

Signage in cinemas



Jim Slater went to the Screen Forum at The Vue, Westfield to see what's happening

It is not just the numbers of large screens that are increasing in cinemas. Cinema signage, advertising the latest movies, highlighting the stars of the shows, has been an integral part of the business for more than a century. The huge printed colour paper cinema poster, sometimes just pasted on the wall, sometimes mounted in a well-lit frame, remains the norm, and does its job well, and its remarkably low cost has until recently allowed it to see off any threats from the undoubtedly more modern electronic screens that have become the norm in the homes of cinemagoers worldwide.

The sheer size of the standard 'one sheet' at 27 x 41 inches and its multiples the two sheet and the three sheet (41 x 81) made it difficult for video screens to compete, but with the coming of much cheaper large screen LCD and Plasma displays to the domestic market at prices of a few hundred pounds, the possibilities for ruggedized versions of such screens to be used both inside and outside our cinemas have now grown, and several companies are taking the chance to move into this new business sector.

The Screen Forum is an independent group dedicated to the on-going development of the digital signage industry. Its members include representatives from all aspects of this rapidly growing medium, which is also commonly referred to as digital out-of-home, digital screen media and captive audience

networks. Established in 2006, The Screen Forum UK is an established part of the European digital signage scene. Its popular events and breakfast meetings highlight the key issues facing the industry and attract the leading experts from across the sector, and I was pleased to take up their invitation to attend one of their recent events, which was held at one of London's newest and plushiest of cinema venues, the Vue at the Westfield shopping centre in Shepherd's Bush. I had been to the shopping centre when it first opened, and as a typical male unenthusiastic shopper can remember thinking '270 glamorous shops and nothing I want to buy!', but the Vue cinema at the top of the centre is something completely different – a great 14 screen example of a modern multiplex built to the highest standards.

BREAKFAST BRIEFING

The Screen's 'breakfast briefing' event, a sort of mini-conference, was held in Vue's Screen 2, and I was interested to see just how many well-known cinema industry professionals had taken the trouble to attend – screen and projector manufacturers, installers, and integrators. Screen 2 is by no means the biggest of the Westfield auditoria, but it is luxuriously fitted out with comfortable tilting seats, and proved exactly right for the event, and I was interested to overhear a couple of delegates say that they had never had so much leg room in a multiplex. The Vue technical team had done a good job in setting up the 'theatre let' for the conference, with a lectern, microphone and PA speakers, with all the wiring taped down neatly, but I couldn't help wondering, and actually asked Vue's Sales and Marketing MD later why this very latest in cinemas hadn't been equipped ready for conferences from day one – I guess nobody thought about it in time.

Richard Cobbold (below left), Chairman of The Screen, welcomed the delegates and introduced the first speaker, the well-known Mark de Quervain (below right), Sales and Marketing Director of Vue Entertainment.



Mark had been part of the original management team behind the launch of Vue cinemas, and he said that he had been with the company since it had just two screens, and had helped it grow until they now had 68 cinemas, with 60% of the population within 30 minutes travel time of a Vue cinema. Mark explained how Vue is using digital technology not only to provide top quality on-screen digital cinema entertainment, but also to use a range of digital formats to transform its venues and to develop its unique cinemagoing experience.

THE MOST MODERN CIRCUIT

He told how Vue has the most modern and up to date multiplex circuit, with its screens being on average only nine years old and 95% having stadium seating. He said that digital cinema had been 'game-changing' for the whole cinema industry and, in true salesperson form, said that digital had represented 'a once in a generation paradigm shift' for the business. As well as providing consistently first rate cinema pictures and sound, Digital cinema brings flexibility in programming and gives audiences the chance of new alterna-



tive content, live and in 3D. The coming of digital cinema advertising would allow for more advertising at lower cost with changes possible at shorter notice, and the impact of 3D on advertisers was still to be recognised. Mark gave examples of how some of the various digital events that they had hosted had brought in magnificent returns, with just three events over one weekend grossing some £450,000 in total – quite a boost for the normal cinema takings.

