



Smart Screens at Legacy place provide shoppers with deals, new movie ads. Zoom Photos. .Smart Screens at Legacy Place

By Edward B. Colby/Wicked Local Dedham
Wicked Local Dedham
Posted Dec 05, 2010 @ 07:00 AM

DEDHAM — Bill Ketcham explained that before his company installed its first “Smart Screens” at an outdoor mall, it needed to figure out some technical challenges.

One consideration was that metals expand and contract in “big weather changes,” but the biggest challenge involved making the digital plasma screens waterproof.

“It’s like designing anything that’s waterproof – you just have to engineer it properly, and that just takes a little time,” said Ketcham, the chief marketing officer of Adspace Digital Mall Network, which put in place 14 screens at Legacy Place on Nov. 12. “The electronics aren’t any different than what we put inside a mall. The enclosure is really the key.”

The “guts” of the 65-inch screens at Legacy Place are the same as those at the Natick Collection, “but the enclosure is weather-tight,” Ketcham added.

The screens show video and visual programming that include top sale deals, mall events, and advertising. On a recent Monday afternoon, the mix at Legacy Place included promotions for Legal C Bar, Claire’s and Aldo, ads for AT&T and the new MTV series “Skins,” short spots featuring the development’s managers, and a screen that said that Wicked Fire Kissed Pizza “Just Opened!”

Adspace says its network reaches 93 million affluent shoppers at more than a hundred malls nationwide each month. The company started in 1998, but evolved into a media business focused on creating a mall network around 2003, Ketchum said. Now, Adspace is adding eight new malls to its roster by the end of the year, and plans to expand by 40 more in 2011.

There have been three Boston-area additions this fall, including at the Hanover Mall and at The Mall at Whitney Field in Leominster.

Ketcham said Adspace has been “very anxious to put our screens into lifestyle centers” – and W/S Development Associates wanted them at Legacy Place.

“Boston was a market that we were really a little underdeveloped in, so it was really an opportunity to kill two birds with one stone,” he said. On the timing of the move into Legacy Place, he said, “The holiday season is our seasonal strong period, particularly November and December, so we were really anxious to have a good presence in Boston at that time.”

Michael Campbell, the vice president of business development for W/S, said his firm is excited to add “a digital element” to Legacy Place. “Adspace Network’s content will provide valuable information for shoppers while driving traffic and sales for our tenants,” he said.

The screens, which are designed to fit the look and feel of Legacy Place, stand upright in pairs – back to back – on its sidewalks. Ketcham said a central server at the development communicates wirelessly with each screen, so the computer inside each one has all the programming info on it.

“We did a lot of research to see what people like to see at a mall, and guess what? They want to see what’s on sale,” he said. “So we created Today’s Top Ten.”

Retailers provide Adspace with their deals, Adspace picks what it considers are the best ones, and then displays a 12-second spot for each sale item, Ketcham explained. The spots are woven in among advertising and other features such as “Trend Alert” in a 4-minute loop, he said. In each loop there are nine 15-second paid ads, and the rest is editorial content, Ketcham said.

Diane Henderson of Westwood was sitting on a bench at Legacy Place on Monday when something caught her eye – a spot in which a young actor from the Cartoon Network urged people to stop bullying. Henderson said it made her think of a headline from that morning’s paper, about a Groton School student who was accused of bullying and killed himself.

“That’s what he was talking about,” she said of the actor’s public service announcement. “And I thought how nice they have this, rather than some stupid ad that tells you to go in a store and spend some money.”

A Westwood friend who was sitting with Henderson said the screens are “a very nice idea.” But the man, who had gray hair, noted that “obviously the advertising is for people under 30, 40 years old.”

The ads are most effective at reaching young consumers, according to Ketcham.

“Malls attract a lot of teens, a lot of young adults of both sexes. So if you’re looking to reach 13- to 24-year-olds,” it’s great, he said. Hollywood studios are Adspace’s biggest advertiser category, as they use the network to promote their biggest films to teens and young adults.

In a Mediaweek piece last spring, Ketcham wrote that “no one ever got fired for buying television,” as he discussed the challenges “place-based digital networks” face when wooing advertisers.

Any new medium is going to have trouble convincing advertisers to try out that medium, he told the Dedham Transcript.

“At the end of the day, as I said, it’s safer buying television. But we are a great complement to television,” and less expensive, he said.

“We know what our reach is, and our reach in a week is better than most primetime shows. So we have a lot of scale. It’s a big network. And we’re at the point now where you have to look at us,” he concluded. “If you’re trying to reach someone in a shopping mindset, we’re a really good place to be.”