

Touching tale

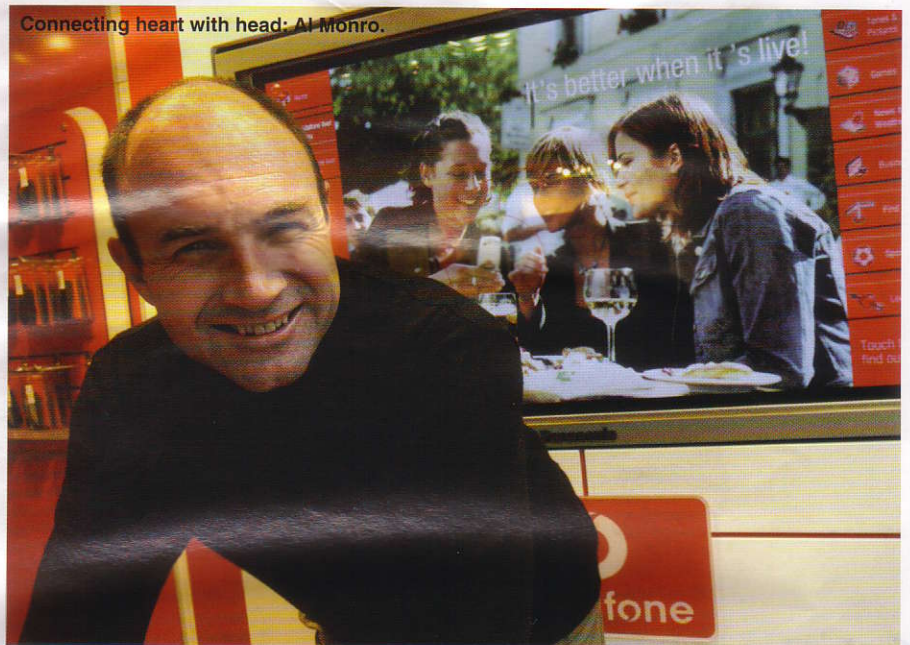
Is self-service shopping going to dominate our shopping malls? **Steven Shaw** reports on the emergence of a new generation of kiosks and digital touch screens.

According to a recent technology report in *The Economist*, there's been a rise in the "self-service economy". The paper calls it the "ultimate in outsourcing" and points to the familiarity consumers have with new technologies such as the internet, mobile phones, voice recognition and ATMs.

The humble kiosk is making a return in bigger numbers than ever. Air NZ recently installed kiosks at airport check-in counters to speed up the process, and digital photo booths that print directly from digital camera memory cards now sit at the entrance of photo stores. Self-service has even severed that already shaky relationship you had with the forecourt attendant at your local gas station, with Eftpos terminals available at the petrol pump.

Touch-screen technology has also been blossoming, according to Al Monroe, ceo of NextWindow. "On the Tokyo subways there's probably about 15,000 ticketing machines, and they're all touch-based," he says. "Overseas there are a lot of touch-screen ATMs. Your traditional kiosk is touch. Your restaurant and bar systems are all touch – it's that sort of market."

Monroe says the traditional touch-screen market has been based around the volume market, with screens being produced at around 16 inches (40cm). "You can imagine the difficulty for them of scaling that technology," he says, "if you double the screen size you essentially add four times the surface area. Most of the competitive technologies are either surface-based or perimeter-based – so that as you grow the screen size their cost for scale goes



up either exponentially or linearly. So as screen sizes have got bigger the ability to scale the touch screens has got more expensive."

NextWindow's touch-screen technology employs CMOS image capturing cameras. "Think of it as a positioning system," says Monroe. "You've got two cameras in two corners. Each of those cameras sees where your finger is and triangulates that position. It's called touch, but basically it's a positioning system. If you want to double the screen size you move the cameras further apart – our cost for scale doesn't go up as significantly."

"Essentially what we've done is to develop touch-screen technology. We've created a fifth field of touch – there were four technologies before that and

we introduced optical imaging. There are a couple of other companies who do optical imaging and were working on it in the same time as us, but we're probably the first to come to market."

Monroe says that interactive digital signage gives the consumer the opportunity to drill down and make a decision at point of purchase. "You can now push content out – not just IT content but broadcasting video, Mpeg etc – out through networks into the point of purchase and make that content changeable. You can vary it as your marketing needs change, you can change it as you require demographics, time of day, weather – all those things."

Vodafone has used NextWindow's screens as part of the Vodafone live initiative. "They've put touch screen onto

the 50-inch Panasonic plasma screens," says Monro. "You can drill down to find out about the features of a phone, you can try out ring tones. You can basically go through all the features and functions in a self-service manner."

That's symptomatic of where NextWindow see a huge opportunity for digital signage – in the sales of complex products, from audio-visual appliances through to computers and mobile phones. Monro says it's perfect when "you're faced with a huge product range and a 20-something employee who's either a good salesman who knows nothing about technology or a geek who doesn't know how to sell."

NextWindow has also installed interactive touch screens into a building directory environment in the US, as well as a 'wayfinder' in a US shopping mall.

Monro says 70% of consumer decisions are made at point of purchase. Statistics coming out of the US indicate uplift in sales and recognition as somewhere between 14% and 30% where digital signage is used. Monro says his interactive digital signage takes that a further step.

"It connects the heart with the head and creates a more lasting impression." ■

GOT A MESSAGE TO CONVEY?

A moving blank space in a supermarket is a perfect advertising opportunity, according to Trinity Concepts director Maui Collins. Collins has been researching checkout conveyor belt advertising for six years and is set to launch in January 2005.

"We're going into all supermarkets," he says. "We have agreement from Progressive Enterprises [Countdown, Foodtown, Woolworths] to go into their supermarkets and we have individually signed up a percentage of Foodstuffs [Pak' N Save, New World] stores."

Trinity was planning to run a trial over October, November and December 2004, but Collins says the response from potential advertisers has been "so great that we decided to launch straight away".

Conveyor belt advertising has been trialled before in the US, he says, but with a completely different intention – rather than dealing with FMCG products, it was used in a political campaign for a senator who wanted to increase his vote in a local Hispanic community.

Trinity will launch into 50 supermarkets at a time until it hits capacity. The product is a piece of PVC vinyl with adhesive backing that sticks straight on to the conveyor belt. Ads will be A3-sized landscape and are limited to 10 ads per conveyor belt. Collins says 50% of the ads (that's five, for the numerically challenged) are on display at one time.

"Everyone can name at least three things that are sold at the checkout of their local supermarket," says Collins. "We've only had a small percentage of potential advertisers respond by saying they think their brand might be too elite to risk being covered up by the contents of a shopping basket."



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