The Craziest Thing at CES Could Change OOH Advertising

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LAS VEGAS—Delta Airlines may have just introduced the future of out-of-home advertising. At this year's Consumer Electronics Show, Delta CEO Ed Bastian unveiled what the airline is calling Parallel Reality, a digital screen that gives airport travelers a custom, tailored message when they're standing in front of it, including greetings, boarding times and departure gate in any language.

Created by the tech startup Misapplied Sciences in 2014, this was the first time the screens were made public.

Bastian first announced the technology alongside Misapplied Sciences CEO and Founder Albert Ng during his keynote delivered on Tuesday, saying, "You might think [this] looks like science fiction, but it's closer than you think … Personalized signage is coming to an airport very soon near you thanks to the wonder of Parallel Reality."

Adweek got an opportunity to tour Delta's booth at CES and try out the "Parallel Technology" firsthand.

With a "boarding pass" provided by Delta, we scanned into a dark room with a screen hanging about 10 feet in the air. The screen displayed "Ryan" and "flight information" with a clarity and quality closer to any large-scale jumbotron than the OOH digital screens used in most cities. (Ng told Adweek that the quality would improve with every generation of technology.)

Nick Gardner, Adweek's video producer and host of the GenZeos podcast, scanned himself and entered the room. To him, the screen read Nick.

As we walked around the room, our names followed us, with an ever-so-slight lag.

The technology is possible because of a camera toward the ceiling. When we scanned our boarding passes, it told the screen that the images it was seeing were "Nick" and "Ryan," identifying each of us by our names.

As we walked around the room, the camera followed us, sending a signal to the special pixels in the screen that control the light it sends and can send it in different directions. One Misapplied Sciences pixel can send green light to Ryan and red light to Nick and follow each of us, everywhere we go.

According to Ng, the screens can handle at least 100 people at a time.

"What's so exciting about this is the broad applicability of the technology. Here [at CES] we are showing an airport scenario, but you can imagine any public venue," Ng said.

But what about ads? If Misapplied Sciences wasn't as concerned about the opt-in portion of the experience and the screens used facial technology to identify travelers, couldn't this same technology be used to target ads in public venues?

"It is certainly a possibility," Ng said. "We're very mindful about the experience because ultimately what makes parallel reality extremely valuable is providing a better experience in a public environment … if we get the feedback that having more tailored advertisements provides a better experience going through a public venue as well, that's a great use case."

When pressed about the advertising capability of the technology, Ng was emphatic that he was more interested in the

opt-in experience of Parallel Reality instead of its ability to advertise.

Delta’s CMO and communications officer Tim Mapes acknowledged the potential, comparing the targeting capabilities as the “physical demonstration of hyper-local,” but emphasized that the technology would first have to provide value to travelers if they wanted to interact with it.

“The reality is, if a customer sees value in a digital interaction, they are willing to engage more deeply. If what they get is resistance in the sense of a commercial intent versus a genuine interest in serving ‘me,’ their radar goes up and their resistance goes up,” said Mapes.

Delta will be beta testing the technology this summer at Detroit Metropolitan Airport. Mapes said that choosing an international airport was important because Delta wanted to test the technology with foreign languages, adding an additional layer of complexity to the technology.

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