

Counting on iCount



Distribution Veteran Embraces Fraud-Protection Technology

by Andreas Fuchs

You don't know what kind of revenue you are missing out on, because of people sneaking in," warns Patsy Lundin, the recently appointed VP of sales and marketing at iCount, getting right to the heart of the matter. "However, with the attendance photo taken by our system, you have proof positive and can begin implementing countermeasures immediately. So I really don't like to look at our iCount fraud-protection program as a cost to exhibition, but as a way to actually increase revenues."

To recap our exclusive introduction of the technology in October 2008, iCount (www.icountusa.com) uses a camera facing the auditorium to record snapshots of the people present at any pre-defined moment. "Usually we say about 30 minutes into the show, as everybody is settled in by then," Lundin suggests. "We've also had clients take a photo before opening and after closing to see about any screenings that staff might be having, be it for friends or otherwise." Advanced facial-recognition software then compares the head counts, quite literally, with the number of tickets that were sold. This data comes directly from theatre box-office systems. The process is precise and efficient while protecting the privacy of moviegoers. "This is a secured data and deleted from the servers over time," assures Shariq Hamid, president of the Plano, Texas-based company.

"The hardware of camera and networked computers is still the same," Hamid says about the tried and true backbone of the system. "We have added a lot of functionality, however, including a much different web interface. iCount now runs a variety of new and expanded reports. We offer much more customizability, including reports by location, by company and others based on data drawn from the system."

iCount "creates the interface for each box-office software," Hamid explains. "All we need are the showtimes and tickets sold, and any system has that information. It is easy for us to work with whatever format that data is provided in, whether it's a text file or XML, for example. We can work with any ticketing system."

Projection technology also works on all fronts, he affirms. "Just like film projection, as long as the screen illumination in digital cinema is of standard brightness, iCount takes photos without the need for any lighting." Picking up on LED lights thanks to its built-in signal recognition, several theatres equipped with iCount have deterred camcording piracy.



**iCOUNT PRESIDENT
SHARIQ HAMID
AND VP OF SALES
AND MARKETING
PATSY LUNDIN**



"This is a very significant threat to the cinema business around the world," Lundin observes. No wonder the Motion Picture Association of America has continued to show an interest and was about to have another demo as *FJI* was conducting this interview.

Another innovation that resulted from exhibitor feedback about using iCount is the ability to record a full video of the auditorium in addition to the audit photo. "Before the movie starts," Hamid explains, "they can make sure that the cleaning crew has done its job right and that no one is walking in with a camcorder or outside food, perhaps."

Starting out in India, where the founder of this technology has family connections in exhibition, "we have expanded quite a bit there, as well as to Australia, South Africa, Oman, Germany and many more circuits across the United States." Hamid counts no less than 1,000 screens these days. Classic Cinemas, one of the early American adopters, is "100% iCount now, for every single screen." Additional

U.S. clients are Kerasotes, FunAsia Theatres, Moore Theatres and Santikos. Globally, iCount services Adlabs, Sathyam, and PVR in India, as well as United Cinemas in Australia, Ster-Kinekor in South Africa and Oman Arab Cinema in Oman. "We have installations on every continent," Lundin enthuses, "except South America and we're actually in talks right now."

Hamid makes special mention of CineCitta in Nuremberg, Germany, whose "location is just amazing." Avid readers should not be surprised to discover this super-plex is testing the technology. Owner Wolfgang Weber pioneered reserved seating with seat status indicated via networked in-seat electronic contacts to a monitor at the auditorium entrance.

"iCount is much easier to maintain than mechanical contacts," Hamid assures. Similar to the original set-up and procedure in Nuremberg, "our 'Open Foyer' model for reserved seating also uses a monitor and indicators on the matching seating chart," he elaborates. "As people begin to occupy their seats, colors change on the chart. If the ticket was sold and the seat is occupied, it turns green. If it was sold but it is not yet occupied, the indicator is blue. Red means someone is sitting in a seat that was not assigned. By walking in the halls, staff can quickly see if people are sitting in the wrong seats and whether there are additional people in the theatre that shouldn't be there."

Add to that the iCount photo proof, Lundin says, "and you have really enhanced reporting accuracy in addition to operational efficiencies." No wonder, she finds, distributors "having to send out blind checkers" could become a thing of the past. "Exhibitors are not only monitoring fraud themselves, but they can also save additional expenses for their secret-shopper programs. This is how iCount can eliminate fraud and be a cost saving for both sides of the industry. The studios save on audits and checkers and the theatres on secret shoppers... iCount positively affects both the booking and film part of theatrical exhibition as well as technical and operations, of course."

Truly spoken like someone who understands the business and human nature to boot. The 34-year sales veteran of Warner Bros. Distribution Corp., first in New Orleans ("born and raised," she enthuses), and then from the Dallas branch, is excited about her return to the theatrical business and a company that she truly believes in. "I am happy to be working with iCount on the technological side," she says, "and in this industry which I love so much."

Exhibitors who are interested in iCount may request a test installation, and Lundin will spread the love at CinemaCon. "While we would naturally not provide information of individual clients, we have plenty of accumulated data on what the systems have accomplished. iCount has reduced fraud by up to 8% on average."

The proof might be in the photo, but truth resides in numbers, too.