

Interactive Displays Installed in Virgin Megastores

By Dawn Klingensmith

LOS ANGELES — Working with **Epson** and **GestureTek**, a Toronto-based creator of gesture-controlled digital signage, **Virgin Entertainment Group** installed interactive floor displays in two Virgin Megastore retail outlets, including the recently restyled Times Square location in New York and a newly opened store in Hollywood.

Unveiled in December 2005, the digital signage system projects imagery from the sleeve of Nirvana's perennially popular album "Nevermind" onto a durable floor mat. As customers walk across or gesture over the image, it instantly reacts to their movements, and crowds form as people discover that they can manipulate the image's content, says Ken Donham, senior manager of visual merchandising for Virgin Entertainment Group.

The retail chain — which sells music, DVDs, electronics, games, books and fashion — plans to change the projected image periodically and roll out displays to other stores across the nation in keeping with the company's strategy of entertaining customers to the extent that they "would want to purchase a piece or several pieces of product as souvenirs, taking a piece of the store experience home with them," Donham adds.

Virgin chose the 1991 Nirvana album for its inaugural displays because it's a Top 50 seller for the chain, and its cover — featuring a swimming baby in pursuit of a dollar bill — is considered iconic, Donham says.

Driven by GestureTek's patented GroundFX software, the signage sys-

tem combines image-projection, motion-sensing, directional-audio and computer-animation technologies to enable customers to exert control over the graphics. People can wave their hands over the projected image to create ripples in the water, cause the baby to bob, or make the dollar bill float around. At the Hollywood store, setting the graphics in motion also activates a sound bite of one of the album's classic guitar riffs.

Asked if mischievous customers could subject the infant to abuse, GestureTek President Vincent John Vincent laughs and says, "No, it's not like you kick it and it goes flying; it just moves a little, and you get the sound bite."

The Times Square display is on the

lower level near the escalator and is intended to draw traffic from the main level. The Hollywood display is near the main entrance and is intended to coax curious passersby into the store.

The system consists of a projector, a computer and a camera with infrared emitters that instantly read and respond to people's movements. These components mount to the ceiling in a cabinet that's about 20 inches wide, 15 inches tall and 15 inches deep, roughly the size of a microwave oven. "The system is self-contained, so you don't need to run wires anywhere; all you have is a power cord that plugs into a normal electrical outlet," Vincent says.

In addition to taking the lead in the six-month planning and developing process, Epson America Inc. — headquartered in Long Beach, Calif. — provided the 5,000-lumen projectors, which cast a 5-foot by 7-foot image onto a highly reflective white mat produced by 3M, St. Paul, Minn.

Using Macromedia Flash, a graphics animation program, GestureTek's creative team of programmers and animators developed the content for the displays, which cost about \$30,000 each. However, Virgin purchased GestureTek's proprietary content-development software with an eye toward developing new interactive images for existing signage as well as for displays that will roll out to other stores.

Donham declined to discuss specifics for future rollouts, and he couldn't say how often the signage will change at the Times Square and Hollywood locations. "It will change as often as needed; that's the advantage of using this flexible system," he explains.

He indicated that the technology would be used to promote album releases and relevant brands. As an "added bonus," Donham says, Virgin can also generate revenues by leasing time to advertisers.

Epson provides ongoing service to the displays, but the system is low-maintenance, says John French, Epson's strategic business manager for digital marketing. The projector's lamp and air filters need to be replaced about every six months, and the floor mat, though durable, acquires scuff marks, which employees can scrub off.

The displays complement Virgin Megastore's interactive listening and viewing posts, where customers can sample thousands of music tracks or movies.

Dave Alder, chief marketing officer for Virgin Entertainment Group, says customer response to the interactive displays has been enthusiastic: "We believe that [the display] has become a talking point that encourages other customers to visit. It's impossible to pinpoint a sales increase, but it certainly helps to set us apart." ■



When a shopper moves her arm above this digital projection, the baby bobs in the ocean and a sound bite from Nirvana's popular album plays. The display is in two Virgin Megastore locations.

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