



M&S Minute *by Marion Hixon*

Skipping Lines

WHEN SCOTLAND NATIVE LEONARD SIM AND HIS FAMILY VISITED A FLORIDA THEME PARK in the mid-1990s, mechanical problems with a ride resulted in the family standing around for two hours. Countless others have dealt with the same issue, deciding whether to lose their spot in line and risk a longer wait later in the day, or stand waiting while they waste minutes and hours that could be spent elsewhere.

With frustrations mounting, Sim's wife issued him a challenge: "You work in high technology; you should be able to solve this problem," she said. She was referring to his experience as an electronics engineer, his 13 years at Rockwell Semiconductor, and the time he spent in sales of data communication chips. Sim had the background necessary, and now he had the cause—to create a system that allows guests to skip attraction queues and enjoy the rest of the park while "waiting" to ride.

He got to work and after providing a test product of Guest Services Product to Thorpe Park in Surrey, England, the park invested in prototype models with much success. In 2000, Lo-Q signed an installation contract with Six Flags Over Georgia. But growth at Guest Services Product halted when a fire at Thorpe in July of that year burned down the operations' communications hub. Sim was faced with the decision of continuing the system at Thorpe or focusing on his contract with Six Flags. He chose the latter and formed Lo-Q in October 2000. "This allowed us to take the product



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forward and market development," Sim says. By March 2001, the product was fully integrated at Six Flags Over Georgia.

"What makes us unique is that only the Lo-Q system employs true virtual queuing," he says. He's referring to the fact that users of the Q-bot—Lo-Q's flagship product—wait the same amount as other guests, who do not suffer an increase in wait time. It also means the service is available throughout the day and doesn't have a limited usability. "If a regular guest can join a line late in the day, the Q-bot guest can join that line," he says.

"Lo-Q's Q-bot is a robust, pocket-sized electronic device which allows guests to queue virtually and therefore enjoy other rides and amenities rather than standing in a physical queue," Sim explains.

While intricate technological systems were at work to create the Q-bot, its reservation system for parks and guests is decidedly simple. Parks operating the system offer guests a daily rental of the Q-bot for a price determined by how many people are registered on the device; a maximum of six is allowed. Once roaming, visitors make ride reservations from anywhere in the park by scrolling through

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Laying the Groundwork

LEONARD SIM LOVESTHEME PARKS, but when he founded Guest Services Product in 2000, which later morphed into Lo-Q, he had more experience with microchips than thrill rides. After time spent as an electronic engineer, and for 13 years heading a sales agency for Rockwell Semiconductor, Sim crossed over to the attractions industry and says there were quite a few surprises along the way. He talked to FUNWORLD about his transition and what he's learned about becoming a lasting force in the industry.

FUNWORLD: What differences did you see when you made the jump from engineering to working with parks and attractions?

Leonard Sim: In the microchip world, companies could rise to become major players very quickly—and sometimes disappear just as fast—which is quite different in our industry. It seems there are no quick bucks in the theme park industry; it is characterized by long-term relationships, and these relationships are relied upon to help senior executives make good decisions.

FW: How do those long-term relationships affect people and businesses in the industry?

LS: One strong resource I have seen is that people can start at the very bottom—without college degrees or even a high school diploma—and work their way up.

FW: What advice would you give to someone entering the industry from a different professional background?

LS: The best way to break into our industry is to partner with a well-known complementary company with a good track record and to expect to have to work hard for quite a while to become established.

a list of rides and shows. Waiting times are updated continually and appear on the device to alert riders. “A button-press later, the guest is in the Q-line,” Sim explains. “Should a ride break down and cause the queue length to change significantly, the guest will be informed and the reservation time will change.”

Once arriving at the ride, guests go through a separate controlled entrance and display their Q-bot to the attendant. Parks can also invest in automatic turnstiles at these entrances which are triggered by the device.

Sim's system evolved into the VQ²⁰²⁰, which is a multi-lingual version of the Q-bot and is now running

in seven Six Flags parks, as well as Dollywood in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, and Legoland in Windsor, England. Lo-Q has recently expanded and bought Text-Q, which is in use in the United Kingdom and gives cell phone users the ability to reserve their place in line via text messages. Sim is also looking at adding park information as part of the device's messaging and possibly selling advertising space personalized to the guest's wait time and location, and park information.

It's an exciting time for Sim, as his company continues to add parks to its roster. New products are in the pipeline that will allow Lo-Q to offer its system to other recreational venues. ■