
BUYING AN LED SIGN?

ASKING HARD QUESTIONS NOW
CAN SAVE HEARTACHE LATER



Introduction

If you're ready to make the move to digital signage, it's critical to find a digital partner who can deliver the best combination of image quality, durability, service and cost of ownership. All of these factors help you take advantage of the tremendous returns that LED signs can provide. Depending on the manufacturer you choose, you can expect either a long-term, successful relationship or short-lived one.

Due diligence is part of every important purchase these days. There are stories all over about consumers who have bought cheap products just to save money and have been dissatisfied.

Before you buy an LED sign, we recommend performing a little due diligence of your own on the manufacturer behind the sign. If you know which questions to ask and what to look for, you'll understand why buying on price alone isn't usually a good idea, and you'll greatly improve your chances of a successful transition to digital.

1. Who Are You Really Buying From?

Many LED sign companies claim to have the lowest prices and in-stock signs that can be installed within a week. This may seem like an attractive option, but if you shop for the lowest price only, you'll likely end up with an inferior product that has little or no future support. Though low prices are tempting, there are many more important factors that anyone making the investment in digital signage should consider.

How long has the company been in business?

If a company has been successful in the sign business for a long time, there's a better chance they'll be around for the whole life of your LED sign, but longevity alone won't tell the whole story. You should also find out how long they've been focusing on selling digital signs.

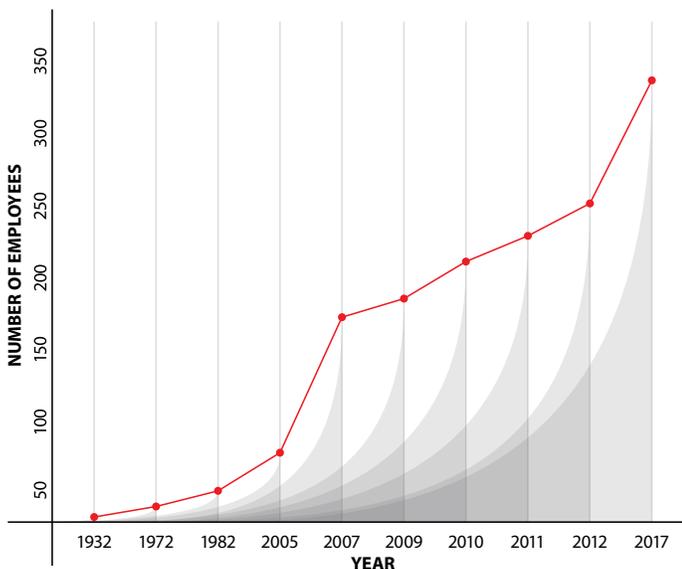
There are some companies who have been around for many years, but have only recently begun to sell digital signage. Without a history of manufacturing quality digital signs, they're more likely to experience the growing pains that often accompany adding an entirely new product line.

Designing and building the best LED signs with the latest technology isn't something that can be perfected overnight.

Can they show you working reference signs?

Anyone can produce a beautiful image of a sign. With photo editing programs, companies can work miracles. New signs, even from fly-by-night manufacturers, can look great on day one. What matters is how their signs will look in six months, a year, or five years from now.

Ask them if you can see actual working signs in the field, and find out how long those signs have been in continuous operation. It's a good idea to talk to the sign owner as well to find out how the signs have stood the test of time. Are they willing to speak well of the product and the service the company provides? If not, you should probably look elsewhere.



Since 1932, Watchfire has designed and manufactured outdoor electronic sign solutions.

Do they design, engineer and manufacture their own signs?

Many companies buy cheap, pre-made imports and rebrand them as their own signs. Others purchase LED panels from overseas and piece them together when they arrive in the United States.



Watchfire sources the best available LEDs and components from all over the world. These through-hole LEDs are being added to a circuit board in our Danville factory.

Does the company specialize in LED signs?

Do they have a long history of designing and building electronic signs alone? Watchfire Signs has been in business since 1932 and has designed, engineered and manufactured LED signs since 1998; it's all we do. Be careful of the companies that don't specialize in LED signs; they may not have a good history of supporting their products. You may also want to find out whether they're a different type of company entirely (software or media, for example) that has recently decided to start importing and reselling LED signs.

When asking these questions, listen to the answers and then verify them. Ask to speak to customers and check the better business bureaus. Doing your homework now will save a lot of potential hassle (and money) in the long run.

