

AV's the centre of our attractions

AV is creative engineering - telling stories and creating experiences with technology one of its tools, concludes the panel at the first AV Roundtable for the Attractions & Entertainment sector. *Lindsey Reynolds reports.*



“There’s a wide range of different types of attraction and entertainment but we’re all storytellers and magicians,” says Blair Parkin, principal and EMEA director of Teecom, a firm providing consulting, technology project management and engineering services to the sector.

The ‘attractions and entertainments’ label certainly embraces diverse entities, including cultural and heritage and theme parks – a mixture of privately and publicly owned, free and pay-to-enter – many of which were represented on the panel.

Despite their differences, they are linked by the expectations of their very technology-aware visitors, who expect an experience they can’t get at home – and for that the sector turns increasingly to technology.

Storytelling with technology

There’s a constant pressure to keep it fresh and relevant, and get visitors through the doors, the panel agrees.

“We try to be innovative by telling stories rather than use technology for the sake of it,” says Simon

Casey, senior show services manager for Merlin Entertainments’ five London attractions – Madame Tussauds, Coca Cola London Eye, London Dungeon, Shrek’s Adventure! London and Sea Life.

Head of new media at London’s Science Museum, Dave Patten agrees that storytelling is vital. “You start with an object list for an exhibition, then look at what to add to help visitors understand its story – add text, audio or video for example,” explains Patten.

Innovation may also be a new twist or combination of ideas, says Kevin Murphy, director of sales and marketing for AV systems integrator, Kraftwerk Living Technologies.

“Innovation isn’t always about new technology,” agrees Dan Crompton, AV services manager for Tate London who, with his team of five staff and an army of freelancers, looks after hundreds of events and dozens of installations at Tate Britain and Tate Modern. “It’s collaborative innovation - take what you’ve got, integrate it with consumer electronics, see how you can twist it and make it work in the gallery.”

A current trend for theme parks is to move away from iron rides towards immersive experiences,

although some panellists expressed concern that, while UK theme parks want to innovate, they don’t know how.

“They’ve plodded on with thrill rides,” says Graham Wickman, director at 767 Consultants which provides AV consultancy services to museums, designers and theme parks, “but innovative approaches like the Warner Bros Tour, have opened their eyes. They have to catch up. It’s a great example of another key industry trend - the rise of the intellectual-property based attraction.”

This is a very different concept from Harry Potter themed rides at Universal Studios (like the new Hagrid’s Magical Creatures Motorbike Adventure, which combines media with iron-ride). The tour bridges the worlds of theme park and museum. The pre-booked tours show how the Harry Potter films were made, augmented with AV, and enabling visitors to experience the magic of the filmmaking at first hand.

Because the Harry Potter films were being made while the books were still being released, the production crew saved many of the sets, props and costumes in case they would be needed later in the

THE PANEL

- » Graeme Bunyan, Sysco Productions
- » Simon Casey, Merlin London Attractions
- » Dan Crompton, Tate
- » Benji Fox, Royal Academy of Arts
- » Paul Kent, Electrosonic
- » Graeme Massey, Jacobs Massey
- » Kevin Murphy, Kraftwerk Living Technologies
- » Blair Parkin, Teecom
- » Dave Patten, Science Museum
- » Chris Power, AV Cultural Forum
- » Graham Wickman, 767 Consultants

THE SPONSORS

- » Matthew Causton, AJA Video Systems
- » Kieran Walsh, Audinate
- » Duncan Savage, QSC
- » Joe Graziano, Christie

series. When the last film wrapped, they had accumulated a treasure trove of thousands of artefacts, many of which wouldn’t have been saved on a typical production, which have been preserved and showcased in the tour.

Europe, says Paul Kent, a senior consultant for entertainment at international systems integrator, Electrosonic is streets ahead of the UK in terms of innovation. Kent notes a trend towards pre-booking in European attractions and says dynamic pricing is also on its way, now that ticketing systems with the necessary agility are becoming available.

Innovation is also underway in the off-site experience. Simon Casey says they’re looking at how to drive pre-booking by building anticipation.

US innovation

Over in the US theme parks appear to find innovation easier than their UK counterparts. Greater competition makes it easier to find budget, says Wickman: “The US is such a massive market and they’re always trying to raise the bar.”

Funding mechanisms also vary by country. In the US for instance, there are tax incentives to fund the likes of libraries and museums, explains Parkin, who cites Morgan’s Wonderland in Texas, a Gordon Hartman Family Foundation initiative, as an example.

The drive to create ever better experiences that



According to our Roundtable panel of experts, the attractions and entertainment sector requires those with a broad set of skills which span creativity and technology.



