



It Can't Stay in Vegas

The “outing” and “re-education” of digital visuals in Sin City.

THIS PAST MARCH, I WAS IN LAS VEGAS attending the annual GlobalShop and Digital Signage Expo (DSE) trade shows. Everyone in our industry who comes to Vegas is reminded that this world (specifically, the Strip) is far from the day-to-day reality of the retail landscape at large. Yet, in terms of impact and insights, it's an amazing place to study trends. After all, very few destinations get more than 42 million visitors a year to drive an economy where luxury stores and burger stands sit in close proximity.

I ventured over to The Forum Shops at Caesar's Palace, which often ranks in the top five highest sales per square foot in the U.S., according to a 2016 Green Street Advisors report. Simon Property Group's (Indianapolis) signature property often rents space for more than \$1600 per square foot, according to a June 2015 CNBC report, "Malls that rake in the most sales per square foot." At 680,000 square feet, the mall itself isn't necessarily that big, but it does have an impressive tenant mix of 145 specialty shops, 56 of which are exclusive to The Forum Shops. Simon claims on its website that the property sells approximately 250,000 pairs of shoes and 75,000 handbags each year. Where better to see the “next store”?

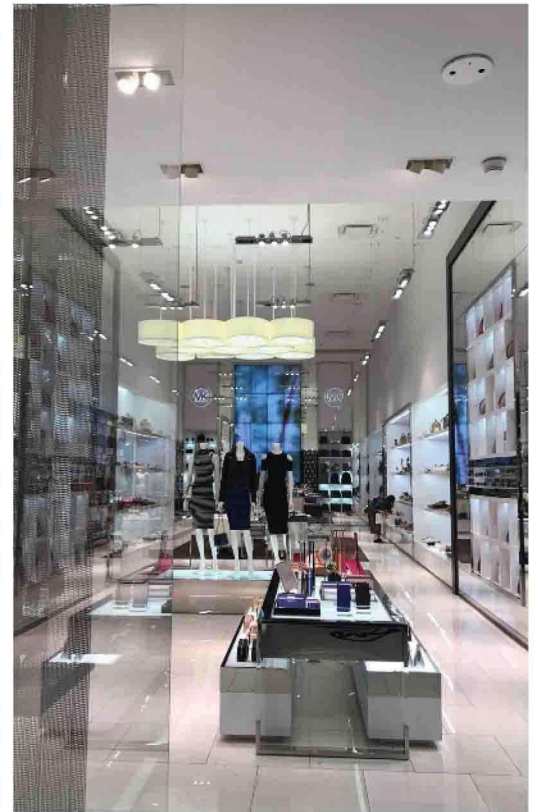
As the old mantra goes, “What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas,” but now I must reveal my “tell all”: In my venture around the mall, before indulging in a \$20 cocktail, I went in search of great examples

of digital utilization in a place that clearly can afford great experiences. The truth is that only one left an impression, while the others reminded me of how far the industry still has to go when it comes to true digital integration and understanding of the basics.

I'll start with one of the best uses of digital integration within a window I've seen recently: Timepiece outfit Breitling (Grenchen, Switzerland) is to be congratulated, not only for its clever use of screens, but also for its commitment to engaging, on-brand content. The retailer is known for precision-made chronometers – especially useful to aviators – hence the theme and the range of its window visuals. Within the busy mall, the display's moving, “activated” dials immediately drew my attention. The digital screen replicates nine watch faces with bezel details which morph into an aircraft flight control panel, creating a series of dials that any Breitling fan would be drawn to. The image then changes from flight controls to old-school-style flip letters, reminiscent of vintage airport signage, spelling out the brand name. All of this made the products' several-thousand-dollar price tags seem a little more attainable.

Yet, some disappointment set in when I walked into the store, as I saw example after example of missed opportunities; its use of digital screens appeared incongruent to its brand message.

Michael Kors (New York) has been a mainstay in American malls for years. This particular location, however, did what so many oth-



ers (incorrectly) do, which is anchor a back wall with stacked digital screens. I'm not sure where this trend started or why it's become a regular technique of fashion brands, but it does not work. Whoever thought of tying together massive flashing screens behind cashwraps simply doesn't understand when and where stores should focus on the customer. One must ask, do I want them engrossed at the end of the journey or the beginning?

Ralph Lauren (New York) stores are arguably some of the most compelling in modern retailing. So why – with all of those quality garments and eye-catching millwork – put up screens 9 feet above the floor? Styled stores should just say “no” to anyone suggesting they slap a screen where it doesn't make sense.

I could've used my casino table winnings for a shopping spree in Ted Baker (London), but I have to ask ... who thought jamming screens into the side of confined window displays would be enticing? (This is yet another question of why a screen would be installed in this spot when there are great products to showcase instead.)

Gucci sits in what is most likely one of the prime spaces at The Forum Shops. This brand is the definition of luxury, with an attention to detail that has made it enormously successful. In digital reviews, one must always hold up a benchmark to measure any elements that might work against a brand's heritage. This was the case here, with an ill-positioned screen right inside the front door. I had to question the decision once I saw that the closed exterior doors cut the screen in half at its most important viewing angles. And then there are the fashion runway images looping on the screens. Again, one of the basics is that repurposed content often does not work in store and does not engage

the customer as well as it should.

We'll end on an example in which some execution steps were well thought out, while others went astray. The architects' placement of screens within Ugg's (Goleta, Calif.) column structure was visually strong from outside the store, and in good scale to the overall structure. The millwork and detailing around the screens also matched the styling and product messaging throughout. The nice thing about this location was that the designers used digital screens sparingly and kept the space well-balanced. So what's the miss? Again, the looping content. Content strategy, or the lack thereof, is typically what tanks digital signage. And at that scale, this merchant has lost the ability to use this space for an interactive experience or capture viable behavioral data.

Anyone thinking this is a harsh critique should know that, above all, I'm a champion of brick-and-mortar. I want it to succeed and continue evolving with new designs and offers. But I am tired of seeing digital screens thrown into well-designed spaces and product displays without any knowledge of how to execute or integrate them into architecture. I can only hope these examples will make you take pause and understand that the hardware is the simple part, mostly. It's the strategy and intent that sets apart a great digital experience from so many wasted dollars. And in today's retail climate, dollars shouldn't go to waste. ▀



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