

At Home with Time Warner

Just before the cable giant takes 16% of its shares public, a vast 'Home to the Future' offers New York a selection of Time Warner products

by [Helen Walters](#)

Striding through the Time Warner Center on New York City's Columbus Circle, Edwin Schlossberg, designer and founder of the firm ESI Design, seems like a man without a care in the world. No matter that he and his team (of around 200) have mere hours left to construct a four-story "building" within the vast atrium of the Center. Covered in 7,500 sq. ft. of transparent fabric, incorporating 50 Samsung liquid-crystal display (LCD) monitors, and lit with a color wash of spotlights and light-emitting diodes (LEDs), the transparent cubic column is the centerpiece of an exhibition intended to inform people about what Time Warner Cable has to offer.

As of last Friday there was a lot of scaffolding, a little bit of fabric, a few monitors and not much action. "I'm not nervous," insists Schlossberg, whose previous projects include Reuters' 22-story news wall in Times Square and the interactive visitor's center at Ellis Island. "It's going to be cool."

"It" is the Home to the Future exhibition, opening on Jan. 16. Though it might be more fairly be called the Home of the Present, as it features technologies and services available today from (mostly) Time Warner Cable and other divisions of the media giant. The exhibition/interactive advertisement, developed by ESI Design with contributions from nine other companies, includes the central tower, which dwarfs the escalators leading down to Whole Foods (WFMI), as well as trade-show-like booths throughout the Center.

MAKE YOURSELF AT HOME

"For me the column looks just like a New York building, it's very layered with a lot going on," says Schlossberg. "We had to have something stunning to get people's attention, but then we also wanted to have something granular to show you how to use all the things that Time Warner offers. I always try to work from the behavioral model out rather than the informational or technical model in."

What he means is that visitors to the exhibition (including unwitting tourists stumbling into the Center from Columbus Circle) will be able to have hands-on experience of Time Warner (TWX) offerings in "rooms" built for the occasion. The kitchen, living room, master bedroom, and teenager's bedroom will be manned by Time Warner employees primed to demonstrate products such as video on demand, high-definition programming, and the company's digital phone service. Mixing real furniture with mocked-up sets, the hope is that people will come in, kick back, and perhaps stay and play a while.

In any case, the elaborate corporate advertisement is timely. Sometime soon (though officials won't say when), 16% of Time Warner Cable will go public. "It feels like a good time to promote its services," agrees Edward Adler, vice-president of corporate communications for Time Warner Corporate. "But we'd have done it anyway: the company is so different from even 10 years ago, it made sense." There's also perhaps the underlying hope that the launch will detract attention from other parts of Time

Warner's business, such as Time Inc., which looks set to announce further staff layoffs this week.

FIFA'S BOUNCING BALL

Is it ironic that a cable company should look past the medium of TV to embrace an alternative means of promoting their services? Yes, but it's practical, too. Such interactive, large-scale exhibits are becoming more commonplace as corporations continue to look beyond traditional forms of marketing to make their mark.

Last year, Adidas and Auckland agency TBWA\Whybin created a dramatic "reverse bungee" to launch the FIFA 2006 World Cup matches in New Zealand. A 2.5 meter-high ball sat in front of the country's largest billboard site, printed with imagery of England captain Steven Gerrard poised to strike. Participants were strapped inside the ball to listen to match commentary, and then blasted into the air as Gerrard "struck" the ball.

This exhibit is certainly not so off-the-wall, and it's uncertain whether the city's tourists, or native New Yorkers—adept at blocking out on-street or in-store marketing messages so common in this part of town—will pay any attention whatsoever. But, says Adler, "we're not looking for cause and effect. We're looking to make the services seem alive to customers and consumers."

NO DENYING THE COOL

Adler wouldn't specify financial details of the exhibit, saying simply, "in terms of marketing dollars, it's not a

large amount," while Schlossberg reckoned that the total cost would weigh in at "a little over a million dollars." This exhibit is only open for three weeks (after which it will travel to different markets around the country) but Schlossberg remains excited about the opportunity.

"One of the things that is so interesting about contemporary electronic life is that there's nowhere to learn about it," he says. Then, again, it's also another opportunity for him to make a grand design gesture in the middle of Manhattan. Schlossberg pauses, staring up at the column that should soon be a glowing beacon. "I think you'll be able to see it from Fifth Avenue," he says. "That's pretty cool."

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