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Clear Channel Outdoor Trip

At 9:00 AM to 12:00 PM on April 11, 2013 we, the digital media 3350 class, took a field trip to Clear Channel Outdoor located at 12852 Westheimer Rd, Houston, TX 77077. Upon entering a fancy conference room, we were met by Mike Reed, the digital media specialist and tour guide, and Brad Ford, the marketing director and assistant tour guide. The main subject we covered was the growing use of digital signs and the pros and cons that come with them. Near the end we were told a little bit of the history of signs, did you know all billboards used to be painted by artists?

As the conference room was still filling up with students Mike goes on to tell us about what happens to vinyl after it has been used on a sign. EcoFlex is recycled vinyl that lasts about a year before it is torn apart by the elements. It is also a lighter material that requires less labor requiring only two workers instead of the usual four, and is less expensive. Another way to recycle vinyl is to compress it into railroad ties. Non-EcoFlex vinyl on the other hand is made up of ethylene and chlorine mixed together is called Polyvinyl Chloride (PVC). This substance can last a very long time, but even though the material holds up the printed colors on it will fade and not to mention it getting dirty by birds and dirt. Due to these factors the vinyl will have to be replaced.

Moving our conversation on, we start with the positive side of digital products. Digital brings so much to the plate that something printed cannot, though print still has a firm place in this business. Firstly it is the ultimate definition of flexibility. Such as the unthinkable control of the signs display being handed over to the client if desired. Also if an image comes in the day before it is to be posted... No problem! Secondly, it is dynamic due to the ability to display live updates and online content feeds immediately in real time; such as, Facebook images and real time likes and twitter posts from chosen people. Thirdly, it is social, it extends companies social media traffic and boosts service inquiries. Most of the viewer statistics comes from the detailed information of the Census Bureau.

Even though digital signs are all these things they still have an ordinance against them in suburbs due to them being too distracting for drivers. This is also the reason why you will never find video or any kind of video transitions on the road-side signs. For pedestrians however, you can have video and even interactivity. The digital signs also have a minimum 8 seconds restriction to prevent them from detracting driver's focus on the road. Note that we are defining off-premise signs, on-premise signs follow a 5 minute rule.

Digital signs are made of many little RGB LED lights nestled in panels. The new signs are 9 percent more energy efficient than older signs thanks to new technology. Companies are urged not to have white backgrounds for their images because it can be too bright even though these signs are capable of adjusting their brightness appropriately to the time of day. Another thing about digital signs is the images they require don't need to be high resolution to display at high resolution. Images such as a 400 x 1400 pixels at 72 ppi 3 color RGB is just fine.

When buying a broadcasting spot you can choose parts of the day or a full day. Though one cannot buy just one sign, you must buy a network of signs. There are usually 8-12 slots and if a sign's slots are not all bought out then those slots will be used for self-promotion or community service. One company may buy more than one slot as well.

Clear Channel owns its own satellite company this means all of their signs have their own mini-satellite installed on them to insure a strong and constant connection. All signs have their own camera as well to let Clear Channel and a connectivity company monitor them day and night. When a sign's computer crashes vendors have maximum of 4 hours to fix it. They are usually fixed in a couple of hours though. Clear Channel's signs also are equipped with temperature and time sensors that allows the signs to automatically change their display to an image that is fitting to the current state of the weather or time of day.

Next we move on to street furniture. Street furniture is a sign that engages the viewer and allows them to control what they are viewing. These signs also have an audience sensors that allows them to identify if the viewer is a male or female and display content relevant to them. Street furniture is most commonly seen at bus stations and air ports. If permission is given to build one of these signs Clear Channel will do the bus or airport a favor by updating the bus shelf in order to install it.

After this presentation we were finally given a tour of the sales and marketing/design departments and the warehouse. In the warehouse they have a giant mural of a Mona Lisa painted in the traditional way of painting signs panel by panel. It was a parting gift from the artists who once worked for Clear Channel. In front of the Mona Lisa was an area designated for building sign extensions made from 2"x2" wooden boards. Out

in the back were the new and old famous Chik-fil-a cows. The newer cows were sculpted by Blaine Kern and display much more realistic features than the old betsyies. While still out in the back we were also shown examples of a couple of the smaller signs made with EcoFlex.

I would choose to hire Clear Channel Outdoor for my advertising needs because it seems that they are a well-defined company and with clients such as Foxx and ESPN that is qualification enough for me. I would want to know their sign locations though before saying a definite yes. They also say they would not push a digital sign on a small company they take time to analyse their client's needs.

This trip was very fun and insightful as a digital media major it is important to know all the outputs you may need to prepare your work for. Knowing that for a digital sign you don't need an image that is very large or high ppi was surprising to learn but thinking it over it does make sense. Knowing how this business is growing into the signs such as street furniture is important to know as well.

As I say my ultimate goal is to work for an animation company. I would say this trip has impacted my career goals in letting me know what all types of jobs are out there that involve my degree. I can say I could see myself working for them as well it is all very interesting to me. I'm always looking forward to where we might go to next; and im glad I was able to find what I wanted to do in life at a young age so all that we are learning is not too alien to me.