Subscription services or one-time projects for new signage providers

When you start offering digital signage, one of the first decisions you face is how to structure your work. Do you charge a flat fee for each installation and walk away, or do you set up a recurring subscription that covers the screen, the media player, the content platform, and ongoing support? Neither approach is right for every customer or every provider. The choice depends on your goals, your customers' needs, and the type of relationship you want to build.

Understanding the one-time project model

A one-time project is straightforward. A customer pays a single price for the hardware, installation, and maybe a short period of training or setup. After that, the system is theirs. They own the display screen, the media player, and any content they have created. If something breaks, they call you for a repair that they pay for separately. If they want to change the menu or the playlist, they do it themselves or hire you again.

This model works well for customers who have a clear, fixed need. A restaurant that wants a single menu board above the counter, for example, may not want to think about monthly fees. They just want the screen up and running, and they will update the content themselves with a simple USB stick or a free cloud tool. For the provider, a one-time project means a larger upfront payment and no obligation after the sale. You can take the money and move on to the next job.

But the downside is that your income stops after the installation. To keep your business growing, you need a steady stream of new customers. That can be exhausting. You also lose touch with customers after the sale, which means you miss opportunities to sell upgrades, additional screens, or content services later. If the customer has a problem and cannot reach you, they may leave a bad review or simply switch to another provider next time.

How subscription services change the relationship

A subscription model flips the dynamic. Instead of paying once, the customer pays a monthly or annual fee. That fee usually includes the hardware (leased rather than sold), the media player, a content platform with remote access, technical support, and sometimes content design or menu updates. The provider retains ownership of the equipment and handles maintenance, software updates, and troubleshooting. The customer gets predictable costs and a system that stays current.

For the provider, the subscription creates recurring revenue. One installation may not generate a huge profit on day one, but over twelve or twenty-four months the total often exceeds what you would have earned from a one-time sale. More importantly, you build a customer account that you can grow. A restaurant that starts with one menu screen may later add a drive-through display, a waiting-area screen, or a wall of screens for promotions. Each addition increases the monthly subscription revenue without requiring a new sales cycle.

The subscription model also aligns your incentives with the customer's success. You want the system to work well because a happy customer stays subscribed. That encourages you to provide good remote access, responsive technical support, and regular improvements to the content platform. Over time, your service package becomes more valuable, and your customers become less likely to leave.

When each model suits the customer

Not every customer wants a subscription. Some have tight budgets and prefer to pay once. Others run seasonal businesses and cannot commit to a long contract. A one-time project can be the right answer for a temporary installation, a trade show booth, or a pop-up shop. It also works for customers who have their own IT staff and prefer to manage everything in-house.

Subscription services, on the other hand, appeal to customers who want simplicity. They do not want to worry about hardware failures, software updates, or content creation. They just want the screen to show their message reliably. Small and medium businesses, especially, often lack the time or expertise to maintain a digital signage system. A subscription that includes everything gives them peace of mind.

As a provider, you can also offer a hybrid. Charge a reduced upfront fee for hardware and installation, then add a monthly fee for the content platform, remote access, and support. That way the customer feels they are not paying twice for the same thing, and you still get recurring income. Many providers find that a hybrid approach captures more customers than either pure model alone.

Practical considerations for the provider

If you lean toward subscriptions, you need to think about cash flow. Hardware costs money upfront. If you lease the display screen and media player to the customer, you pay the manufacturer now and recover that cost over time. That requires capital or a line of credit. You also need systems for billing, managing customer accounts, and handling cancellations. A simple spreadsheet can work for a handful of customers, but once you have dozens, you will want proper subscription management software.

One-time projects let you avoid those complexities. You get paid in full, and you can use that money to buy more inventory or invest in marketing. But you also shoulder the risk of equipment failure after the warranty expires. If a display screen fails a month after installation, the customer may expect you to fix it for free even though you have no contract. That can damage your reputation if you refuse.

There is also the question of content. Many customers underestimate how much work it takes to keep a screen interesting. A static menu that never changes looks abandoned. If you offer a content platform with templates and scheduled updates, you add real value. That is easier to deliver through a subscription because the customer pays for the ongoing service. In a one-time project, you might include a basic content tool, but the customer may never use it, and the screen becomes an ugly static sign.

The revenue argument for subscriptions

Recurring revenue transforms a business. Instead of starting from zero every month, you build a base of income that grows with each new customer. A digital signage reseller who switches from projects to subscriptions often sees the business become more stable and more valuable. Buyers of businesses pay a premium for recurring revenue streams because they are predictable. That is why the phrase "7 Ways Entrepreneurs Can Build Recurring Revenue With Digital Signage" resonates with many new providers. It captures the core strategy behind the subscription model: you are not just selling screens; you are selling a service that customers pay for month after month.

That said, subscriptions are not magic. You still need to acquire customers, install systems correctly, and provide good support. If you promise too much and deliver too little, customers will cancel. The key is to design a service package that solves a real problem and is worth more than the monthly fee. For many digital signage resellers, that means combining hardware, a content platform, remote access, and responsive technical support into one clear price.

Making your choice as a new provider

If you are just starting out, you may not have the cash to finance hardware leases. In that case, one-time projects can get you going. You earn money quickly, build a portfolio, and learn the ropes. Once you have some capital and a few happy customers, you can begin offering subscriptions to new customers or even convert existing ones. Some providers start with a one-time sale and then offer a paid support plan after the first year. That is a small step toward recurring revenue.

Another path is to specialise. If you focus on a specific industry, such as quick-service restaurants, you can create a subscription service that includes menu design, scheduled updates, and remote monitoring. That niche lets you standardise your offering and reduce costs. Your customers get a solution tailored to their needs, and you get a predictable income.

Whichever route you choose, remember that the goal is to build a business that works for you. A mix of both models can be the most practical. Use one-time projects for customers who prefer them, and subscriptions for customers who want ongoing support. Over time, you will see which model fits your market and your own working style.

The decision between subscription services and one-time projects is not permanent. You can start with one and evolve toward the other as your business grows. The important thing is to understand the trade-offs and choose the approach that aligns with your customers' needs and your own financial reality. As you gain experience, you will develop a feel for when to offer a flat fee and when to propose a monthly plan. And you will be better equipped to explain why your chosen model benefits the customer, not just yourself.

For anyone entering the digital signage space, the question is not which model is better in theory. It is which model helps you serve your customers well while building a sustainable business. The answer will be different for every provider, but the effort to find it is worth making. After all, a successful digital signage reseller is one who understands that the real product is not a screen or a media player. It is a solution that helps the customer communicate effectively, day after day. Whether you deliver that through a subscription or a one-time project, the focus should always be on value that the customer can see and appreciate.

One more thought: the phrase "7 Ways Entrepreneurs Can Build Recurring Revenue With Digital Signage" captures the mindset shift that many successful providers make. They stop thinking of each sale as a finished transaction and start thinking of each customer as a long-term partner. That shift does not require a subscription. It is possible with one-time projects if you follow up, offer upgrades, and stay in touch. But a subscription formalises the relationship and makes it easier to deliver ongoing value. For many, that alone is reason enough to try it.