

Billboards go digital

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Until a month ago, American Music Theater could only dream of flashing its marquee and schedule to motorists not traveling right past its doors.

That's when Brian Trout, AMT's director of sales and marketing, purchased space on a new digital billboard off Manheim Pike and Dillerville Road.

The board's computer-controlled LED display allows AMT and other advertisers to change their message as often as they'd like.

"The digital boards couldn't be more perfect for our business," Trout said. "It's almost like allowing us to launch a new product on a weekly basis."

Operated by Lamar Outdoor Advertising, the digital billboards—which resemble ball-park jumbo video displays but scroll through several static ads each minute—are helping to draw advertisers back to the outdoor medium.

The flexibility of the digital boards leave their vinyl predecessors in the dust, said Christopher Ensley, an analyst at Bear, Stearns & Co. in New York.

"I think that's kind of changing the way outdoor is being used by advertisers," Ensley said.

Bill Ripp, director of Lamar Outdoor Advertising's digital billboard business, said the flexibility allows companies to place messages such as "Sale ends tomorrow" or highlight specific prices that can be changed at any time.

"Billboards have tradition-



Associated Press

An ad for Compleat Restorations is displayed on a new digital billboard at Manheim Pike and Dillersville Road.

ally been a reminder business," he said. "We do branding and 'Turn left at this intersection' sort of stuff.

"This product allows advertisers to drive the message on a much more call-to-action or timing basis."

Lamar also operates a digital billboard on Route 272, near the Brownstown exit off Route 222. Each sign flips ads from five to six advertisers.

Trout said AMT historically has not advertised specific shows, which change weekly or monthly, because changing standard billboards frequently is too expensive.

"We were doing a branding campaign that said: 'American Music Theater — Lancaster Entertainment Showcase,'" Trout said. "But we prefer to put those monies behind particular shows."

Despite the flexibility and the convenience digital billboards offer, Tom Loper, general manager of Lamar's York

office, said standard billboards will remain.

"Billboards have been around forever, basically, and we're still doing things that we've always done," Loper explained. "This is just a natural progression that ties into technology."

Digital billboards offer many new opportunities, including the ability for companies to sell space in a time-share arrangement and open up high-profile locations to more advertisers.

The same billboard, for example, could show a Starbucks ad for a mocha latte during the morning commute, movie listings from the local theatre complex during the ride home and a late-night entertainment venue after the dinner hour, Meyer said.

The Outdoor Advertising Association of America estimates there are 500 digital billboards on U.S. roads, compared to about 450,000 traditional billboards.