

University of Florida

Menus Go Digital at the University of Florida UF says goodbye to manual menu updates at its largest dining hall

Where there are college students, there is food – lots and lots of it. The University of Florida in Gainesville is no exception. With 50,000+ students, UF offers more than 40 on-campus dining options through Gator Dining Services (GDS), the university's official food service provider.

In the fall of 2008, after seeing digital menu boards at work in restaurants at the Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport, the GDS management team considered applications for the screens at UF. They felt one dining area in particular, the Fresh Food Company, could benefit greatly from the technology.

Fresh Food Company is UF's largest eatery catering to students with meal plans. It's a food-court style facility that changes its menu often, and communicating these changes to students was a tedious manual process for dining hall staff.

Turning to Technology

The University of Florida was no stranger to digital signage. Screens already existed throughout its recreational facilities, and administration welcomed the idea of integrating digital menu boards into dining areas as well. The administration believed that high-tech menu boards would help set the school apart, which resonates with its "Gator Nation" branding campaign.

When it came time to develop, install and manage the digital menu board systems, GDS turned to the company that deployed the signage at the Atlanta airport that had initially captured its attention. That company was Atlanta, Ga.-based Capital Signs.

Capital Signs built industrial-class Scala players for the Fresh Food Company.

Highlights include:

- A mini-player that powers a 52-inch portrait Samsung Pro LCD welcome screen near the entrance.
- A combination of dual and triple output players running eight 40-inch Samsung Pro LCDs that display menu items and promotions around the dining hall.
- Customized application that connects Scala software to a database of Fresh Food Company's menu items over the four-week rotation period.

The Fresh Food Refresh

The Fresh Food Company is a new-age dining facility featuring three food concepts: Gator Grill, Mediterranean Cuisine and World Grill. It gives students the opportunity to purchase food grown by local farmers with an emphasis on sustainability.

The dining hall operates on a four-week menu cycle, changing meal selections daily. It also rotates in special menu items for even more variety. This food assortment is fantastic for students, but communicating the daily menu required an incredible behind-the-scenes effort by the staff.

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Previously, dining staff would manually write out menu information across the glass sneeze guards at each food station. They also printed the food listings on flyers and posted them on magnet boards around the facility. Then they updated the information on a Web site for students to view. This process was time-consuming, and the need for daily printed materials didn't mesh well with spirit of the facility or the university's commitment to being environmentally friendly.

Once the digital signage network was installed, GDS quickly began designing and updating content for the menu boards directly using Scala digital signage software. The eight menu boards and additional welcome screen quickly replaced the need for writing out food items and printing paper signs each day.

But Fresh Food Company's revolving menu presented an opportunity to further automate the process for updating the digital menu boards using Scala software.

After years of working with digital menu boards, Capital Signs has developed its own in-house digital menu board technology based on Scala that is used by many different restaurants and retailers. In this case, Capital Signs customized an application that connects Scala software to a database of Fresh Food Company's menu items over the four-week rotation period.

With this system in place, dining hall staff can log in and update the menu content for all the screens through a user-friendly custom interface that displays all the menu items to select from. The Scala players control the LCDs' on and off functions, and the staff controls the power and the schedules for each menu through the software interface.

"Using Scala, we were able to provide GDS a network that saves them time every single day," said Andy Panos, Vice President of Capital Signs.

Eventually, this system will automatically update menu items onto the dining hall's Web site. Also, the database will be able to generate reports of the loaded menu content, eliminating the need for GDS to maintain Excel files.

Capital Signs continues to deploy and manage additional menu board installations across the University of Florida campus, including Chili's Too, Pollo Tropical and Cheeburger Cheeburger. The digital menu board concept at UF, especially at the Fresh Food Company, serves as a good model for integrating digital signage at other university campuses nationwide.

About Capital Signs



For more than 30 years, Capital Signs has produced and manufactured custom quality signage utilizing the most advanced automated equipment currently available to the industry. Capital Signs offers architectural, digital, neon and LED signage, channel letters, flatbed printing, and large format printing. The company serves both national and regional accounts, including HMS Host, Brinker International, Coca-Cola, Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport, Sbarro Pizza, and Aramark Dining. For more information, visit www.capitalsigns.com.

About Scala

Driving more than 300,000 screens worldwide, Scala is a leading global provider of digital signage and advertising management solutions. Scala is the world's first connected signage company, offering the leading platform for content creation, management and distribution in digital signage networks and the first unified platform for advertising management of both traditional and digital signage networks. The company's digital signage customers include Rabobank, IKEA, Burger King, T-Mobile, Virgin MegaStore, Warner Brothers, The Life Channel, Rikstoto, Repsol, NorgesGruppen, Audi, ECE Flatmedia, Kaufhof (Metro Group) and thousands more. Advertising management customers include CBS Outdoor, Clear Channel Outdoor and Magic Media, among others. Scala is headquartered near Philadelphia, USA, and has subsidiaries in Canada, The Netherlands, France, Norway, Germany and Japan, as well as more than 450 partners in more than 60 countries. More information is available at www.scala.com.