IT'S SONY 4K FOR VUE

Mark gave the long-awaited 'official' announcement that Vue had signed a contract with Sony the previous Friday night to equip all its cinemas with Sony Digital Cinema 4K projectors, and he said that the rollout would begin immediately and be complete by the end of 2012. Sony and Vue share a 'digital vision' of how they want to proceed over the coming years, with lots of new ideas, including the use of digital signage, and he told us that the contract had been signed only after the Vue Fulham test site had worked flawlessly for months. 3D will continue to be rolled out – in March 2011 Vue currently have 182 3D screens, 28% of their total. He explained how Vue are looking at new 'pre-show' opportunities, and how they are testing and trialling a range of digital signage ideas to give customers an exceptional experience in both foyer and auditorium.

The marketing guys had obviously been working hard on Mark's presentation, and he came up with some of the factors that would provide these experiences, quoting 'A Vuenique experience with Sony 4k', 'Breath-taking Vue', and 'Vue Profound Sound', which I gathered to be a 'tweaked' form of Dolby Digital, providing 'professionally mixed immersive sound quality'. The stepped seating, along with big floor to ceiling and wall to wall screens he called 'SuperVue', saying that everybody had a perfect sight-line to the screen, and he showed how this was bringing

in high-quality and high-spending audiences – the Vue Westfield had sold three bottles of Crystal Champagne at £250 the previous week! He foresaw a growing portfolio of products and services joining the core cinema business and gave some ideas that they are currently discussing. These included pre-school programming, girls' nights out (guys are rubbish at organising such things, he claimed!), Vue gaming, Vue Sports, Vue education, and Vue...tbc!

But he was careful to stress that all these ideas are extras, all ideas to run alongside the core business of Vue cinema.

Mark told us about the new Vue website www.myvue.com which was currently being trialled in Aberdeen prior to a nationwide rollout. He expressed the importance of a good website, saying that the previous site had three million unique users per month.

ON TO SIGNAGE

Having given us the 'big sell' for Vue cinema, Mark eventually focused on the key topic of the day – using signage and other technologies in cinema foyers. He admitted that foyer development had in some ways lagged behind that of the actual cinema screens, but promised that all that is due to change dramatically. Foyers will become much nicer places for customers to spend time in, whilst maintaining their key ability to quickly cope with large numbers of incoming customers at peak times. Vue is planning for its foyers to be less cluttered – he asked us to note that there are no cardboard 'standees' at the Westfield site. Foyers will be more 'joined up', and would begin to take advantage of the technological devices that customers now carry with them, allowing for easy interaction between the cinema and the customers' hand-held devices, whether phones or iPads.

Josh Honda (top right) is Sony Digital Cinema 4K European Strategic Marketing Manager, and he began by saying that the change to digital in cinema exhibition was nothing less

than a revolution, cleverly illustrating this with crowd scenes from the 'real' revolution happening in Egypt at the time of the Westfield event. The advantages of a change from film to digital affect all sides of the business – at the projection end it's much easier to transport and handle a 200GByte hard drive than 3000 metres of film weighing 20Kg, and at the production end the studios are motivated to move away from film distribution by the undoubted success of the DCI specifications.



DCI COMPLIANT

Having had his thunder stolen a little bit by Mark's previous announcement that Vue will equip all its cinemas with Sony Digital Cinema 4K projectors, Josh was able to provide an equally interesting announcement to Cinema Technology readers by telling the audience that Sony were at that moment preparing a press release that would show that the Sony SRX R320 and SRX R220 projectors with Sony Media Server had passed both parts one and two of the Digital Cinema Initiatives Compliance Procedural Test Plan. Josh said that this meant that the Sony Digital Cinema 4K Projector and Sony Media Server is the world's first digital cinema projector and media server (media block) combination to have passed the DCI Compliance test as a working system.

