



MOVIE TICKETING

company roundup

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mobile

POS

data

iCount...and iCatch You

ARE YOU READY TO INCREASE YOUR PROFITS AND EMPLOYEE PRODUCTIVITY
WHILE RECEIVING A WHOLE NEW SENSE OF SECURITY IN YOUR THEATRES?

—iCOUNT MARKETING MATERIALS

Video Surveillance Enhances Fraud and Piracy Protection

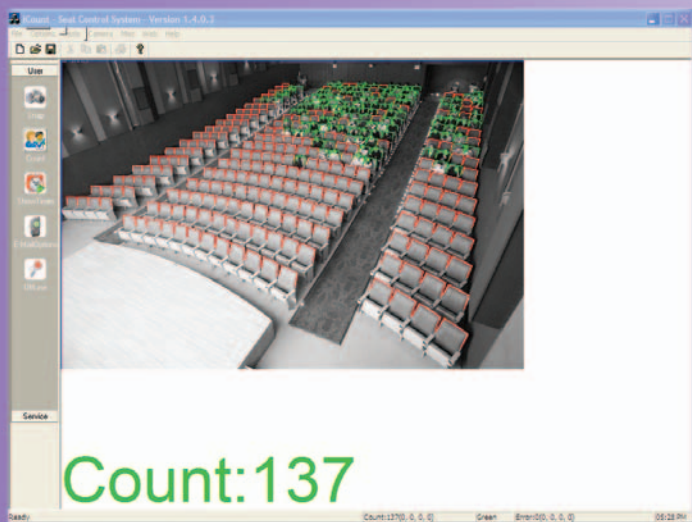
N by Andreas Fuchs
OTIONS OF “BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU” have been superseded by ubiquitous cameras and devices in the name of homeland security. And how far has James Bond come since he first turned a switch in his Austin Martin and started tracking Goldfinger? As the movies continue to envision techno toys and employ better and

better spy games in the name of entertainment, it should come as no surprise that the movie theatre itself is catching up.

Internet-supported, digital video surveillance in cash-generating and handling areas around the multi- and megaplex have become a standard. Plano, Texas-based iCount Machine Vision Technology is counting on securing the auditorium instead (www.icountusa.com). It’s all about “Putting Profit into the Picture,” as the official slogan goes. According to their marketing materials, iCount

presents “a new way for your company to eliminate ticket fraud and to have more control over your entire operation [that costs] no more than most of you are already paying for an auditing agency—one that isn’t eliminating the problem—or the amount you’re losing due to the ticket fraud/theft.”

“I was chief operating officer and one of the founders of a U.S.-based chain of Bollywood theatres called Funasia,” advises Shariq Hamid, now president of iCount-USA, about how the idea came about. Pyramid,



iCOUNT HELPS ELIMINATE FRAUD BY TRANSMITTING A DIGITAL IMAGE OF CUSTOMERS INSIDE THE AUDITORIUM ONTO YOUR COMPUTER SCREEN. iCOUNT ALSO ENABLES POLLS AND CONTESTS AS CUSTOMERS IN THE THEATRE RAISE THEIR HANDS (ABOVE) AND STAR ON SCREEN. ABOVE RIGHT, SHARIQ HAMID, PRESIDENT OF iCOUNT-USA.

a large circuit in India and competitor to Adlabs Cinemas, which has also expanded their U.S. reach by joint-venturing with Phoenix Theatres ("Popcorn and Poppadum," *FJI* August 2008), later purchased Funasia in 2007. "We started out with one location back in 2002. As we expanded to second, third and fourth locations, we realized there is a need for theatre owners to find out how many people are actually watching a movie by comparison to how many tickets are sold." To better manage those theatres remotely, with his business partner Raum Pattikonda, the current India-based iCount chief technology officer, "who is actually the brain behind all this," Shariq launched "our first system in Richardson, Texas, and we have refined our machine vision technology ever since."

In essence, he explains, "a digital camera is installed next to a computer that runs our iCount software. The camera takes a picture at any pre-defined point in time—five minutes after the show starts, ten, and twenty, fully customizable—and collects data from the box-office system to see how many tickets were sold. After comparing the two numbers, iCount e-mails you the discrepancies and makes them also available online on demand." In more detail, this technology uses facial recognition to count the number of people in the seats with 99% accuracy and without the need of a flash but by screen illumination alone. "If someone is standing in the aisle, it will not count," Hamid assures. "We have the option to block off the actual faces for privacy reasons," although "just like in any other business that has security cameras, signs are posted that video surveillance is installed inside the auditorium for fraud protection."

