

INTENTIONAL ANXIETY

SpotMagic qualifies attendees by forcing their attention underfoot.

Exhibiting an intangible product is a challenge. Make the product nonexistent as well as intangible, and you have “mission impossible,” right? Wrong. Just ask SpotMagic, which, despite those obstacles, found a way to stop attendees in their tracks.

The start-up company had just spent three years “underground,” developing a new interactive multimedia distribution technology. This new software allows users to distribute interactive multimedia over a range of modes — television, radio, computer, etc. —

faster, more easily and without costly hardware enhancements or high-speed data connections.

“We really didn’t have a product yet, but we had this technology,” says president John Armstrong, “and we wanted to explore where we might go with it.” To Armstrong and his partner, Robin Solis, the technology was the greatest thing since the modem. But they wanted a second opinion.

Emphasize the human connection

The company decided to take the technology on the road and show it to potential users. “We wanted to know if the technology appealed to them and how they might use it,” says Armstrong. “Even though we didn’t have anything to sell yet, we wanted to start building excitement about the technology and its possibilities.”

SpotMagic selected the National Association of Broadcasters show, which attracts 85,000 radio and television industry professionals. While most NAB exhibitors target attendee job titles, SpotMagic was seeking a specific personality profile. The company wanted to attract



SpotMagic creates a raised floor made of six 150-gallon aquarium tanks to screen attendees. Those brave souls who step on it are more likely to try the company's unconventional new technology.

attendees who were “open-minded, courageous and not afraid to experiment,” according to Armstrong. These were the people who were more likely to try SpotMagic’s new technology and then promote it word-of-mouth.

But, the company faced one major hurdle: What would be the focus of its exhibit? Although the company was 3-years-old, it hadn’t gone public yet. So the name “SpotMagic” would mean zilch to show attendees.

“Clearly, the design of the booth had to be driven by the technology,” says designer Paul Tsang, who was hired only six weeks before the show’s start. The company wasn’t really focused on what direction they were going to take the technology or how they were going to market it. So it was important that whatever we did in the booth was more broad than specific. To me, that meant creating an abstract exhibit.”

Armstrong’s and Solis’s additional design objectives required a booth that would:

- *Be organic, not high-tech.* “We’re radio, television, film and advertising people,” says Solis. “We’re not computer people. So we asked

Paul to design a booth that was more organic. Even though we’re pushing software, that’s not what we’re really about. We prefer to emphasize the human communications aspect, rather than the software.”

- *Give visitors an experience or sensation like they’ve never had before.* “We wanted to convey the feeling that the company was very different from any other company (at the show),” says Solis. “So the booth had to be totally unconventional.”

Go fish

To make the SpotMagic exhibit “atypical,” Tsang

first had to identify what was “typical” in trade show exhibits. “I discovered in my research that most booths deal with structure,” says Tsang, a multidisciplinary designer. “Nobody really deals with the floor or the ceiling of an exhibit. Unfortunately, time didn’t allow me to do something with the ceiling. So I decided to do something unusual with the floor.”

To call Tsang’s solution “unusual” is an understatement. Tsang’s vision was for a raised bamboo floor inset with six 150-gallon tanks. Three of the tanks were actual aquariums stocked with tropical fish. “I decided on the fish because I wanted something in the booth that had motion to subliminally make the point of connectivity,” says Tsang. The three remaining tanks were filled with an odd collection of unrelated items but each with symbolic meaning. “I chose eggs to imply a company hatching; bonsai trees to imply growth; and a photo of a woman swimming upward from underwater to imply someone breaking out of something,” says Tsang.

Tsang’s floor tank selections were all items

'We weren't selling to just anybody. We wanted people who are courageous.'

that people don't typically walk on. So the experience of stepping on them in the exhibit would be intentionally unnerving.

"At first, the convention center didn't want us to use the fish tanks in the floor of the booth," says Tsang. "They were afraid the tanks wouldn't hold the water." (Imagine 450 gallons of stinky fish water sloshing through neighboring exhibits.) But they finally relented after the project was approved by a structural engineer. To protect the tanks from damage, Tsang created a "buffer" between the actual floor surface and the tanks. "We had the fish tanks, a middle layer of 1/8-inch plexiglass and a top layer of 1/2-inch plexiglass," he says.

Tsang admits that the raised and unusual flooring created a psychological "wall" for attendees. "Many people walked up to the booth but didn't walk on it," he says.

But Solis insists that this is just what they wanted to happen. "We weren't looking to sell to just anybody," she says. "We were looking for people who are courageous and experimental — the kind of people who would use our product.

We found that those who weren't afraid to step on the floor, were just the type of attendee we were targeting."

Subliminally, the booth challenged attendees to try something they've never tried before. "Our hook was, 'Come on, let us help you walk on water,'" says Solis. "We wanted them to put aside traditional thinking and open their minds to the possibilities with our technology. But it required a leap of faith."

The technology's capabilities were showcased on three 15-inch computer monitors at the back of the booth encased in sandblasted, pastel blue and yellow plexiglass. "In retrospect, we should have used bigger monitors," Tsang comments. "But originally SpotMagic didn't want the monitors too big because they wanted people to step up into the booth to look at them, not be able to just glance at them from the aisle."

Because so much attention would be drawn to the floor, Tsang placed the company's marketing message there too. "There was no sense putting traditional graphics on the backwall because nobody would be looking there," he observes.

"They'd all be looking at the floor." The marketing message Tsang used was actually a string of words in bright hues that illustrated the various applications of the technology. The only graphics text on the exhibit's black backwall was the company name.

Was Tsang concerned that the floor text would be obscured by attendees standing on it? "I knew people would be afraid to walk on the tanks," he says. "So I didn't worry about crowds of people covering the text."

The exhibit was a big hit with attendees — attracting droves of "gawkers." "We definitely made an impression, and that's really all we were trying to do," says Solis. After all, who could possibly forget the first time they ever walked on water? ♦

— By Kristin Troff Pavek, associate editor.

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