



This story ran on nwitimes.com on Wednesday, May 3, 2006 1:06 AM CDT

Personalization to the touch

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CHICAGO | For the first time outside of a Hollywood-generated future, travelers at O'Hare International Airport will be able to access personalized information such as weather in their destination city and up-to-the-minute news. All this by touching to direct the show on a larger-than-life screen.

Unveiled Tuesday in O'Hare's American Airlines terminal, the Accenture Interactive Network, an effort to "revolutionize" billboard advertising, engages one or two users with a 10-by-7-foot screen, cutting-edge technology and applications ranging from CNN headlines on families of the Sago mine victims to the latest on Tiger Woods.

The interface, presented by global consulting and technology services company Accenture, whose Chicago research lab developed the technology, "makes O'Hare more than just a travel hub, we're also a hub of innovation," said Patrick J. Harney, first deputy commissioner of Chicago's Department of Aviation.

He noted that such vanguard technology will greet thousands of travelers each day. Fifty-seven percent of the 190,000 travelers that pass through O'Hare daily make connecting flights, seeing little of what Chicago has to offer, he said.

Bearing a resemblance to the interactive technology manipulated by Tom Cruise in the 2002 futuristic thriller "Minority Report," the Accenture Interactive Network is situated at one of the airport's main thoroughfares, and serves both as a purveyor of information and an advertising platform.

The user begins by touching a category displayed on the screen, let's say, "News." The graphic swells, popping out toward the user and shrinks, settling next to a video by CNN Pipeline, one of the companies that has partnered with Accenture.

Another is the Weather Channel, so by choosing "Weather," a traveler can learn if it's snowing in Boston or pouring in Jacksonville. The airport may seem like too noisy a place to do any research, but overhead speakers trap users in a cone of sound, inaudible to those standing outside it.

"We blended all the interaction of a desktop along with the fidelity you see of a large poster," said Accenture's Kelly Dempski, who designed the technology behind the interface.

When a user touches the screen, two infrared cameras, shooting more than one hundred frames per second, capture the user's fingerprint and triangulate the position of the touch with the content.

Dempski said the inspiration for the installation came from Web sites that involve the user, making them feel part of the action. But here the space is much larger than an office cubicle, so the design took some innovative thinking.

"I can't rearrange shelves for you when you walk in," Dempski said. But what he and techies like him can do is let you choose the information and advertising that only you want to view, unlike traditional billboards.

"This is a new type of media," he said.