2. What Kind of Warranty Do They Offer?

It may seem obvious, but a solid warranty is a good indicator of how confident the manufacturer is in its products and, in turn, how confident you should feel with the manufacturer. Typically, a quality warranty means the manufacturer has performed extensive testing on the product and will stand behind their signs should anything happen in the future. Many buyers don't weigh these considerations carefully enough before the sale. The rule with warranties always seems to be you never think you need it until you do.

Some questions you may want to consider are:

If the company is new, how can you be sure they will be around in a year to fulfill their warranty? What about five years, or ten?

Although some start-up companies will succeed, a large percentage of new businesses fail within the first year or two. According to the Small Business Administration, nearly 50% of small businesses fail within the first five years.* If you purchase a sign from a startup company or one that hasn't been manufacturing LED signs for a long time, you risk investing a lot of money in a sign that won't be supported in a matter of years. Even a comprehensive, long-term warranty won't do you any good if the company who offered it goes out of business.

Does the sign manufacturer stand behind the performance of their LED signs?

The best way to find out if a manufacturer will stand behind their products is to talk with longtime customers. Reading customer testimonials isn't enough — you should be able to pick up the phone and talk with multiple references who are willing to discuss their experiences. Ideally, you should check with references who have had their signs in operation for two years or more.

*Source: <http://www.sba.gov/sites/default/files/sbfaq.pdf>

3. Do They Have a Dedicated Service Department?

Many buyers assume that a company has a service department and will be there to answer questions and take care of any issues that arise. Often, especially when buyers purchase from newer or lesser known companies (and even some that have been around for a while), they are disappointed when they can't get any support for their sign. That's why it pays to verify the level of service support your LED sign manufacturer will provide before you commit to a purchase.

Here are a number of service-related questions you should ask before your LED sign purchase:

Does the manufacturer have a customer support line?

Having a support line is important, but you'll also want to find out what kind of support you can expect after the sale.

Ask questions like:

- Will they provide responsive service both before and after the sale?
- Is there a toll-free number for service?
- Is the support group based in the United States, and are the hours of operation convenient for to your business?

Does the manufacturer have an in-house parts department and telephone support?

If they don't stock parts or the parts have to be shipped from overseas, a malfunctioning sign could be out for weeks.

Ask questions like:

- How quickly can you expect the telephone support group to return your calls or emails?
- Do they have a proven track record of long-term availability for service calls?
- Will they ship parts immediately if needed?

Does the company keep service records?

Service records are an important quick reference for the service and support team. Your sign's service record will hold its complete model information and service history. This history can be invaluable when troubleshooting, and it can save lots of time and headaches. It can also save money, because a service department that knows your sign's service record may be able to fix a problem remotely and avoid a field-service call.

How long are parts kept in stock?

Some sign companies will sell signs now, but will stop making replacement parts within a very short time. So if your sign has problems later, they won't be able to fix it, and you'll be stuck with a malfunctioning sign and a big hole in your pocketbook. Watchfire Signs keeps parts in stock for a minimum of 10 years after the last of that model ships. Even if your sign model is no longer being produced, you'll still be able to get replacement parts.



Service and help desk support ready when you need it — right here in Danville, IL.

4. How Are Their LED Signs Built? Why Is That Important?

The construction of the sign and the type of materials used can have a significant impact upon the quality and durability of the sign. Sign construction can also affect the energy usage, cost to run the sign and the frequency of required service or maintenance. To learn more about the construction of the sign, ask:

Is the cabinet constructed of extruded aluminum or steel and sheet metal?

The benefits of an all-aluminum cabinet are important. Aluminum is both strong and lightweight, so it significantly reduces the cost of installation and will minimize the sign structure requirements. Unlike steel or sheet metal, aluminum is durable and rust-proof, keeping your sign components protected and your sign looking its best. Heavy-walled, extruded aluminum cabinets should also be constructed with solid welds, rather than pop-rivets, keeping them true, square and corrosion-resistant for the life of the sign.

What are the electrical service amperage requirements for the sign?

All signs are not created equal, and it can definitely show in your power bills. There are a number of factors that affect amperage requirements: brightness control, quality and number of the LEDs used, and the number of connections, to name a few. Another consideration is whether a product's power consumption has been verified by a third-party testing agency like Underwriters Laboratories (UL).

