

CYBERVISION

When Media Projects International was asked by the Dickson Group to deliver a cutting-edge retail environment for the Dickson CyberExpress development in Kowloon Express station, Hong Kong, it responded with a state-of-the-art multimedia shopping experience. Project Director **Colin Payne** relates the process of consultation and implementation, and draws out some of the main issues facing multidimensional retail development.

'I want WOW...and I don't like anticlimaxes!' As Dickson Poon closed our first meeting, there could be no doubting his wish to create a genuinely memorable experience, or the weight of expectation on Media Projects to play an integral role in achieving this.

To be located in Kowloon Express station, and 70,000 square feet in size, Dickson CyberExpress was being planned as another piece of Dickson Poon's retail jigsaw: a new hi-tech shopping mall, offering a physical showcase for selected products available on Mr Poon's website, a point of sale for these and other products, and full access to the website itself, enabling on-line purchasing. The purpose of the mall was to enhance the store's on-line offer, to attract customers and to add value to the offer as a whole. Our brief was for all active content to integrate seamlessly into the physical space and provide entertainment, information and the sparkle that together would deliver the 'WOW' factor. All this was to be delivered within a very tight schedule – less than six months from beginning to end. Quite a challenge!

In four mad days in Detroit, Media Projects, together with other key consultants JGA, Electrosonic and Lighting Design, conceptualised, defined, designed and planned prototypes for a vast range of media content to fill the mall's six zones: fashion, technology, children, entertainment, cosmetics and sports goods.

The project development meetings determined the need for innovative audiovisual solutions, interactive multimedia and a comprehensive intranet, all designed with customer and client needs in mind.



Shoppers use the Cyberquarium to create their own cyberfish

The architectural design was unashamedly futuristic, with steel and glass and hi-tech specialist fittings. Our media was to sit within this context and deliver the 'life blood' that would energise all spaces.

Media Projects is used to working in themed space and creating interactive environments, working extensively in theme parks, museums and large exhibitions around the world; retail, perhaps surprisingly, has been slow to adopt innovative, customer-focused entertainment technology. It was clear that the ability to entertain, inform, inspire and ultimately sell in an upbeat and fun way was sure to win customers' loyalty and attract new shoppers.

In this respect, we aimed high and wanted to combine the best of all worlds using game design, 3D animation and the best information delivery systems to deliver a stunning product. Additionally, a few tricks from the world of e-marketing would be borrowed to enhance the loyalty offer.

Media Projects' heritage guaranteed a rich vein of original and creative ideas. The added benefit of our close client relationship and rigorous project management control guided the production to its completion, avoiding the pitfalls that alteration and adaptation can bring and adding value where possible.

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It was a given that the mall would need an excellent intranet to allow customers to gather information and shop on-line when the retail spaces were closed. The system needed to be attractive and themed for each zone, easy to use, dual-language and full of useful, instantly updateable information. It would need to integrate into the e-commerce site and be tolerant of constant use.

We began an intensive branding exercise, developing an identity for the project as a whole and then variations for each zone. Our thinking was inspired by the MTV logo device, as a result of which the core is consistent but the flavour changes depending on your location: fashion to kiddy, sports to cosmetics.

Once approved, we then began the process of creating the intranet. The animation screen-saver acts as an 'attractor' loop, and when touched, the screen offers a choice of languages. From this point the site is as simple as possible, offering information on the mall, special offers and events, links to the e-commerce site and interactive 3D maps to guide the user through the store. Users can then use these maps to search the mall, with a click on the area they wish to investigate revealing possible directions. It is also possible for users to search on specific brands or products.

Once this framework had been put in place, images and animation were added to continue reinforcing the zone brand. Active content such as this, however, suffers if it cannot be maintained and refreshed regularly, and quickly becomes obsolete. A cost-effective network administration tool to enable content management was therefore installed, creating a system that was simple to update whilst avoiding the trap of being prohibitively expensive.

The issue of constant change was to be a major factor during and after installation. The precedent was an important one to establish, and it defined the need for all our work to be designed with change in mind.

As we began to consider our second strand of media, the audiovisual elements, style and adaptability were crucial – the media needed to look cool and remain relevant.

In Fashion World, for example, we wanted to create a cyber-catwalk but did not want to show current fashion. Instead, we decided to use the body form as a mask and create a four-screen plasma show, inspired by the fabulous James Bond introduction sequences. At the entrance to the fibre-optic lit catwalk, our screens invite customers into the demonstration areas.

Sports World uses circular projection to create exciting montages of sports footage, framed at regular intervals by 3D animated graphics of globe icons projected onto large spheres at the entrance to the zone – golf balls into footballs,

compass into stopwatch.

