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Columbus Zoo Director of Information Technology*



The Columbus Zoo: A Bottom-Line Focus on Guest Experience

In recent years the Columbus Zoo and Aquarium has experienced tremendous growth and received national recognition for its guest-friendly, revenue-enhancing approach to pursuing conservation through successful business operations. In fact, last year the Zoo achieved a record-breaking 2.2 million attendance figure and was rated the #1 Zoo in America by USA Travel Guide.

Columbus Zoo set a course for this unprecedented growth when plans began for the destination's dramatic 2008 expansion including the addition of a second gated attraction, Zoombezi Bay Waterpark, and a comprehensive new entrance. The sweeping expansion seemed to be the perfect time to upgrade the Zoo's ticketing and membership technology as well.

Zoo leadership began extensive research to find a company that could deliver on their near-term needs including enhanced eCommerce, group sales, point of sale, membership processing, and access control solutions. Expected ongoing growth meant that the new ticketing solution must also be able to expand with future development including a more sophisticated answer for managing donor, member, corporate and group relationships. A priority was also placed on choosing a solution that would not place extra burden on existing staff. In the end, the decision was made to partner with Orlando, Florida based *accesso*.

"When we decided to work with *accesso*, we absolutely needed a technology solution that could handle the specific requirements of a large scale zoo plus a new separately gated waterpark," said Gregg Oosterbaan, Columbus Zoo Director of Information Technology. "While traditional on-site systems were considered, *accesso's* hosted solution was particularly appealing because it allowed us to keep our small IT staff focused on other important technology projects rather than maintaining on-site ticketing servers."

With attendance pushing nearly 2 million visitors at the time, an emphasis on driving guests to make purchases online was critical. The focused shift to online ticketing has simplified and enhanced guest experience by allowing visitors to bypass ticket booths and proceed directly to the entrance. The percent of daily tickets sold online has increased every year. So far in 2010, nearly 40% of all memberships and season passes have been sold online.

“With six membership categories and four donor membership options, finding a solution that would allow us to fully integrate our online and onsite membership sales with our Raiser’s Edge program was essential,” said Patty Peters, Columbus Zoo Vice President of Community Relations. “Working with accesso, we have streamlined the process for our guests while improving the quality of our data behind the scenes.”

In addition to the online improvements, Columbus Zoo has also benefited from accesso’s robust entrance point of sale and group sales functionality. When training seasonal front line staff to welcome and process guests, an easy to navigate point of sale solution makes all the difference in the world.

“Since moving to accesso’s point of sale solution, the amount of time we need to train seasonal ticket sellers has dramatically decreased,” said Andy Cloyd, Columbus Zoo Director of Operations. “In addition to ease of use, it helped us decrease transaction time allowing us to move guests through our lines quickly and efficiently.”

“Advancing our technology for everything from admission control and online ticket sales to donor management and group sales was a giant undertaking for the entire team,” said Dale Schmidt, Columbus Zoo President and CEO. “The accesso team brought a tremendous amount of dedication and expertise to our project. Working closely with them, we have accomplished our objective of a reliable, state-of-the art ticketing system that specifically meets our unique and growing needs.”

“Rather than convincing a zoo to operate their ticketing process with software designed for a theme park, we have purpose-built our solutions with the direct feedback of clients like the Columbus Zoo and Aquarium.” said Steve Brown, CEO of accesso. “The best part is that our hosted solution allows us to affordably offer this robust system to zoos of all sizes. Plus, since we are an ongoing service, working with us is more than a one-time software sale; it’s the start of an ongoing partnership that any operator can appreciate.” ♦



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