

It's Showtime!

Cobb Theatres makes a blockbuster move to combine dining and moviegoing.

By Marshall Lager - Posted Feb 1, 2009

Image is everything in the movie business, whether you're in front of the cameras or putting filmgoers' butts into the seats at the local multiplex. Realizing this, Alabama-based theater chain Cobb Theatres has gained an online appearance edge with the help of SFA Marketing, a Connecticut-based communications specialist.

"About two years ago, we were a small circuit, having just gotten back into the business after selling another chain to Regal Cinemas years before," recalls Jeremy Welman, chief operating officer of Cobb Theatres. "With stadium seating and 10 locations, we realized we weren't just a small theater chain, and we had to provide a level of service that was unique to the area, branded in a way that would encourage moviegoers to choose us over the others."

This goal was particularly critical for growing Welman's new concept in movie viewing—CinéBistro. Combining a premium movie theater with fine dining, CinéBistro "allows its customers to enjoy the splendor of watching a movie in their own specially reserved, ultra-luxurious high-back leather rocking chair, eat a sumptuous gourmet meal served [at] their seat, sip premium cocktails and fine wine, and then retire to the terrace for delicious coffee and dessert," according to company literature.

Welman knew that a venture of such high-end appeal calls for better branding than what's allowed by the typical online ticket reservation system, where the individual theater is reduced to just a few lines of titles and showtimes.

"We had to make the site attract customers and serve them from the first click," Welman says. "We had an online relationship with [listings and reservations site] Fandango, but we didn't want to do what so many other theaters had done: use the Fandango site to serve listings and ticket sales."

Enter Alder Crocker, partner and senior vice president of brand strategy with SFA Marketing, who helped make Welman's concept a reality. "Jeremy has been the driving force behind brand definition at Cobb Theatres, especially with CinéBistro," Crocker says. "He always had a goal, and [an] image in mind, and benchmarks to get to. It's not about showing movies; it's about getting people to return because of the design and the experience." In fact, the theaters themselves (see photo, left) have won design awards, and Crocker had to make a Web presence to match.

Crocker credits Welman's original vision for Cobb Theatres and CinéBistro, in which users could see theater-specific pages, access deals, and self-select movie trailers. "He wanted one-click functionality on all of it," Crocker says. "If you have a bad e-commerce process, you have a weakened brand."

SFA worked with Fandango to get access to its showtime listings and purchase system, but keep it all hidden behind the Cobb and CinéBistro branding. "It's all in the background," Crocker says. "The appearance and functionality are all unique to Cobb Theatres." SFA also worked to realize Welman's desire for a Moviegoers Club loyalty program and a newsletter to keep loyal moviegoers engaged.

The return on this branding and service-delivery initiative has been an impressive boost in site visits, with an additional improvement in ticket sales and brand recognition. "SFA took our image and made it reality," Welman says. Cobb now competes successfully against national chains such as Regal, AMC, and Cinemark, and the CinéBistro locations draw customers from miles around. "We felt we'd cannibalize our own 19-plex in the mall—but we're [also] drawing visitors from much further away."

The success of the project is gratifying for Welman and Crocker both. "People want to go where they're appreciated," Crocker says. "The Cobb Theatres/CinéBistro brand is Hollywood and the neighborhood all together."

Welman strongly agrees. "We didn't really have a brand. Now we do, with CinéBistro."

THE PAYOFF

SFA Marketing's custom design helped Cobb Theatres/CinéBistro:

- increase unique Web visitors by 34.7 percent;
- increase total visits by 274.7 percent;
- increase page views by 228.3 percent;
- create two unique brands for a multi-location movie-theater chain; and deliver a loyalty program relevant to customers' desires.

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