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Interfun

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FOR KIDS



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Why sensory makes sense

How interactive surfaces are keeping kids entertained in a wide range of venues

It isn't very often that I take my grandchildren to a fast food establishment. It is perhaps governed by concerns for what they are eating, balanced by the "treat" that they seem to appreciate because the fast food companies market themselves so well, and the razzmatazz always has appeal.

A visit to McDonald's is the preferred (by the grandchildren, at least) venue and on a recent visit I noticed that my grandchildren were whiling away the time that I was spending in the line to buy their meal deal by jumping around a matrix of flashing lights.

An "interactive surface" was being employed by the company to entertain their guests and, judging by the enthusiasm with which my grandbrood were elbowing their smaller competitors out of the way, the entertainment does just that.

What, I wondered, is the commercial rationale behind the installation of what appeared to be a free attraction? And would it work in other types of location, particularly a family entertainment centre?

I got the answers from one of the specialists in the field of interactive playgrounds, EyeClick, a US-based company with a global network of sales.

It is all about harnessing children's innate



desire to challenge and compete in such a way that the process also develops healthy activity; and the foot-traffic that it can generate makes a significant contribution to a location's performance.

Floors, walls and tables, are all well within the product compass of EyeClick, appealing to advertising and media businesses, used in events and trade shows and specific locations

with high foot-traffic such as airports. The technology is well advanced and what the company calls MotionAware means that the display switches on when it detects movement. But it also has the ability to play games with people – and that's where the amusement and entertainment industry comes in.

For EyeClick read EyePlay, part of the company which is its acknowledgement of the

potential in the wider amusement industry.

Inroads have long since been made, with interactive floors and walls in family entertainment centres and other facilities all over the world – dedicated to bringing fun and movement to families in a safe, hygienic and customisable manner. “We’ve carried out installations in several franchises of Pump It Up in the US,” said Andru Miller, marketing manager at EyeClick. “They have also gone into FECs in many other countries, including Polliwogs Play Pad in Singapore, Cool de Sac and others in the UK, France, Spain and Norway.”

The great conundrum for FEC owners, surely, is the known of cost balanced against the unknown of the resulting enhanced income. “Yes, the interactive walls and floors are free to play,” says Andru. “The systems are not used by businesses as an income producer – at least, not directly. Rather they are positioned as a way to generate business and income across the board.”

The appeal is not just to children either, for the parents – at least the responsible ones! – are always conscious of the necessity to encourage their offspring to exercise; to use up that seemingly endless supply of pent-up energy in some meaningful way. “The hand-to-eye exercise, the manual dexterity involved in skipping on the lights as they illuminate or slapping a colour on a wall matrix, is healthy and non-toxic.

“If an FEC owner is thinking about installing a new product, maintenance is another major consideration. EyePlay is not only germ-free, but low in running costs. Wiping down the entire facility every day is no longer an issue. But more importantly from the FEC parent’s point of view is the consideration that interactive surfaces represent a tool that builds a wide variety of skills. They include motor skills, co-ordination and literacy as kids read the games. And there is a wide variety of games, many of them educational.”



The systems can be used to foster language skills as the children interact with each other as they play and can teach social and emotional development skills.

The installations don’t need to be ring-fenced or manned and will happily co-exist alongside softplay and other fun pastimes. The only requirements are in the brightness of the lighting and the finish of the floor. And, of course, the space can always be utilised for other purposes if needed – by simply switching the system off.

No instruction on the use of the floor or wall system is needed, because the software tends to be intuitive and even the youngest players quickly see what they have to do.

Installation of these systems is handled by the company selling them, through its own

installation team or one of its partner resellers. With the required internet connection there is always support, software updates and the ability to buy new games as they are available.

The \$64,000 question is the ROI, of course. There are many factors which influence this, not least of all the ability for the uplift to manifest itself in a measurable way. Much depends upon the geographic location, but many of the systems, including EyeClicks, are priced competitively and leasing may be an alternative.

What do the operators say? Jay Watkins, general manager at the Get Air indoor trampoline park in Temecula, California, US, put a virtual playground in and said: “Everyone seems to love it.” Paul Noon, manager at Adventures on Wonderland, an indoor playground in London, Ontario, Canada: “Kids are drawn to it and parents are pleased with the games.” The Venetian Hotel in Macau, China, now has one too. Tony Lam, director of retail and leisure operations, said: “Our innovative activity centre offers climbing structures and computer games, but also a virtual playground; we wanted to offer tools for personal development that would boost children’s abilities and confidence.”

It isn’t then simply a matrix on the floor or wall. Instead it can be a virtual playground in which children can play with their entire body on life-size interactive games.

Will it encourage footfall?

Put it like this: if I give my grandchildren the option of a McDonald’s with an interactive floor and one without, the one with wins every time... Appropriately, hands down.

David Snook