4K BECOMING THE NORM

Josh explained the importance of the Vue contract, saying that more than 1000 of the UK's 3700 cinema screens would be using Sony Digital Cinema 4K by the end of next year, which meant that 4K has moved on from being a specialist 'Ferrari' product into the mainstream of digital cinema, and the Sony system will provide UK cinemagoers with the best possible visual experience, tying in with Vue's aims. Releases in digital format are currently increasing quickly, currently at about 70% of the studios output, and although most DCPs are currently 2K this too is likely to change – the original film material is now scanned at a minimum of 4K, with some being scanned at 6K and even 8K, suggesting that the studios don't really want anything below 4K. Josh showed slides illustrating how 4K is 'way beyond' 2K, using the somewhat questionable mathematical statement that $4K = 2K^2$ and not $2K \times 2$. His message, and that of Sony, is that the whole electronic imaging industry is moving to higher resolutions, as shown by the exciting work on Super-HD TV systems, and he even told us that his mobile phone contained an 8.1 megapixel camera (almost 4K) – overkill for most of us, I would have thought!



Examples of how the Sony Ziris Canvas system can be used to provide multiple images over multiple screens in an unlimited range of layouts - each screen is a large screen HDTV display

SIGNS WITH A DIFFERENCE



Josh's colleague Martijn Bakker (left) is Sony's Digital Signage Product Manager, and he explained the growing links between digital cinema and digital signage in cinemas, showing how the move from posters to

digital signs is providing cinema with a whole host of new business opportunities, increasing the chances to capture your audience and to get your marketing messages across to them.

He provided numerous examples of cinema auditoria across the world where digital signage had been installed in various formats, and said that it had been proven that such signage increases the revenue taken by the cinema. Special promotions advertised on the digital signs had far more impact on sales than traditional posters.

It isn't just a case of duplicating the poster information digitally, though, the screen must become more than just a decoration, and the

information has to be changing and 'live' to make people want to look at the screen - it is vital to keep the information 'fresh'.

Martijn showed examples from Cinema City, Dubai, from Utopolis, Luxembourg, and from Norway, where package deals have been done for cinemas alongside the Sony 4K projection equipment.

He introduced a new electronic signage concept called Ziris Canvas, which uses clever software to work with multiple display screens in a variety of shapes and sizes to show HD images and videos, creating limitless possibilities and eye-catching layouts, breaking down the confines of the screen, with user-friendly software allowing creative teams to explore new and exciting ways of displaying content to customers in a range of environments.

Ziris Canvas users can create walls of screens displaying content in Full HD, creating huge impact and emotional engagement with the content. Ziris Canvas is unlimited in the size of the area HD content can be shown on (your budget may not be so unlimited,

though!), from a few screens for smaller spaces to multiple screens positioned in variety of ways, with images stretched across multiple screens but with the original Full HD resolution. Multiple, related pieces of content can be displayed, images and logos can be displayed next to video, which can be displayed across single or multiple screens with screens connected across several walls, floors and ceilings, to immerse the viewer in HD content and your advertising message. Sony provide the technology and also help customers to create the content, and there are four different Sony signage solutions to cope with all requirements.

The systems now include metadata to simplify signage solutions across a number of sites, and Martijn showed an example of how a single countrywide playlist might be distributed to all cinemas, whilst metadata within the digital playlist could link particular local content to different sites, allowing different 'regional' content to be automatically inserted into the main playlist when this was shown in Manchester and Glasgow, for example.

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George Eyles (left), Head of Digital Cinema and Signage at Arqiva, a company I knew better as a broadcasting and satellite service provider, but one that I now know also has a significant presence in the digital signage market - I was later shown several huge Arqiva advertising signs around the Westfield site - spoke about the relationship between digital cinema and digital signage. He began by talking about the future of movie distribution, showing how the current 'cans and vans' scenario hasn't moved very far in the last decade except for some of the film cans being replaced by hard-drives, and pointing out the disadvantages compared with a new 'Electronic Delivery' solution that Arqiva is pioneering.