Chris Power, AVCF



Dan Crompton, Tate



Dave Patten, Science Museum



Kevin Murphy, Kraftwerk



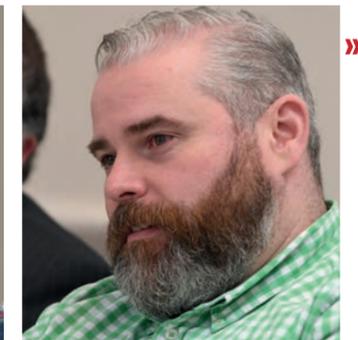
Graham Wickman, 767 Consultants



Blair Parkin, Teecom



Graeme Bunyan, Sysco Productions



Simon Casey, Merlin London Attractions

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Paul Kent, Electrosonic



Benji Fox, Royal Academy of Arts



Graeme Massey, Jacobs Massey



surprise and amaze can be very costly, although the sector often appears to lack understanding of the costs involved to deliver them, some of the panel suggest.

Many attractions turn to consultants and integrators for specialist knowledge. “We turn a brief into technology,” says Wickman, although the cost of delivering the client’s concept often proves “beyond what they can afford.” Reports Graeme Bunyan, director of technology for consultant and integrator, Sysco Productions: “We have to keep cutting down to fit the budget,” he explains, “because the client had no idea how much it would cost.”

Conversely, some clients will spend whatever it takes. “Even when we’ve spent a year on R&D for a client, some clients will double or even triple the budget if that’s what it takes to achieve what they’re after,” says Electrosonic’s Kent.

However big or small the budget, how it’s allocated varies. Wickman says 767 typically allocates one third to software, one third to hardware and the other to construction. Bunyan says they work on a 50:50 basis for media and networking at Sysco while Patten says it’s more like 70:30 even 80:20 at the Science Museum, depending on the amount of interactivity.

It helps if the AV technologists are brought into projects early. “Architects know the building, and clients know the artefacts and visitor experience,” says Bunyan. “But you need another team including AV to join those two book-ends.”

The “arrogance of architects” as one panellist phrased it, is a familiar complaint of the AV industry and clearly, further education is required to ensure all architects appreciate the benefits of getting AV to the table early on in a project and the impact on cost of failing to do so.

Take POCs (Points of Connection) for example, for network, sound and power. “They cost just pennies if done during the build,” explains Parkin. If they’re moved later on, the costs shoot up and “soak up the budget”.

Wickman notes a trend for designers to load costs in the base build, meaning integrators are forced to guess what will be needed and where, or opt for a grid to provide a flexible space. If they are brought in late, choice may be limited by that point.

Using consultants can help secure budget, in Patten’s experience. The Tate AV team engaged a consultant to help convince all its internal stakeholders of the need to replace some equipment. “The consultants talked to all the

stakeholders about how the space needed to work and spoke to fellow London museums before coming up with a comprehensive document that explained why we should replace the kit, gave gold, silver and bronze options and explained the performance we’d get from them. Best of all, the report provided the external view we wanted in the language of the trustees and high level executives – very succinct, accurate and unchallengeable.”

The external view of a consultant can also serve as a sense check, says Wickman, who cites the example of the Maritime Museum. “Its head of AV is perfectly capable of designing the system, but felt safer with external input to rubber stamp the design.”

Skill sets

The attractions and entertainment sector requires people with a broad set of skills spanning creativity and technology. Roundtable panellist, Benji Fox explains their responsibilities: “Our small team at the Royal Academy of Arts does all the exhibitions – the design, lighting and the creative systems – and the public events programme. The team does all the audio, the podcasting and archiving – quite a breadth.”

It’s not easy to find people with the right skills and there is certainly a lack of courses in Higher Education at present, meaning people come from other aligned disciplines, often from the theatre.

“Theatre has the built environment, audience, performance, technology and show,” says Parkin. “We need people that understand all these aspects.” Simon Casey couldn’t agree more. He studied at

drama school specifically to prepare for a career in theme parks. It wasn’t about acting, he explains. It was about learning how to make props, deal with the sound and lights.

Integrator Sysco Productions also has its roots in theatre. In its early years - a pre-digital age - they were theatre and concert designers, and now describe themselves as ‘story engineers’.

Chris Power, chairman of the AV Cultural Forum, a knowledge exchange for AV professionals in heritage, cultural and service owner organisations, says “scratch the surface of people in AV and you’ll find lots of musicians, film makers - creative people who are great problem solvers, practical and with the technical skills.”

One of the problems is there is a real lack of awareness amongst students so we need to raise the industry’s profile says Graeme Massey, managing director of AV recruitment firm, JacobsMassey.

Massey recently spoke to students at Middlesbrough College: “They know about sound engineering but no-one realised what the AV industry is.

“They come out of university with a large debt and want to know they’ll be able to get a good job. I’m convinced this industry would have huge appeal to students – you can go anywhere in the world and be part of this creative engineering process – and universities would surely jump at the chance to have someone from the likes of the Science Museum or Merlin Entertainment talk to their students about AV careers.

“Recruitment for AV positions is a problem for us and for everyone in the industry. We need to get out there and tell them.” ■

