

So What Is Interactive Television And Why Should It Work For Me?

A general overview of Interactive Television: exploring the ITV concept, innovations and beyond.

By Peter DeMilio ■ *Insight Media Group*

During the mid 1990s, the American leisure industry was experiencing slow, but steady growth. As part of this growth, the cruise industry reported record increases in passenger growth, and there seemed to be no end in sight. It looked like clear sailing and blue skies for the cruise industry.

As the cruise lines introduced new magnificent Mega and Super Liners, management noticed changes taking place on board. As part of this incredible growth, the cruise lines inadvertently created some onboard operational issues. As larger and larger ships began to enter the market, ship capacity as well as passenger counts grew significantly, leaving in its wake long lines on board and guests in need of some relief.

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In an effort to find ways to reduce lines and assist their guests with improved services, the cruise lines commissioned a committee to address these issues. The first task was to evaluate other leisure markets (theme parks, resorts, and other vacation destinations) to observe any similar trends and the resolutions used at their sectors.

Second, what was the likelihood of the same solution working in the cruise market? Having to start somewhere, the thought was that cruise ships share many of the same characteristics of an all-inclusive land-based resort, except

of course, cruise ships stay afloat and travel from port to port. Many hours were spent researching computer based services, and professionals within the cruise industry, both operational and technical, exchanged ideas. In the mid 90s, basic concepts started taking shape and the cruise lines knew what they wanted but needed some help getting there.

At about this same time, there was talk of a new technology being developed that could quite possibly assist the cruise lines with the issues they were experiencing, and at the same time, help improve guest services. This technology became known as Interactive Television (ITV).

As with most, if not all industries, the introduction of new tools was difficult,

but not impossible. As ITV companies began the development cycle, a host of unique obstacles began to slow the progress. Finding a cruise line willing to help with alpha testing was nearly impossible. There were very few risk takers willing to start, let alone, keep the ball rolling. “A risk taker is nothing more than an innovator in disguise.”

With this in mind, they turned to the technology side, which few people ever see, or for that matter, understand. Within the brick and cyber community, there is a group of companies actively engaged in building Interactive

Television systems, writing applications, de-bugging codes, and ultimately deploying their systems. Their enthusiasm and commitment is second to none. The first systems deployed were extremely equipment intensive, occupying valuable space on board, and because of the complexity, needed a dedicated operator. These were acceptable circumstances at the time. After all, these services were needed and were part of the cruise lines solution.

Now, the currently deployed systems are certainly robust and capable enough of handling the ITV concept, and over the years, many attempts have been made to successfully introduce Interactive guest services. Unfortunately for both the cruise lines and vendors, most, if not all of those attempts have experienced less than stellar results, yielding only minimal financial returns, thus contributing to the lack of ITV growth.

Companies making up this high tech community can be counted on one hand. Their knowledge, innovation and creative spirit, command the respect of their peers and deserve industry recognition for their achievements. They, as a group, are responsible for the current advancements in Interactive technology. The ITV companies that have successfully harnessed the power of Interactivity have made tremendous strides, but the technology alone does not ensure the ultimate success of the ITV deployment.

A key component on the path for a successful ITV solution is the partnership commitment. Without the partnership commitment, neither the

system provider nor client-operator can complete the circle. A strong strategic partnership, combined with the cooperation and coordination of both parties, is significant in obtaining the desired results and will serve in the continued advancement of ITV services. By adopting the partnership commitment, the rate of success increases. Not only does the technology and applications benefit, but also enhances the Interactive experience for the guests on board. This may be simple in concept, but few have managed to succeed.

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as a hybrid product, one that encompasses information technology, Internet browsing, e-commerce, and entertainment technologies. To ensure system design specifications and application modules meet the functionality and operational requirements, ITV companies rely heavily on large-scale laboratory environments to conduct simulations and operational trials. Applications and hardware components are rigorously tested and are able to be fine-tuned before deployment. This minimizes the amount of time the deployment team needs to install and commission their system.

For Interactive technology to be universally accepted and utilized, there are some factors to take into consideration. First and foremost, its operation should foster a pleasant user experience and should be no more difficult than using your TV at home. Second, the system needs to be stable and operationally sound. And third, the system should be scaleable, easily maintained, and upgradeable for future applications and services.

Ideally, an ITV system would be capable of delivering all guest informa-

tion and entertainment (Infotainment) services, including but not limited to:

- VOD (Video On Demand)
- MOD (Music On Demand)
- Television Delivered Over IP (broadcast and satellite)
- Internet Browsing / E-mail
- Online Commerce (banking and shopping)
- Interactive Advertising
- Videoconferencing (meeting services)
- Distant Learning / Training (crew and guests)
- Emergency Information and Alerts
- Guest Text Messaging Cabin to Cabin

- IP Telephony, Paging, and Text Messaging
- Room Services
- Photo Display Services
- Interactive Games and Gaming

- Online Reservation System: (shore excursions and future cruises)
- Administrative Information Platform (ship services and activities)
- Remote and Local Online Maintenance Reporting and Controls for ease of use

This may sound like an ambitious undertaking and most dare not tread these waters, however, advances in current technologies makes Interactive Television a service whose time has come. ■

About the Author

Prior to starting Insight Media Group, a technology-consulting firm, Peter DeMilio served as a Manager of Marine Technologies for Carnival Cruise Lines in Miami, FL. During that time, his responsibilities encompassed managing the development and installation of Interactive Television systems, Internet Cafes, advanced broadcast television, and collaborated on the development of enhanced satellite telecommunications services on-board the Carnival vessels. The author may be reached with questions or comments via email at InsightMediaGroup@comcast.net.



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