



Playing to Win

Dave & Buster's harnesses the power of video to attract customers

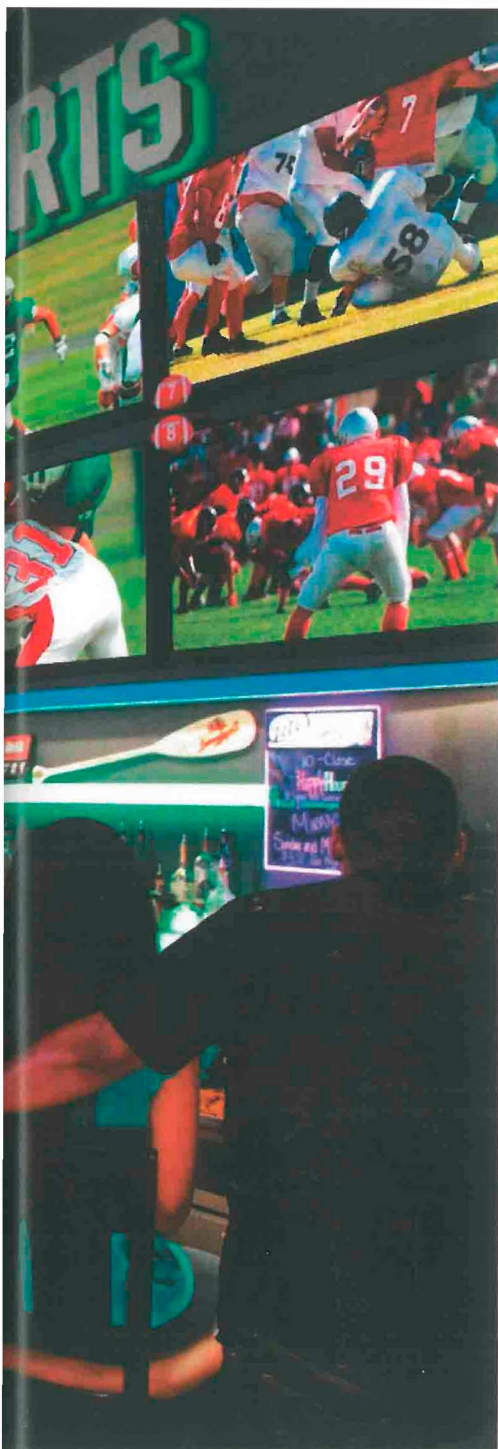
by JOHN MORELL

An executive with Dallas-based entertainment chain Dave & Buster's walked through the door of one of the company's stores about five years ago and saw something amiss. He immediately called Jeff Weiss, director of store systems for Dave & Buster's, and let him know. "He said the lobby area was so cool, it was cold," Weiss

says. "Someone could walk in the door and not have a clue what Dave & Buster's is."

Weiss did his own inspections and found he was right. Signage in the entrance area was inadequate and the lobby itself was quiet — a trait that's fine for a library, but not for a brand that's supposed to be a good time location.

"We were doing a great job with other parts of the store, but the lobby areas needed work. It was just a front desk and some signage, nothing digital to communicate who we are," he says. "We needed to figure out how to generate excitement from the moment customers walk in."



The formula has also been a hit with Wall Street. Dave & Buster's mix of food and entertainment has spurred 20 consecutive quarters of positive sales growth. Its games area has been a boost, comprising 57 percent of the company's revenue.

The company invests regularly in new technology, from the latest in video games to RFID bracelets that allow guests to play games without coins or tokens. While other restaurant/bars might promote their happy hour, Dave & Buster's promotes a "Power Hour," which gives 60 minutes of game play on weekday evenings for \$10.

Guests can add to their game account through a Dave & Buster's phone app; the chain's loyalty program includes a 10 percent discount on purchases.

The other big draw for the stores is sports. Dave & Buster's promotes itself as a football fantasy draft headquarters, advertising draft party packages that include food, drink, a private room and Wi-Fi for league players, in addition to special accommodations for game watch parties.

Dave & Buster's locations in Los Angeles and New York have been a place for celebrity sightings, with the paparazzi catching pictures of Kim Kardashian playing air hockey and Justin Bieber shooting hoops. The company also has a sense of humor about itself, as it promoted a recent story in the satirical publication *The Onion* that announced it was opening a high-end restaurant/entertainment location called "David & Benedict's."

GRABBING ATTENTION

Because of Dave & Buster's focus on entertainment, Weiss thought it might be worth exploring video screens, specifically a video wall that instantly draws attention.

"These have been used over the years in many types of retail and entertainment venues and they're extremely popular," he says. "You see one and you can't avoid what's on the display."

He reached out to some of the company's IT vendors for recommendations and was pointed to NEC. "We were looking for a company that had been doing this for a while and they were already a partner for us providing our regular monitors."

NEC had been in the video wall business for several years and had been working on perfecting the technology. For most retail applications, it concentrated on creating walls made with nine monitors in a 10-foot by 12-foot rectangle formation. They have expanded in size and scope, with video billboards marking many spots along highways and in some cases becoming landmarks. The 100-screen wall at Las Vegas' McCarran International Airport greets arriving guests and shows off images of the city. The world's largest wall is at the Texas Motor Speedway in Fort Worth, measuring 218 feet long and 125 feet high.

