem, with a vast amount of displays, from touch to non-touch, in multiple sizes, all the way to 86 inches, as well as 4K and 8K displays,” she says, noting that Sharp offers a number of AQUOS BOARD interactive display systems and commercial signage systems, as well as its newly launched Windows collaboration display (WCD). “The WCD is the perfect, flexible and versatile tool for the multigenerational workforce because it works with tools that they are already familiar with, such as Microsoft 365, for an enhanced collaboration experience in a hybrid office environment where some people are working in the office and

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Sharp

others are working from home. The WCD and our other diverse offerings allow us to play an instrumental role in many different applications within the office environment through the digital transformation, not just in one specific area.”

The growing interest in displays is becoming increasingly apparent within dealerships, with dealers “outfitting their offices and utilizing digital signage, and investing in Sharp

displays to showcase them for potential customers,” Merollo says. “If they are putting displays in their offices, you can bet they are going to be encouraging their reps to sell them. That’s the first step. We’re seeing that buy-in.”

Toshiba America Business Solutions Inc.

There is, as noted, a compelling reason for dealers to take a look at digital signage solutions. Bill Melo, vice president of marketing at Toshiba America Business Solutions Inc. (Toshiba), states it succinctly. “Print volumes are going down,” he says. “So, it is prudent for any dealer to look at lines of business and potential areas of growth that don’t involve printed pages.”

Those “areas of growth” would allow the dealer to leverage his (or her) current customer base, as well as the inhouse technical and sales expertise, Melo says. “There are a number of those [areas of growth], both document-related and not,” he says. “Digital signage is certainly one of those.”

While page output is decreasing, it is not going down because there is less to print, Melo says. “In fact, there are lots of studies showing that the amount of information created in the world doubles at a rate of something like every two or three years; it’s just that we don’t print it as much,” he says. “What’s replacing that is ‘eyeballs on screens.’ So, part of Toshiba’s rationale [for pursuing the digital signage opportunity], was that if we make our living in print and print is going down, it’s being replaced by people consuming information on screens and that, perhaps, we could leverage our expertise in creating solutions for customers who don’t rely on output.”

About six years ago, Toshiba was showing digital signage products as part of the end-user portion of one of its LEAD dealer and end-user events, Melo says. “We really did not have a notion at that time of selling digital signage through dealers, because we didn’t think they would be interested,” he says. “However, we received a lot of inquiries from dealers, because the signage is visually appealing and interesting, and so we created a program for them so that they could participate.”

While there has not been “a big push” by Toshiba for dealers to sell digital signage, there are success stories among dealers, Melo says, citing the example of the placement of digital signage by one dealership at a South Dakota museum. “We have a good business development manager up there who got the dealer and the dealership reps to pay attention to this product category,” he says. “It was basically just a flyer on a cold call that led to multiple digital signage installations at the museum. This was a six-figure deal.”

Melo notes that most Toshiba digital signage installations are generally custom, guided by customer needs. As such, dealers have the option to initially or on an ongoing basis rely on Toshiba for assistance when digital signage opportunities arise. “We have the infrastructure in place, so

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we tell dealers, ‘Bring us the deals, you will still manage the customer relationship and sales process and, most importantly, gain additional revenue and stickiness with the customer,’” he says. “We’ll wholesale our services and products to you, so to speak. You price it and manage the customer. If, after a couple of sales and implementation cycles, you think this is something that works for you, then

we’ll help you find the right people, but if not, if you just want be involved on the front end, that works, too.” ■

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