Working solutions

WHITE PAPER

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Key Software Considerations for an Interactive Touchscreen Kiosk

Kiosks are made up of more than just metal, computers and peripheral devices. Get the most out of a kiosk with wise software decisions.

Hardware and computer costs are always falling, so today's kiosk hardware is cheaper than ever. But arguably the most important part of a kiosk often doesn't get specified until after the hardware has been purchased.

The kiosk software application can cost a great deal more than the collection of metal, computers and peripheral devices that goes to make up a kiosk. It's important for deployers to ensure they are getting value for their money.

What is a kiosk?

According to Wikipedia, "Self-service kiosks are hardware devices that work in combination with self-service software, allowing users to perform any number of possible transactions. The method of input is either a keyboard, touchscreen or both. Some kiosks include card readers, ticket and receipt printers, bill and coin depositors, robotic product arrays and other more complex mechanical devices."

Hardware purchase considerations

While the focus of this white paper is software, when purchasing hardware, it's important to consider:

Enclosures. Can the enclosure be customized? A decent kiosk vendor can "dress" a kiosk with a deployer's choice of design or even customize the shape.

Type. A deployer must decide whether a countertop or freestanding kiosk better meets his needs. A countertop kiosk costs about a third as much as a free-standing one. Countertop kiosks are a good solution for businesses that have limited floor space, such as a digital photo kiosk in a drugstore.

CUSTOM KIOSK SOFTWARE USES

- Financial services, including bill payment, check cashing and credit applications
- Retail product information such as in-store product lookup and information
- Retail check-out POS systems in supermarkets
- Customer check-in such as airlines and hotels
- Allowing people to download music or PDF documents
- Checking in and printing boarding passes at the airport
- Printing professional-quality digital photos
- Wayfinding (i.e., displaying interactive map directions)
- Visitor management and security using a virtual receptionist

Location. When placing a kiosk outdoors, the machine should be made of metal, have scratch-resistant touchscreens and preferably temperature-controlled interiors. For an extended lifespan, consider placing it in a covered or partially covered area.

Scalability. Make sure the enclosure not only accommodates the devices currently available, but also one that might be needed in the future, such as a larger display.

Customized kiosk applications

Why is the software so important? Because, depending on what a deployer intends to do with the kiosk, it can cost significantly more than the hardware.

A kiosk needs to work to be effective. Deployers need to choose either a kiosk monitoring company, a solution they can monitor themselves, or a combination of the two.

There are two main aspects to the software: the application, without which the kiosk won't function, and the stability of the software and remote monitoring.

It is very unlikely that a so-called standard application will help a deployer achieve his objectives or meet his expectations. Even a secure Internet browser needs to have the ability to be easily customized. Most companies source, or at least choose, the kiosk hardware before they embark on the search for software. Those companies invariably run into budgetary problems, because software cost, to use an old analogy, can often be "as long as a piece of string."

It is all well and good to have the kiosk hardware and kiosk software application selected and ready for installation. But perhaps the most important aspect of a kiosk solution often gets overlooked. Uptime, or the amount of time during the day that the kiosk is available to its users, is critical for success. To ensure uptime, deployers either need a kiosk monitoring company, tied in to an airtight SLA (Service Level Agreement), which can be very expensive, a software solution that they can administer, or a combination of the two.

Secure Internet browsers

Since many kiosks offer the user a portal to an Internet or intranet website, the most common kiosk software product available is the secure browser. While there are plenty of these available, the configuration is not always as simple as the vendor would have clients believe.

Before purchasing a secure browser, pause long enough to phone the vendor and ask them what kind of upgrade path their

software has. Can the functionality be upgraded or the platform changed without losing the initial investment?

Kiosk monitoring solutions

Of course, a kiosk vendor can recommend monitoring companies, and in fact, some vendors even offer monitoring services. Monitoring companies can conduct repairs, replace consumables such as paper and toner, perform general maintenance and upgrade software.

For kiosks connected to the Internet, remote kiosk monitoring software is a possibility. There are remote solutions on the market, but some of them started life as simple remote desktop software packages that make big claims but deliver little else. Look for software that has been written by companies with a background in writing kiosk applications.

Ideally, kiosks will have two applications and a secure conduit between the two.

Part of the software should be a watchdog that resides on the PC in the kiosk. This watchdog at least should be able to:

- Lock-down the computer, preventing all local and remote access, except via a password protected interface intended for engineers.
- Monitor and log all activity generated by BIOS, the operating system and kiosk applications.
- Monitor and log all activity generated by hardware devices and peripherals.
- Send alerts to engineers via email and/or SMS.
- Provide an interface to some kind of remote site management software via a secure network. The supplier must provide secure hosting.

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CHOOSING A SOFTWARE PROVIDER

Kiosk applications are provided by software developers. These can be experienced companies, or merely talented individual programmers trying to build their own company. When choosing a software provider, consider:

+ Stability
+ How long have they been creating applications?
+ Do they have testimonials from recognizable references?
+ Do they have an impressive client list?
+ Do they have any standard applications that are customizable? This can dramatically cut costs.
+ Do they have any sort of basic software platform onto which plugins can be added? This can again reduce costs and even spread the cost over the number of kiosks a deployer has.
+ Can the software be easily upgraded? Are updates free of charge?
+ Do they have their own kiosk monitoring software? They may even be able to provide a monitoring service for you.
+ Can they provide support and maintenance contracts?

Kiosk software application pricing

While interactive kiosk pricing typically includes standard software, customized software also can add to the total cost. Customized software fees range from $5,000 to $20,000 or more, as well as licensing fees of $150 to $500 per kiosk. If it's not included in the purchase price, standard software, including automatic updates and around-the-clock live help desk support, costs a few hundred dollars, with discounts for multiple licenses.

Kiosk monitoring pricing

Vendors typically forge relationships with national and regional kiosk monitoring companies and subcontract them to do the work. Monitoring contracts can cost as little as $20 to as much as $800 per month per kiosk, depending on the level of service, the number of kiosks being monitored, and when service is requested — night and weekend service calls are more pricey.

About the sponsor: Established in 1997 in the United Kingdom, Working Solutions has grown to become a market leader within the interactive multimedia and digital signage industry across the world with a variety of clients. The company's client list — available on its website — includes blue-chip companies, start-ups and entrepreneurs, all of whom have come to expect high levels of technical sophistication and service from the Working Solutions team.