Indoor walls were originally designed to be used for corporate branding at trade shows; NEC found a ready market in retail as bricks-and-mortar stores looked for attractions to bring customers through the doors.

"Initially they were eye-catchers and you could run some simple branding videos but now customers are becoming more sophisticated, and they expect more from the video wall programming," says Ben Hardy, NEC product manager for large-format displays.

TECH LIMITATIONS

Creating video walls is tricky because of the limitations of the technology. With expanding sizes of monitors, it's easy to think that one day a giant wall could be constructed out of a single monitor, but that might not be the case. A company that wants an impressive giant panel in its 50th-floor boardroom might need to settle for a smaller size if the monitor can't fit into the building's service elevator.

"A panel is made of one sheet of glass and while it's strong, you're limited as to how much you can move a big sheet like that safely," Hardy says. "The biggest panels on the market today are 98 inches long. Any bigger and you risk creating a sheet that's too big and brittle to move to its destination."

Massive single-panel monitors are also extremely expensive, which is why many companies opt to go with the larger screen space afforded by a

GAME TIME

With 84 locations around the United States, Dave & Buster's was created in the early 1980s by Dallas restaurateurs David Corriveau and James "Buster" Corley, who saw a benefit to combining the concepts of food and entertainment, a kind of grown-up Chuck E. Cheese's. Each location features an array of the latest arcade games and, in some places, billiards and bowling. There's also a bar menu and video screens tuned to sports channels that can be seen from every viewing angle, making Dave & Buster's a hit with fans.



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— Jeff Weiss, Dave & Buster's

multiple-monitor wall, but there are some challenges. The problem has centered around the bezel, the frame around each monitor. The first walls had bezels about 7.3 millimeters wide. While viewers might not notice if they were engrossed in the programming, the wide frames made it easy to distinguish each monitor and see nine images rather than just one.

Over the years bezels have shrunk to 1.8 millimeters, which creates a more uniform image on the wall but can also lead to problems. "The bezel is there to protect the screen and when you reduce it there can be issues if the wall is jostled around during installation," Hardy says. "There are lots of specific procedures in place to put one up, which is why it's critical to have the installation completed by professionals who have assembled walls."

Indoor video walls commonly use LCD panels, since customers are going to be relatively close and LCD's smaller pixel pitch (which creates a denser image) lets them view the screens with little distortion from a short distance. LED panels are less expensive because pixel pitch is wider, but viewed from a distance, such as at a stadium or from a highway billboard, the distortion is less pronounced.

INSTALLATION AND MAINTENANCE

Dave & Buster's began installing the video walls as part of each store's scheduled remodeling; about 60 currently have them. The two-day installation process begins with making sure the mounting wall has proper space and wiring, as well as ventilation.

"As electronic devices, the monitors will produce heat, so location of the wall does require some evaluation," Hardy says. "If they're placed in the corner of a room they may have issues and parts will burn out. They need some air circulation to cool them down."

For new stores being built, the monitors are built into the wall with a frame that goes around the entire video image. "It really gives it a custom look, as opposed to monitors attached to a frame that's attached to the wall," Weiss says.

The toughest facet of having a video wall is calibrating all nine screens on units that are running 24/7. Over time, images created by each monitor can vary, with some darkening and others changing hue. The result is a video wall that looks simply like nine poor TVs mounted on a wall.

"It's critical to have the monitors calibrated at least twice a year," Hardy says. "If the calibration is poor, it takes away from the video wall effect."

Another issue that can crop up is a broken monitor. The monitor panels themselves are relatively easy to pop in and out, but a newer monitor may not calibrate well with older ones. And perhaps more importantly, the bezels may not match.

"Even if the bezel size is just slightly different, it's noticeable when it's up on the wall," Weiss says. "So far, though, NEC has been a big help in finding refurbished units for us, or finding a model that's so close you don't notice."

Unlike a regular TV, these types of commercial monitors can notify the system controller when there's a malfunction. "If a ball hits a screen and knocks it out, the network can recognize the issue," says Hardy.

"It's also monitoring the screen temperatures. Generally, the screen in the top middle is most vulnerable to heat failures since it's boxed in by the others and heat rises into it, so if it starts getting too warm it lets the technician know."

CLEAR BRANDING

Dave & Buster's sends out programming from a central media hub at headquarters to each location. What's displayed is a melange of clips showing the games inside and people having fun. There's also a component that gives stores a section of the programming to display local events and fan messages.

"Ideally, even someone who walks by a Dave & Buster's will see the video wall," Weiss says. "It shows who we are even if you didn't plan on coming in."

Next for the Dave Buster's screens may be to make them more connected. "We're talking about integrating them with social media and using them to connect guests at other Dave & Buster's," Weiss says.

"What if on New Year's Eve you could watch what's going on in the store in Times Square, then switch to other locations? It would make you feel like you're at the biggest party in history." **STORES**

John Morell is a Los Angeles-based writer who has covered retail and business topics for a number of publications around the world.