Hamid "definitely" believes this to be an additional warning for audiences to behave better during the film, as well as a deterrent for illegal movie recording. "The system

instantly recognizes LED lights to alert about camcording. You can also zoom in on the existing picture and find out exactly where that person is sitting. At ShoWest there were several studios who were very interested in this feature, as well as the MPAA who received information from us."

Exhibitors too are showing interest. In fact, "there's a huge response." Hamid has been able to secure early support from Chicagoland-headquartered Kerasotes Theatres and Classic Cinemas stateside, along with Mexico's MMCinemas. The Pattikonda family-owned Saraswati theatre in Hospet, state of Karnataka, is used for ongoing product development. "We have done presentations for independents and some other large chains as well." After all, "the system has found discrepancies in almost every show. I would say at least 90% of them have some discrepancy from ticket sales versus actual

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Concept To Reality

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NEW TRENDS IN TICKETING

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real test of their capability. Splyce contends that almost every online ticketing engine in the industry failed or crashed at some point during the rush for that film. But Splyce ran seamlessly because they were ready for it, the



company asserts. Splyce continues to proactively step up its capacity and improve its system in anticipation of the next major release. (splyce.com)

TICKETSOFT

Moviegoers may now change their plans and receive a full refund with a mouse click. Ticketsoft software allows customers to refund their online ticket purchase up to one hour before showtime. With traditional online ticketing services, refunds are not allowed, and customer-service departments are often understaffed or unreachable.

“Plans for a night out at the movies can change for a variety of reasons, and online ticket buyers now have a ‘No questions asked’ option to receive an immediate refund if they cannot make the show,” says Philip Wood, president. A secure link is sent in the order confirmation e-mail that allows a refund to be initiated by the customer from a web browser. The system works in open or reserved-seating environments.

Ticketsoft’s end-to-end software is used in more than 120 theatres in the United States. (ticketsoft.com)

VISTA

Vista MobileCinema allows customers to purchase tickets, look up showtimes, view film information, and check cine-

ma bookings, all from their mobile phone. Built on the flexible Java framework, MobileCinema the application is quick and easy to use, as all program information is contained on the phone itself. Downloading the application is very easy, and usually takes no more than a minute or so.

Vista MobileCinema is compatible with most newer-generation mobile phones (post-2004). MobileCinema is completely integrated with the Vista Cinema system and is a great way to boost your external ticketing sales, in an increasingly mobile environment. (vista.co.nz)

iCOUNT

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attendance.” Consequently, Hamid calls fraud protection “the most important iCount feature, as it helps pay for the system and helps exhibitors save money.” What Hamid likes to tell prospective clients is that “this is actually not a cost, but a way of generating higher revenue. All the other benefits come with it. If a theatre stops as little as one percent fraud, it generates more revenue than the system costs.”

Internal and external fraud amount from one to six percent, average industry estimates go. “When iCount tells you during the show that you have eight extra people sitting inside and that is repeating,” Hamid opines, “you will know whether employees are not doing their jobs properly or whether somebody is up to something fishy.” Either way, “measures can be taken and if you stop even two percent of the fraud, you will be saving thousands of dollars every year.”

Looking at the European and Asian markets with assigned seating options, “the next version of iCount will have a module for reserved seating as well. The way it will work is that every seat which has been sold will have a virtual light and number lit up on that seat’s back... Once the person sits down, the light will go away. If people are sitting on the wrong ones, the light will be flashing that the seat is not sold.” Unlike seat contact-based systems, the retrofit of existing auditoria should be much easier, Hamid anticipates. “The way I see it, our cost and maintenance would be much less because with

those types of seats, there’s a lot of hardware that can go bad.” Also during ShoWest 2008, iCount heard that “many people in the United States would go to reserved seating as well, but don’t want to deal with all the extra staff the implementation would require. Clearly, our system can help with those concerns.”

While we have chosen to profile this product as part of our annual focus on ticketing, iCount has already developed an add-on component that would make an equally good fit with “Cinematic Interactivity” detailed in our screen advertising section. “Once again, the system takes pictures and counts, this time of raised hands and how many,” Hamid says of polling and game options. Alongside surveys asking “about the most important issue for you during this election,” he believes, “you can apply this to trailers as well”—establishing how many guests liked a trailer...or didn’t. The awarding of prizes for trivia questions comes fully automated; the system knows the correct answer and selects one winner from the photo with the appropriately raised hands. “The added feature is a small projector facing back towards the screen,” he says. “The camera will be connected to that projector and picks up the winner and shows that person on the screen. So everybody in the auditorium knows who has won the prize.”

Not just putting profit but also people in the picture... Sounds like a plan to us.

The author wishes to thank Janine Bradford of Cinema Service Company for pointing out this new technology.

