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Added Attraction

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They're sitting in seats that rumble at the National World War II Museum in New Orleans. Simulated snow falls from the ceiling during the Battle of the Bulge; an antiaircraft gun rises, rotates and appears to fire above the audience; and a 25-foot guard tower appears out of nowhere along with the nose of a B-17 bomber.

It's all part of "Beyond All Boundaries," the museum's new multimedia cinema experience narrated by actor Tom Hanks that opened in November. And it was brought to you entirely by a tiny Pasadena startup, [The] Hettema Group. "First and foremost we are storytellers," said President Phil Hettema, who spent 14 years at Universal Studios, finishing his tenure there as senior vice president of attraction development before launching his own shop. "What we try to do is tell stories using architecture, theatrics and media to impact people in emotional ways."

The New Orleans show got a good reception. "A magnificent and moving spectacle that explodes ... onto the oversized screen of the museum's luxurious new 250-seat

Solomon Victory Theater," one reviewer gushed in the New Orleans Times-Picayune newspaper. "It is a world-class, theme park-style attraction combining education and entertainment in a stirring and inspiring package."

Hettema, 55, said he started the company eight years ago to get into what he sees as a burgeoning field of "experiential design" -immersing audiences in multimedia spectacles. These attractions most often are designed and built for museums, theme parks, resorts and hotels.

It's not a new idea, of course. More than 50 years ago, Walt Disney Co. made history by putting together the first group of Imagineers to create experiential theme park attractions for Anaheim's Disneyland. Technological innovations since then have vastly broadened the field. And recent years, experts said, have seen a proliferation of smaller companies like Hettema's - many in Southern California - eager to get in the game.

It's easier for small companies than big

companies to work the sector today, said Bill Ward, a professor at UCLA's Scholl of Theater, Film and Television, who has taught entertainment design.

"The advent of new high-definition, high-quality image projectors has made a big difference," Ward said. "But it's become more difficult for big companies to sustain the creative potential that each project requires. They're all custom built; you're not building a Buick, you're building one of a kind. I don't think there's an economy of having a very large organization working on something when there's only going to be one of them."

At any given time, Hettema said, his group is involved in about 15 design projects requiring anywhere from 18 months to five years for completion at costs ranging from about \$500,000 to several million dollars. Once the company gets a contract from a client and establishes a theme, a team of artists, designers, architects, engineers, producers, writers, musicians and model builders creates the concept at Hettema's 15,000-square-foot studio



THE HETTEMA GROUP

in Old Town Pasadena. Then, when the customer approves that concept, the company puts the project out to bid for contractors to build.

To date, Hetteema said, only a handful of his company's plans have actually been constructed: a 75-acre resort in Aqaba, Jordan, designed to evoke the cultural traditions of the Middle East (a job that paid the firm in the \$5 million to \$10 million range); a 200-room hotel, also in Aqaba, with the same theme (about \$500,000); a touring exhibit, now at the California Science Center in Los Angeles, depicting the cultural contributions of African-Americans to U.S. history (about \$500,000); and, most recently, the National World War II Museum show (about \$9.5 million). The latter was a five-year project.

Other Hetteema projects already designed or in progress include a 600-foot observation wheel (similar to a Ferris wheel) for Harrah's Entertainment on the Las Vegas strip, and a major exhibit for Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry about life on Earth and Mars.

"They came up with an outstanding design," said Kurt Haunfelner, vice president of exhibits and collections at the Chicago museum, where the new exhibit is planned.

Hetteema's competitors include Thinkwell Design & Production and BRC Imagination Arts, both in Burbank, as well as Goddard Group in North Hollywood and Jack Rouse Associates Inc. in Cincinnati.

Craig Hanna, chief creative officer at Thinkwell, expressed his respect for Hetteema, saying, "They produce excellent work and are known for quality."

The recent opening of the World War II museum attraction made a big splash in the Big Easy.

"We have tripled our visitation since the

movie opened and are well above our pre-Katrina levels," said Bob Farnsworth, the museum's senior vice president for capital programs. "The response has been terrific; we get nothing but positive comments and we believe it will remain popular for years to come."

Hetteema believes that the future growth of his industry is secure thanks to young people being increasingly multimedia oriented.

Holly Willis, director of USC's Institute for Multimedia Literacy, agrees. "It's something I see happening," she said. "The field is definitely burgeoning, especially in museums where they want to reach new audiences."

Much of the inspiration for the New Orleans show, Hetteema said, came from the stories his 86-year-old father told of being a fighter pilot in World War II. "The goal was to put you into the experience so you can see it with new eyes," he said. "We worked on that project longer than it took to fight the war."

