

Doing ‘The Wave’ and other news, test talk from FS/TEC

By ALAN J. LIDDLE
On Technology

(May 12, 2008) Recall Tom Cruise and his projected, motion-controlled display in the future-world flick, “Minority Report,” and you get a sense of the visual impact of one of the visual aids exhibited at FS/TEC 2008 in Grapevine, Texas. The large, high-definition, flat-screen display, on which content could be manipulated with hand gestures and without contact, was from Solaris Labs of Westmount, Quebec. It is slated for unspecified use by interactive-restaurant developer uWink Inc. in a Mountain View, Calif., branch expected to open within months.

Also turning heads in the exhibit hall was a wireless, touch screen device supporting customer pay-at-table functions, guest surveying, and the display of still and video images for entertainment and promotions. That package from TableTop Media of Dallas is in test at the Grapevine branch of the nine-unit Cozymel’s Mexican Grill chain, which made it easy for some FS/TEC types to go observe the silicon beast in its natural setting.

Among other technology tests cited by exhibitors was a trial in San Francisco involving “near-field chip,” or NFC, technology from VIVOtech Inc. of Santa Clara, Calif. The technology permits users of special cell phones to pay for rides on the Bay Area Rapid Transit line and find and pay for food at participating Jack in the Box restaurants.

It was satisfying to see and hear about such interesting applications, among others, given the economic climate. But some folks with more tech-tracking time than me said such forward motion should be the norm.

“Keeping up is a fool’s game... I want an advantage,” FS/TEC keynote speaker Dan Burrus said of how technology could “change reality” to better serve guests, improve human resources management or enhance operations. “It doesn’t have to be new technology” that gives businesses a leg up on rivals, it might be “better use of my old technology,” added Burrus, a forecaster and author of “Technotrends,” among other books.

The Grapevine Cozymel’s has been testing TableTop Media’s hybrid payment-promotion-entertainment devices since January after limited trials in 2007. Along with supporting multimedia promotions and touch screen surveys, the technology permits patrons to close out their tabs, split the check among people at the table as they wish, automate the tip process, and swipe their own payment card for protection against fraud and identity theft.

Early results suggest that the technology, which is now in use on about 30 tables, is contributing to increased guest satisfaction, product trial and revenue at the test site run by Food, Friends and Co. of Dallas, Cozymel’s parent.

“Cozymel’s has been very impressed with the initial results from the TableTop Media solution,” Food, Friends and Co. president Mary Russo wrote in a statement about the trial. “Items promoted on the device represent a double-digit increase compared to traditional table top promotions.”

Cozymel’s Grapevine general manager, Mike McPhail, added, “We are seeing faster table turns, shorter wait times, repeat guests and operational efficiency across the board.”

In the San Francisco trial involving NFC chip technology and First Data Corp. support, 230 BART riders, who are also Sprint cellular service users, were given Samsung phones that serve as payment devices. The users tag their phones on readers at BART station gates for entry and can hold the devices up to Jack in the Box “smart advertisements” containing VIVOtech chips to have displayed on their phones directions to the closest restaurant. At the restaurants, testers can use the cashless-payment technology in the phones to buy their meals.

This sounds like one test in which no one can disparage the participants for phoning it in.