



Up Close & Personal

K.C. Suri: Managing Director, Reel Cinemas.

How and when did you enter Exhibition?

It was in 2001 when I bought the Curzon Loughborough with the initial intention of converting it to run as a pub. It was badly run-down and near-to-closure. However, I quickly fell in love with this remarkable Art Deco building, and then the business also.

How has your [business] background prepared you for Cinema?

For the 15 or so companies I'd already owned, I've always adopted the 'common-sense approach', namely that businesses should not lose money, and this will be the case if you have the right, professional people managing things for you.

In 2001 Curzon Group introduced a 'specialist experience' for town centre cinemas. Tell me more.

Look, I come from India, where Cinema is the main source of entertainment. If you're married, you go home to your wife; but, if you're not, then you go to the [pictures]. So cinemas are like 7-star hotels where fantasies can happen. But British cinemas I'd felt to be more like retail shops, so there needed to be a stronger focus on the 'experience'. Whether our patrons are senior citizens or children, we want them to see their local Reel not as 'the' cinema but as 'our' cinema.

Why the 2005 name-change to Reel Cinemas?

I love the name 'Curzon', but many cinemas use that name also; and, aside from the legal complexities of continuing, we had decided on a new corporate identity. The 'Reel' name offers us good branding too, for example: our concessions are never called 'combos', but 'Reel Deals 1, 2 & 3 etc.', and our imminent, superior mobile cinema service will be dubbed 'Reels on Wheels'.

Reel is expanding rapidly, the circuit nearly 15-strong. Several sites are takeovers, so how do you choose them?

Well, for one, I have a good team behind me which examines the existing and future potential of any site, and we aim always to offer at least 5-screens, to give the needed versatility during peak times.

“I'd [like to] take managers back to the days when evening wear – along with dress shirts and dickey-bow ties – were worn, and showmanship counted, and service would be more like that of a theatre than fast-food outlet”

How are distributors treating your rapid expansion?

I think from 'day one', they – and our suppliers – have been most helpful and, when they understand our vision of where we want to get to, I believe we are treated the same, if not better, in fact, than any major UK operator.

What's the best thing about running a large independent chain?

When you know you're providing good service and can see happy customers telling you that they had a wonderful experience, or that our staff are good or that, at long last, the town has a cinema – all of that is music to my ears.

Is gearing up for Digital a concern or to be welcomed?

I think only time will tell. In the long-

term it will of course be a good thing for the industry to embrace the new technology, indeed, we've recently installed a [d-projector] at Loughborough. One, the technology must improve things; two, it must be both affordable and flexible, so the price will have to come down from the current £70k and I'm sure that, with the roll out, prices will drop. The transitional times are always the most difficult.

If you could change just one thing about the industry, what would it be?

Two expressions come to mind: "the show must go on" and "have a good time"; and, if I could, I would like to take managers back to the days when evening dress – along with dress shirts and dickey-bow ties – were worn, and showmanship counted, and the service to be closer to that of a theatre than the typical fast-food outlet of today.

What advice would you give to anyone thinking about running a cinema chain?

Control your overheads and don't borrow too much money. Cinema is a product-led business so you never quite know how much you'll be banking next week and/or how external events, or even the weather, will influence things. Do as much as you can with your own resources as in this [game] your future is not in your own hands.

What's your vision for Reel?

Well, we may not be the biggest operator in the country but we can certainly try to be the best. Watch this space!

What have you learned most from Exhibition?

How to deal with the public, mainly. **S**