

Museum Opportunities Often Start Small

Integrisys upgrades Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry display.

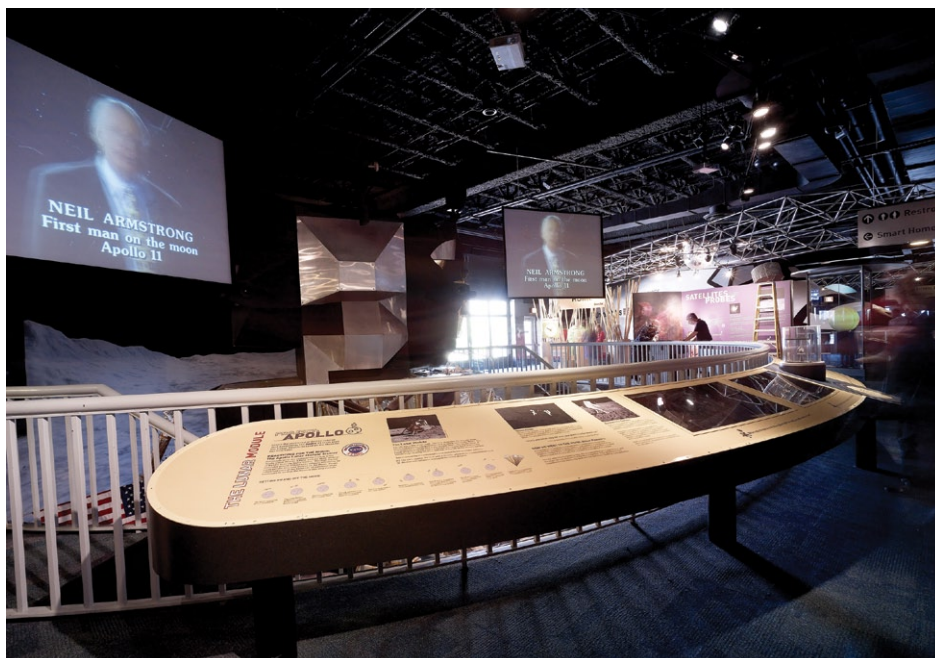
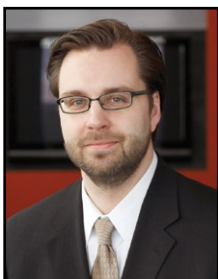
By Eric Wolfram

AV integrators often think of museum customers in terms of the next huge project. However, that's not always realistic, especially for those just establishing themselves in the museum market. There are many opportunities to work on smaller projects, and these can help you show new customers the kind of work you do. That's especially true in a tight economy when many museums simply do not have the budget for major new exhibits.

Integrisys Group, LLC, had an opportunity a couple years ago to help the Museum of Science and Industry (MSI) in Chicago upgrade its Henry Crown Space Center, a large exhibit built in the mid-'80s in one of the largest science centers in the world.

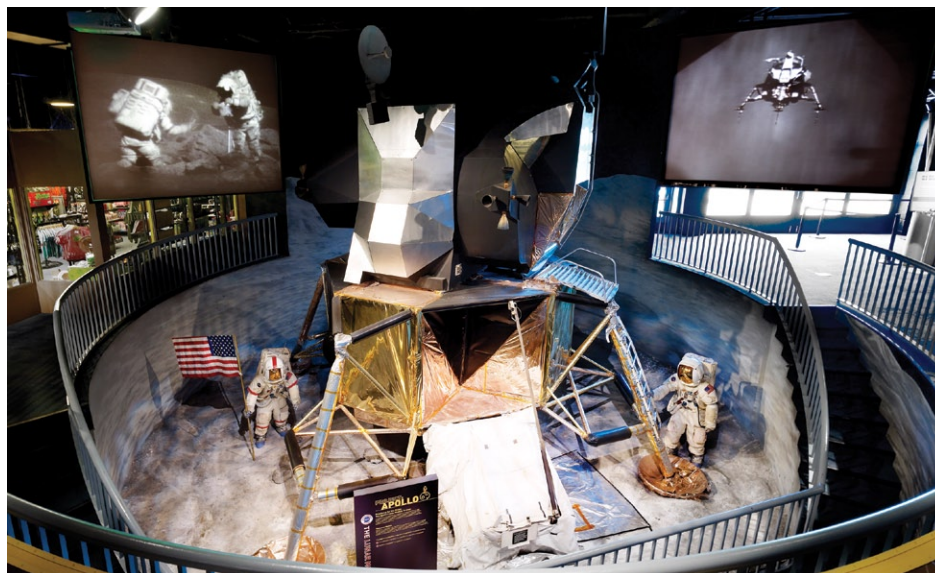
"We hadn't made any big updates to the Henry Crown Space Center since it opened in 1986," said John Beckman, the project director in charge of the upgrade for MSI. "It was telling the story of human space flight only through the beginning of the shuttle period, and there was a need to bring it forward. A lot of it, too, was done in a mid-'80s style that isn't really our interpretive style now....We do have a major change for the Center in the planning stages, but we have to keep our space story relevant until we're prepared to do something larger."