In E-world, E-alley presents a 12-screen plasma show of futuristic gadgets projected from our guide characters, mentor and junior, fully animated in high-quality 3D, giving customers a flavour of things to come, again without featuring transient products that would date the show.

All the multi-screen shows are controlled centrally, and overrides are possible to allow the promotion of specific offers or events, giving flexibility to the marketing teams to feature key lines.

Finally, the exterior of each zone is clad with plasma displays above each intranet station. On these, we developed a system of generative software running on Apple G4s. A set of complex algorithms processes static images and turns them into amazing, evolving digital art. Masks, effects, washes and filters help to make these screens truly unique and infinitely updateable – simply drop a new set of images into the folder and instant adaptation! Easy maintenance, and yet a show that never repeats and is therefore always refreshed.

Perhaps the most innovative work took place in the design and implementation of a series of interactive features in each zone. These interactives, each of which demanded originality, high-quality design and excellent functionality, deliver a combination of entertainment and information, and aim to raise customers' experience to new levels of enjoyment and immersion, encouraging them to stay longer, engage deeper and visit regularly, loyalty being the key to the success of the brand.

The largest interactive is housed in Kiddy World. 'Cyberquarium' is a nine-metre digital fish tank with 12 user terminals surrounding the displays. Users can watch the animated legend and then choose to create their unique 'cyberfish'. By selecting body parts, the creature is defined and can be named. The user inputs their email and dialogue is established, as the fish replies with a short message and an animation of itself. Once completed, the creature appears in the main display, a plasma array of three screens, and swims with the other creatures already in the tank. The fish can be recalled on subsequent visits and fed. Again, loyalty is encouraged. The design was so successful that a range of merchandise has been created, including plush toys, pencil cases and stickers, as well as personalised T-shirts, mugs and ceramic tiles bearing the image of customers' own creations.

Another Kiddy World interactive is a 3D game called 'Paint the World'. In a huge geodesic dome, users touch screens to draw coloured images, which are simultaneously projected onto the surface of the dome. Like the cyberfish, these drawings are then made available on printed merchandise.

Other interactives show previews of software and gadgets in E-world and allow customers to try

combinations of clothes in Fashion World. 'Dress Me Up', for example, is a simple interface designed in Flash (and consequently web-enabled), which allows users to mix and match clothes available in store and then link through direct to the website to purchase them on-line.

In Entertainment World, we developed a unique listening post. Under sound domes and via a touch screen, users select a robot, designed in 3D. Superimpose your image captured by camera onto the robot and select a CD for it to dance to. The system detects the beat and style of music and controls the movement of the character. Again, the recurring option of buying merchandise bearing your own handiwork is offered, through the option to print your robot onto a variety of products.

Finally, in I-Cosmetic World, the challenge of creating a realistic virtual makeover was met as we designed a fully integrated system that allows users to select current products available in store and apply them subtly to their image, again captured through a digital camera. Once complete, the image can be placed on a stylised magazine cover and printed or e-mailed to a friend as a souvenir. Within the same interactive station we also developed a fun interactive, 'Manga', which captures the user's image, and through a number of simple selections transforms the image into a cartoon character and places it into a selection of fantasy worlds. Once more, printing options and e-mail to a friend are available. 'The Look' is the third and final element of the cosmetic interactive, allowing users to view the latest look from a range of cosmetic houses, and providing product information and make-up tips.

Together, our media was designed both to achieve the branding objective of customer loyalty, and to deliver the 'WOW' factor so clearly required by Dickson Poon. As the final touches were made and bugs ironed out of the programs, the final effect amazed us. The combination of sound, light, physical design and active content is breathtaking. The project's speed was also a memorable aspect of the achievement, moving from the first conceptual presentation to the fully built environment in an extremely short time.

Dickson CyberExpress is a first in many ways. Its content is certainly unique. The working model trod new ground in that information was exchanged openly through a project intranet, enabling all parties to work together to deliver a genuinely higher impact than otherwise would have been achieved. The holistic approach to the design of all areas was a credit to the willingness of the consultants to work in partnership.

In Hong Kong the process of development continues with plans to refine and add to existing content through new interactive features. On-line integration is in progress, with many features

becoming available for the global audience. The true 'clicks and bricks' concept has been achieved, with economies of scale and advantages of overlap technology bringing new opportunities for the retail business. Future plans for the Dickson Group are in the pipeline, and locations in both the UK and US are being identified as potential roll-out targets.

It has been the most amazing challenge, but one in which radical design and technology have combined to make the future of retail clearer and a lot more entertaining.



I-Cosmetic World at Dickson CyberExpress