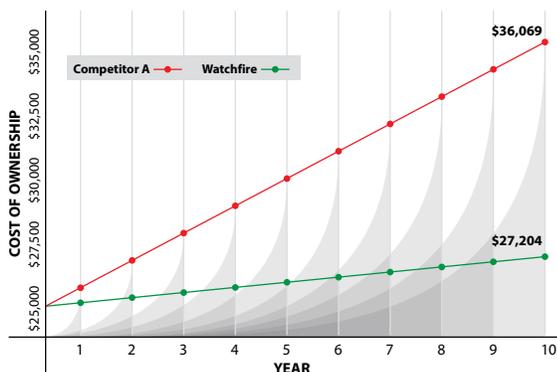
A company that has not taken the time to build energy efficiency into their product might be able to sell it for less; but over the life of the sign, you will pay much higher energy bills. And that's no deal.

Is the sign fully encapsulated, front and back, in a bed of silicone gel?

The most durable LED signs have silicone gel completely encapsulating the LED modules to protect both the front and back from the environment. Some manufacturers seal the face of the module, but leave the back completely exposed to the elements. Moisture is the number one factor in LED failure, so a completely weather-resistant seal is critical. In fact, the most durable LED modules will withstand direct contact with water, even complete submersion. LED signs with the most complete moisture protection will have the highest predicted durability.

Will the LED sign require filter maintenance?

Signs that require an air conditioner to keep the components cool must be constructed with a filter that has to be changed and serviced. Some companies sell air conditioning as an added benefit, but what they may not tell you is that you'll have the added expense of servicing the air conditioning unit regularly. This is a guaranteed expense that you won't incur if you choose a sign that's designed and manufactured to operate efficiently without a filter. Watchfire signs' cross-vent technology cools components without the need for air conditioners or filters, saving you money and the hassle of regular maintenance.



Less efficient competitors can cost up to 25% more over the sign, compared to Watchfire signs.

5. How Easy Is It to Operate an LED Sign? How Will the Sign Manufacturer Help?

The value of LED message centers lies in the flexibility of the medium and the ability to change messages quickly and frequently. It's important that sign owners can easily create and update messages. When you're considering which company to purchase from, you may want to find out a few things.

Do they offer a turnkey system?

The easiest signs to operate are those that offer custom software designed by the same company that manufactures and builds the signs. Many companies will simply piece together a display, software and artwork that isn't made specifically for electronic message centers, or they charge customers extra to use their software. The best companies will include easy-to-use software that was developed specifically for use on their LED signs.

Does the price include software to run the sign?

Is the software designed for the sign? Some companies don't offer software designed for the signs they sell, and some companies charge a fee for the software, adding to the expense. Our Ignite® Graphics Software is included with every Watchfire LED sign purchase.

Have you taken the software for a "test drive"?

Anyone can say a software program is easy to use, but until you've tried it, you won't know whether their claims are true. Ask if you can try before you buy to see if the software will meet your needs.

Does the software come equipped with a large library of free and ready-to-use artwork that will help you create eye-catching messages?

Some companies don't offer any ready-to-use artwork, and some will charge extra for it. Ask what's included with the software, and take a look at the artwork they offer. Our Ignite software features over 1000 EasyArt graphics and animations to help you design messages with ease.



Making a Decision

If you're asking how to get the "best deal" on an LED sign, you might do better to ask how to make the smartest LED sign investment. A well-known, experienced manufacturer may not always offer the lowest prices on the market, but they can offer energy efficiency, reliability, service and ease-of-use. And those are the features that will make your LED sign purchase pay in the long run.

The fact is, your investment in an LED sign is just too large to be gambling your success on an unknown vendor, even when the price is significantly lower. A sign that has persistent problems or doesn't look good will leave your customers with a negative impression, and that can hurt your business instead of helping it.

Do your homework.

Learn the facts before you buy.

Your Watchfire representative can help.

Call us at **800-637-2645** or visit **watchfiresigns.com**.

Before you buy, ask yourself what a lower price tag may cost you. Remember, if your sign fails in the first couple of years, and the manufacturer can't or won't support their product, your initial savings may cost a lot more than you bargained for.

We hope Watchfire Signs will be on your short list of preferred providers. Whether you're ready to purchase, want more information, or would like a free, no-obligation quote, we're here, and we'd love to help you put digital technology to work for your business.

