

Theme parks offering smart-phone options to improve visitor experience

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Folks don't leave their trusty smartphones at home when they go on vacation. They use them for work and play while traveling, and central Florida's theme parks and attractions are taking advantage of the growing trend.

Park visitors, armed with their phones and [tablets](#), can monitor lines for popular rides, make dining reservations, plot routes and get reminders of where they parked the minivan - all on the fly.

"People are now using their mobile device to enhance their experience," said Toni Caracciolo, vice president of marketing for SeaWorld Parks & Resorts. "It used to be that maybe I'd use my iPhone or iPad to purchase my tickets, now it's actually engaging throughout the entire day."

SeaWorld's revamped app includes information about the animals seen at the [theme park](#) and a scavenger-hunt activity, she said.

"Your child can learn more about animals ... and at the same time be petting a stingray," Caracciolo said.

Although some people worry about the isolating and addictive aspects of cell phone use, a survey by TripAdvisor travel website revealed that 85 percent of American travelers reported using smartphones while on vacation.

"Our research gave us many insights about the changing behavior of

consumers, and these insights led to what is now known as MyMagic+, as well as other things," said Marilyn Waters, a Disney World spokesman. "People want information at their fingertips faster and easier."

MyMagic+ - Disney's billion-dollar initiative that enables guests to make advance reservations for its theme parks and resorts - began its rollout last year. Using the My Disney Experience app, visitors nab appointments to meet the "Frozen" princesses, check on wait times for Haunted Mansion and see what the lunch options are.

And the surge of selfies encouraged Legoland Florida to test Buddy's Challenge, a social-media attraction named for one of the park's characters. On weekends in July, the theme park's guests were encouraged to post three photos while in the park and to mark them with the hashtag "#LLFSocial." Participants received a small Lego-based souvenir as they exited the attraction.

"All you have to do is tag us on Facebook, Twitter or Instagram and, in doing so, you get a reward," said Chris Jones, Legoland Florida spokesman.

The result: Dozens of pictures posted featuring Lego figures and happy scenes from inside the Winter Haven attraction.

"It's a way for us to drive engagement on our platforms. It's just a simple and fun way to do so," Jones said.

All of that posting and browsing can be a drag on cellular-data plans and smartphone batteries.

So Universal Orlando introduced a free wireless network before opening its Wizarding World of Harry Potter - Diagon Alley at Universal Studios

theme park this month.

"Guests' growing love of [mobile devices](#) played a significant role," said Al Callier, [vice president](#) of strategic innovation and emerging technology. "We began the planning for our new wi-fi network well over a year ago, and we conducted in-depth guest surveys each year about mobile usage in our parks and while on vacation."

Universal also upgraded its mobile app to include "an interactive way-finding function that utilizes GPS-enabled maps and real park images to visually guide guests step-by-step to their desired attraction," Callier said.

Disney, in anticipation of MyMagic+, started expanding its free Wi-Fi in 2011. It now is available to everyone at Disney parks, hotels and Downtown Disney. SeaWorld Orlando offers free wireless near its entrance and around Shamu Stadium, the top destination of the park. Legoland Florida has Wi-Fi in its newly remodeled and air-conditioned Duplo Barn.

The parks are also getting creative for guests who need to power up their devices. Disney's Magic Kingdom has camouflaged outlets inside wooden-barrel props of a rest area in Fantasyland. Magic Kingdom and Aquatica, SeaWorld's water park, are testing locker-style systems that allow users to leave their recharging devices behind while they explore attractions.

SeaWorld also has power stations with benches, shade and misting fans.

"You're not only recharging your phone battery, you have the opportunity to recharge yourself as well," Caracciolo said.

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