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See and Swim Adventure

Dolphin sanctuary's retail space lets shoppers relive their visit

To begin with an understatement, human-to-electronics interfaces have become exponentially more pervasive in the past decade. Most notably, Apple's iPhone has upgraded the once-practical cell phone to nothing less than a personal companion/wayfinder.

Meanwhile, social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace have created virtual communities. And electronic messaging displays are increasingly an integral component in retail and public spaces.

Nevertheless, it is far from clear that all this connectivity is necessarily enhancing real communication among humans – to say nothing of humankind's intermittent efforts to improve communications with *other* species.

Take, for example, Dolphin Cay, where creatively deployed electronic displays can be integrated into a physical space to extend and reinforce an emotional encounter with fellow mammals, albeit aquatic ones.

Dolphin Cay is a new, 11-acre, state-of-the-art dolphin rescue and education center located at Atlantis, Paradise Island, Bahamas. The habitat was created for 17 dolphins that previously resided at the Marine Life Oceanarium in Gulfport, Miss., which was destroyed by Hurricane Katrina. The dolphins' new home is an interactive haven, where resort guests can swim and interact with dolphins in the 7 million-gallon artificial habitat.

When the commission to design a new retail, reception and educational space for Dolphin Cay was awarded to Toronto-based

The Dolphin Cay's retail space features curved fixtures and shelves that mirror the shapes of the dolphin sculptures overhead. In the foreground is one of the interactive LCD screens where visitors can view and select photos of their swim with the resort's dolphins.

Interior Images, a div. of Richard Johnson Photography, Toronto



Upon entering the Dolphin Cay retail space, visitors are greeted by two wall-mounted flatscreens, at left in the shot above, that provide “teaser” footage of previous groups’ experiences.

Launch By Design, principal Ann Bada-Crema decided to experience the resort’s dolphin swim for herself. She says it was the healing and spiritual quality of that encounter that inspired her creative effort.

“When you swim with them, these creatures give off an intense, healing energy,” says Bada-Crema. “My goal in designing the retail space was to emulate every step of the dolphin encounter, both in the texture of the physical environment and the extension of visitors’ personal experiences.”

It was the latter objective that inspired the deployment of electronic displays to generate revenue through sales of customized photo-CDs, which commemorate the individual experience of each visitor. At Dolphin Cay, each group of participants in the interactive program is joined by a professional photographer. Later, as group members are changing out of wetsuits, the photographer uploads the photo image files into a central server, which distributes the files to the retail area.

When the swimmers emerge from their

dolphin adventure, they enter a space Bada-Crema envisioned as a simulation of their experience. Two types of flat-screen interfaces form a key component of the welcome. First, a pair of wall-mounted 40-inch plasma screens at the left of the entrance present “teaser” footage of previous groups’ visits.

This broadcast is intended as a bridge back to the past hour’s adventure, and to provide viewers with visual reminders of the memorable moment they have just experienced. Arrayed below the plasmas is a 40-foot raised counter housing a series of 12 interactive LCD screens. At these stations, visitors are able to retrieve, view and sort through a hundred or more photos of their swims. The customized CDs are available for sale in the retail area, the hotel and online.

Bada-Crema specified a textured aqua blue solid surface for the counter top, incorporating several Caribbean water colors into glass panels along the front face. These shimmering shades and textures were echoed throughout the roughly circular shopping space, which repeats graceful curves that mirror the shapes of the dolphin sculptures suspended overhead.

The combination of track lighting, strategically suspended blue bulkheads above and a reflected glass mosaic floor pattern below contributes to a sensation of swimming underwater. (The project’s lighting won an Innovation Award in the 2007 VM+SD/ISP International Store Design Competition. For more winners in that competition, see page 14.)

The interactive photo viewing counters have proven to be an effective means of generating profitable sales of the commemorative CDs. But because the proceeds from retail sales help support the dolphin program, these electronic contrivances can also be viewed as a practical tool for establishing better mammal-to-mammal relations on this blue planet. ❖

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