MSI overhauled the entire Space Center, adding a few new artifacts,



Photos: John Faier

New graphics and a dual-screen video production breathe new life into a nearly 25-year-old exhibit of the Lunar Excursion Module at the Henry Crown Space Center in Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry.



The Lunar Excursion Module (LEM) is the focal point of the Henry Crown Space Center at Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry (MSI). To add interest to the exhibit, Integrisys flew two new projectors and screens from metal framing it installed in the ceiling.

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but mainly reinterpreting the artifacts they had with new signage, graphics, and several interactive and video elements. By helping these artifacts to “tell a story,” the museum hoped guests would become more engaged and gain a greater understanding of space exploration, both past and future. The biggest part of the work centered on the Space Center’s largest exhibit, a full-size display of the Lunar Excursion Module (LEM), positioned as it would have looked had this particular unit

landed on the moon.

The lunar lander at MSI is actually a training model used by the Apollo astronauts. MSI asked us to devise a technology solution that used video from the Kennedy Space Center to convey the drama and excitement of the “race to the moon.”

To make this exhibit come alive, the museum obtained a dramatic video production from NASA: a piece about the first moon landing produced for a presentation at Kennedy’s visitor center. “The video

really helps contextualize the lander,” Beckman explained. “And it tells a story most people haven’t heard. Few people realize, for example, that the original landing almost didn’t happen, that they were almost out of fuel, out of time and three miles off course.” MSI hired a local producer, the Iona Group of Peoria IL, to re-edit NASA’s production to play on just two screens.

We worked closely with MSI to create a projection solution that suspended two large screens above the two-story exhibit and used advanced show control to coordinate the video and audio with an existing stage lighting system that we upgraded and repurposed. The show begins every 20 minutes throughout the day and, as the 13-minute video plays (with different content on each of the screens), the show controller adjusts the lighting to highlight different parts of the lunar lander. The story reaches its high point as the voice of Neil Armstrong speaks his famous words, “That’s one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.” As he speaks, a single spotlight highlights a full-size figure, wearing an Apollo space suit, descending the ladder from the LEM to take man’s first steps on the moon’s surface.

In designing the AV system, we were quite aware of the museum’s need for something far more reliable than the typical commercial or residential project. “We are open 364 days a year and this system has to work on all of those days,” Beckman told us. “It has to have almost no maintenance and be simple to use: We want to just turn it on at the beginning of the day and then everything has to be automated from there.”

To meet the requirement for reliability, we used a solid-state, V16+ show controller from Alcorn McBride, with the video itself stored on two one-gigabyte flash cards, rather than tape, DVD or even a hard drive. And the museum asked us to install Panasonic PT-LB 60 projectors, which they’ve had good luck with in other exhibits. We tied Unistrut

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metal framing into the steel beams in the ceiling, then hung the projectors with Peerless PRS 1420 universal mounts and two Da-Lite Da-Snap 72"x96" screens directly to the Unistrut. Needless to say, we took extreme care not to drop any tools or equipment onto the lunar lander.

According to Beckman, the system "has really performed very well for us. We're used to a certain amount of maintenance, but that solid-state video drive has helped."

Museum guests also seem pleased with the system. "When I walk through," Beckman noted,

"I definitely see people lined up at that rail, either watching the video or waiting for it to start....It is really, really good content. Even though we are using historical footage shot more than 50 years ago, it is still fascinating and relevant to people."

You may well ask if our

work on the Lunar Excursion Module will lead to other projects at MSI. Beckman said, "We were really glad to find you. We definitely look for local AV hardware and installation companies that get what we do and understand our maintenance requirements. You definitely get it." ■

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