

A step into the future

With 142 screens, Empire Cinemas Limited is the UK's largest privately-owned chain. In late February, Empire Cinemas converted all six screens at their busy High Wycombe complex to Kodak Digital Cinema systems, becoming one of the first UK sites with all digital projection. In late July, they added a Kodak Theatre Management System

Now, with five months' experience showing digital features and often on all six screens, Justin Ribbons, Chief Executive Officer of Empire Cinemas sat down to talk about what they have learned so far.



On the business and digital quality

The cinema business is healthy in the UK, but I think we have to do more to continue to improve the experience we provide to our customers and we have an opportunity with digital to do that. What's pushing us to want to go digital is quality, its ease of operation, it's a feeling that it allows flexibility in the content, not just for movies, but for alternative content. And it's a step into the future.

On a surprising finding

We've done some low-level exit surveys and customers are telling us that digital sounds better. Originally, we thought that was a 'trick of the mind', but we found that the sound files on a digital print are less compressed than a normal 35mm film print with a CD provided alongside. So, what we think is that the sound is cleaner on a digital print than it is on many of the 35mm film prints.

On alternative content

I believe in alternative content, however, there are numerous difficulties in obtaining the legal rights to show things on screen. Music is a good example. There is an absolutely clear case for putting music into a cinema,

however, fighting through various rights-holders is extremely difficult. When there are enough digital screens available and the revenues gained from those screens is a compelling argument, then the issues will melt away. We believe in it, but it will not happen quickly.

On selecting a partner

Anyone selecting a technology partner needs to be careful in selecting the right technology partner - for today and tomorrow. The commercial deals being discussed are ten-year deals. We want to make sure that the partners we're working with are going to be there over the ten-year period and are going to deliver improved products over that period. We're very happy with Kodak as a technology partner.

On 3D

The next stage is really 3D and I think we need more simplification in the 3D process. There are two 3D processes at the moment and there might be more technology coming down the road. The possibility of adding 3D to a 2D platform means that we have to focus on selecting the right 2D platform to ensure that it operates - and can operate in the future - in 3D. My belief is - that if we are

going to show 3D, then, every screen and every system in every complex, everywhere should be able to show 3D.

On satellite vs hard drive delivery

The difficulty with satellite delivery is picking the right satellite. Hard drives are fine with us. They seem to be easy to load; they're fairly stable. I think overall, the process is working relatively well. There may be advantages, once a whole country is up and running, to move to a satellite delivery system but with a footprint as small as some of the countries in Europe have, it may not be worth that for some time.

On the future

We have a great belief in digital. I think it's the future of the industry. It's where we're heading - to convert all screens, all areas. In a potentially quickly-changing digital world, having a serious technology partner who is there for the long term gives me comfort. There are a lot of other industry players that are new names to this and I think that Kodak brings some history and some stability. The Kodak system provides us with a good quality system where I'm very comfortable with Kodak as a partner.

