



Imax May Have Brighter Future With Lasers

By Andy Georgiades
Of DOW JONES NEWSWIRES

TORONTO (Dow Jones)--Imax Corp. (IMAX) might choose lasers over lamps in order to reap the benefits of digital projection at its largest theaters.

The digital system being rolled out now by Imax consists of dual 2K digital projectors connected to the company's image enhancer. That setup works well for smaller screens in a multiplex setting, but the resolution and light output aren't suitable for the giant screens - as much as 100 feet high - that made Imax's name and reputation.

Digital projection is a cost-saver for the entire movie industry but especially for Imax, whose bulky film prints are about \$20,000 each, and double that for 3D.

Michael Karagosian, president of California-based MKPE Consulting, said Imax probably has its eye on newer 4K light engines being developed by its partner, Texas Instruments Inc. (TXN), as well as innovative light sources such as lasers. Laser light isn't nearly as hot as lamplight so it's less stressful on imaging devices, and that allows for greater light output, he said.

While lasers are more expensive, the long-term energy savings would largely offset the upfront cost. Another plus is that new light sources can be designed to work in existing projectors.

Bill Beck, co-founder and chief executive of Laser Light Engines, which specializes in laser-illumination systems, said today's bulb-based digital projectors are okay for standard 2D films, but not for 3D, where the brightness is cut by 60-85%, nor for ultra-large venues such as Imax big screens. Lasers offer a highly controllable and stable light source, and the ability to pump three to five times as much light through a projector as a lamp, and last 50-100 times as long.

"I would confidently say that, when we have our commercial lasers available, that they could light up the biggest Imax screen there is, and maybe even bigger than that," Beck told Dow Jones.

Richard Gelfond, Imax's chief executive, said the company is looking at a range of options, including higher-resolution chips, brighter lamps, and lasers, but hasn't made a decision on which way to go. He said Imax has had discussions with several companies, including Laser Light Engines.

While he hopes to have a product ready in two to three years, he noted that many of Imax's largest commercial screens are in very profitable locations, so studios will

continue to support them with film prints.

Beck said lasers offer digital cinema many advantages besides low power consumption, such as savings from frequent bulb replacement. He also said the laser can be delivered through optical fiber cables, allowing placement of the actual light source in a different room. That means laser-fired projectors could be the size of a shoebox compared to amp-based projectors, which can be as big as a refrigerator.

He believes the company, which owns 10 patents and has 11 pending, and no competition, will be able to demonstrate its technology to the public by the end of 2010.

Company Web Sites: <http://www.imax.com>, www.laserlightengines.com

-By Andy Georgiades, Dow Jones Newswires; 416-306-2031;
andy.georgiades@dowjones.com

TALK BACK: We invite readers to send us comments on this or other financial news topics. Please email us at TalkbackAmericas@dowjones.com. Readers should include their full names, work or home addresses and telephone numbers for verification purposes. We reserve the right to edit and publish your comments along with your name; we reserve the right not to publish reader comments.

(END) Dow Jones Newswires

10-21-09 1330ET

Copyright (c) 2009 Dow Jones & Company, Inc.