Pokemon Go: Can a game fad make sense – or dollars – for business?

By Dr. Chuck Kelley

Pokemon Go, a GPS-enabled augmented reality game “app” (software application) has hit the streets and generated an enthusiastic response.

The app is a smart phone update of a popular, 20-year-old video game. Players move through the real world staring at their smart phone screens in order to find and “capture” Pokemon “pocket monsters” in an electronic scavenger hunt so totally absorbing that some players have lost track of their surroundings and gotten into real-world trouble. Recent news reports tell of players who have:

- Walked blindly in front of traffic.
- Trampled flowers in public parks.
- Run into snakes and other dangerous animals out in the woods and fields.
- Gotten into automobile accidents.
- Walked off cliffs!

On the positive side, Pokemon Go – unlike most video games – gets players off the couch and gives them physical exercise as they walk for miles in search of Pokemon monsters.

Another positive: businesses of all types are experimenting with ways to lure a potential new stream of foot traffic to their doors.

Last week for example, Waikiki Aquarium found its parking lot and entrance area overwhelmed with gamers. This week they invited the gamers in by offering a modest ticket discount and are now setting record gate revenue numbers!

Hotels, restaurants and other travel industry business will no doubt quickly jump on board in an effort to take advantage of this burgeoning bonanza. Hotels are already negotiating to become designated Pokemon destinations where monsters can be captured or players can “battle” each other.

Pokemon Go may seem a trivial, flash-in-the-pan fad at first, but if we look to past experience, it would seem to have the potential to quickly evolve into something that can impact business.

I recall how Outrigger co-founder Roy Kelley initially viewed computers as a waste of time and money – a distraction from the real business of putting “heads in beds.” Obviously, computers have evolved into an essential part of the hospitality and travel business, facilitating virtually everything we do today.

Likewise, AOL’s “you’ve got mail” was viewed at first as a silly way to communicate, limited mainly to computer geeks. It seemed to have little application to the travel industry. Today, of course, email is essential to every aspect of our business.

So where will Pokemon Go go? Will it be just a flash in the pan or the beginning of a new game-centered method of marketing and driving traffic to business doorsteps? The answer is unclear, but it would be foolish to bet against rapid new developments. Considering the lightning speed with which this phenomenon is spreading around the globe, it looks like a harbinger of change. As Marshall McLuhan wrote, “We shape our tools and then our tools shape us.”

Whatever this phenomenon leads to, I’m confident that Outrigger’s incredible team will know how to harness it to a winning strategy.