

Digital Billboards and Law Enforcement Agencies: A New, High-Tech Partnership

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In Janesville, Wisconsin, police are using digital billboards as the latest high-tech tool to help close cases and assist the department in its outreach efforts. This new way to get a message out to the public is available at no cost to the department and with very little effort. These billboards might also be available in other communities; if so, agencies should not hesitate to take advantage of them.

Janesville is a town of approximately 63,000 in south central Wisconsin, not far from the Wisconsin-Illinois state line. The Janesville Police Department (JPD) consists of 104 sworn officers and 15 civilian employees. Like many departments of its size, the JPD finds itself faced with increasing service demands and decreasing funding sources. Each year the department responds to approximately 68,000 calls for service. A significant number of those calls, including about 350 missing-person calls, are an excellent fit for the use of digital billboards.

Program Origins

Janesville has an active Crime Stoppers program, which has proven invaluable by providing many tips from community members that have led to arrests and the location of missing adults and juveniles. Communicating safety concerns to the public is one of the JPD's most important objectives.

In early 2008, the JPD was approached by Lamar Advertising Company regarding a possible partnership. Lamar had installed a network of digital billboards in Janesville in August 2007. Digital billboards are like conventional billboards except that they rotate static advertisements every 8–10 seconds and can be updated by computer. Those improvements mean the advertising copy can be changed remotely and very quickly.

The service that Lamar provides to the JPD is free; the only condition of use is that the company must have a "flip," or advertisement slot, available for the JPD to use. Thus far, every public safety message the department has asked to be posted on runaways, missing persons, wanted fugitives, or emergency notifications has been posted within hours or even minutes, in some cases. The department provides electronic mail bulletins, or Lamar technicians construct the messages from telephone information the department provides. Lamar has made using the billboards easy and convenient, and it even offers after-business hours access to its technicians.

Sergeant Brian Donohoue and Officer Chad Sullivan of the JPD are the personnel assigned as contacts for the billboard company. Both have remarked about Lamar's helpful personnel and the quick results the billboards generate.

Partnership Results

The partnership with Lamar that allows Janesville public safety messages to be posted on the town's six digital billboards has been an unmitigated success. For example, an elderly female suffering from Alzheimer's disease wandered away from family at a local shopping mall and was found by a citizen using the digital billboard information. In addition, when spring floods along the Rock River posed significant danger to the public, billboards were used to post warnings about the danger.

Since the beginning of the partnership, the JPD has placed 15 wanted individuals on digital billboards and has seen resolution on 13 of the 15. Those resolutions are coming from a variety of sources. In one case, an officer from another jurisdiction saw the face and name on the billboard and informed the department that the wanted individual was already in jail. In another case, a citizen responded that an individual was in prison in Utah, and the department was then able to put a detainer on that suspect.

The embarrassment factor is high for the friends and families of featured suspects. The mother of one individual wanted for drug crimes saw his picture on digital billboards; when she got home, she called the suspect (who was out of state at college) and told him he would be turning himself in when he was home over break. The suspect did as his mother told him, and the case was successfully resolved.

In terms of sheer numbers, calls to Crime Stoppers have tripled since the JPD began using digital billboards to publicize wanted suspects and other types of law enforcement initiatives. Lamar has worked with the department to post an anti-dog fighting message and an antigraffiti message, both of which have been quite successful.

The digital billboards have been used even to promote law enforcement-related public service. During the 2008 National Night Out, digital billboards highlighted demonstrations and other activities the department was conducting. There was a significant increase in the number of participants in Night Out events in 2008.

"For any department where there are digital billboards, if you're not using them, you're missing out on a piece that is invaluable in solving crimes, capturing fugitives, and keeping the community safe," said Officer Sullivan. "Other departments should contact the local billboard company and say they saw a program in other jurisdictions to partner with the police department and ask if this is something we can do here."

Use in Other Jurisdictions

Not all communities have digital billboards—the technology is still relatively new—but in jurisdictions that do have access, billboards present a no-cost advantage to law enforcement agencies.

In Janesville, the partnership was actually initiated by Lamar, meaning that the JPD had to do very little to get the system up and running. However, the department has helped other jurisdictions establish their own partnerships and has found, by and large, that outdoor advertising companies have been more than willing to help. Agencies seeking to establish a partnership in their communities should speak to the general manager of a local outdoor advertising company. Most digital billboards have a sign of some kind identifying the company posted directly on the billboard (such as Lamar, Clear Channel Outdoor, CBS Outdoor, or another company). One phone call could lead to having a new, valuable tool to help fight local crime.

To conclude, the JPD has found digital billboards to be a boon to public safety in Janesville, and the department wholeheartedly recommends the program to other jurisdictions with access to digital

billboards. This type of partnership can require very little effort on the part of the agency involved and can cost nothing. In these tight budget times, such high-profile, low-cost messaging should appeal to any law enforcement agency.

For more information about establishing a digital billboard partnership, readers can contact Officer Chad Sullivan at 608-755-3100 or the Outdoor Advertising Association of America at 202-833-5566. ■