'COURIER IN THE SKY'

He stressed that Arqiva is not trying to replace the current film distributors, but instead will be providing a 'courier in the sky' service, where movies are sent via satellite from the film distributors and automatically delivered to the appropriate cinema management system and ingested into the servers for distribution to individual screens. The Arqiva receiver checks that all the incoming data has been received error-free before handing it over to the TMS. Arqiva are currently delivering cinema packages to some 450 sites, and they maintain a network operating centre at Chalfont, Buckinghamshire. When dealing with Digital Cinema systems, Arqiva can provide the network system that allows a third party such as AAM or XDC to schedule and manage playout 'logs' for studio Virtual Print Fee systems. Within Digital Signage systems, however, Arqiva actually provides the content management, scheduling and audit logs.

I was interested to learn that Dolby's DCP mastering centre in Wootton Bassett, near Swindon, has a 1Gbit/s connection into the Arqiva site at Chalfont.

ALTERNATIVE CONTENT

As well as the delivery of DCPs (Digital Cinema Packages), satellites play a major part in 'live' alternative content events, where they provide a robust high-bandwidth delivery system. He spoke of some of the events that Arqiva have been involved with, including live 3D sporting and operatic occasions, and said that these are currently complex and difficult. There are no current overall technical standards for such events, but much work is currently ongoing to make such events easier for cinemas to deal with on a routine basis. Alternative Content revenue is forecast to grow, and should be around \$500,000 by 2014, but George pointed out that this still represents only about 2% of cinema revenues, so there is still much room for growth.

COMPARING CINEMA & SIGNAGE

George compared the digital cinema business with that of digital signage, saying that there are some similarities in that a content delivery network is needed for what is essentially a store and forward system, but that whereas the DCI specs are very tight so that every cinema operator will be operating in the same way, for advertising and signage there are no real standards and the cinema industry is still a 'cottage industry' as far as electronic signage is concerned. In signage the need is to be able to plug in a whole range of content in any format, including Flash, DivX, MPEG etc. These differences between cinema and signage will be overcome - advertising for the big screen is currently being delivered by satellite - but it will take some considerable time before content delivery for signage can be provided together with an integrated system allowing centralised control of advertising with local variations for particular sites.

CINEMA ADVERTISING

Garfield Smith (above right) is chief Executive of Boomerang Media Group, and he provided a very good overview of the UK cinema advertising market, explaining how on-screen advertising is dominated by DCM and Pearl and Dean but the foyer advertising rights are delegated down to a number of other companies, including Boomerang, Primesite, and Bluepod. He gave the marketing 'spiel' telling how cinema advertising

is tremendously effective, delivering truly captive audiences of the highest quality in a receptive state of mind, and gave figures showing how cinema advertising revenue had grown to £178 million in 2010, with a further growth of around 5% expected in 2011.



He considered that the future for digital advertising was exciting, but couldn't be certain as to how things would develop - signs for the US were encouraging, with significant growth in the last two years.

Garfield discussed the differences in screen advertising times in different countries - typically up to 9 minutes on average here, but up to 12 minutes in some countries - and he reminded us that there had been virtually no advertising at all in US cinemas up to about 12 years ago.

Cinema advertising needn't be high cost - he quoted some Norwegian work where local contractors were able to provide low-cost but high quality local advertising. He felt that the technology for digital signage was now ready, with even 6-sheet posters ready to be replaced by digital signs. There is currently a digital poster pilot project scheme under way, and the initial results suggest that this will be ready for rollout within the next 12 months. Garfield showed us a promo illustrating how digital 'posters' in cinemas have already proved beneficial to both customers and cinema profits, and he ended positively, saying that the move to digital signage is cinema is very much 'work in progress'.

NETWORKING TIME

The morning finished as it had begun, with the opportunity to take coffee and talk with others from a wide spectrum of the industry - as well as the expected advertising people and projector and electronic screen manufacturers I noticed several installers and integrators keenly interested in the opportunities that a move into the digital signage market in cinema might bring. It was interesting to learn how new cinemas are becoming showcases for the best in display and digital signage technology, and to be shown just how effective some of these new signs can be.

For details of how to join The Screen and to benefit from an independent group dedicated to the ongoing development of the digital signage industry go to www.thescreen.org

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