

Monday, December 18, 2000

A kick in the pants

New system designed to shake you up

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Erik Battenberg

For The Dispatch

Like KC & the Sunshine Band before them, the fellows at Guitammer Co. want to shake, shake, shake your booty.

Not with their hands, thank goodness, but with the ButtKicker, a piece of equipment that shakes your seat in time with low-frequency sounds in music, movies, video games or anything else.

"It's like a subwoofer," said Mark Luden, president and chief executive of Columbus-based Guitammer, except you feel the sound instead of hearing it.

Feel it, indeed. Watch Jurassic Park with a ButtKicker set up and your seat shakes with each thundering footstep of the tyrannosaurus rex. Pop in Saving Private Ryan and you can truly feel the rumbling crescendo when an enemy tank approaches. Play a bass-heavy funk CD and your seat will vibrate so much you might fear incontinence.

Yes, it can be pretty intense at times, and if you've been to COSI's Dome Theater, you know what we're talking about. The theater had ButtKickers installed under the seats when it opened a year ago, and they have been a big hit, said theater manager Mike Stanley.

"We were impressed with the system and it hadn't been used in a planetarium before, so we decided to give it a try," Stanley said. "Audiences react to it and react to it well. It helps make the whole experience more memorable."

While the ButtKicker is associated with sound, it doesn't work like a typical loudspeaker, which vibrates a cone to send sound waves through the air. Instead, the 20-pound ButtKicker has a piston inside of it that moves up and down in time with low-level sound frequencies (5 Hz to 200 Hz, to get technical), physically shaking anything that it's attached to, said Ken McCaw, founder of the Guitammer Co. and co-inventor of the ButtKicker.

"We're driving mass rather than air," McCaw said.

That means the ButtKicker does its thing without making noise.



Fred Squillante / Dispatch

ButtKicker co-developers, from left, Marvin Clamme, Mark Luden and Ken McCaw, pose with their "shaker" system at COSI's Dome Theater.

"I can work on songs at 2 a.m. and my kids sleep right through it," said McCaw, who also is a musician and composer. "I just put on some headphones and turn on a shaker (ButtKicker) and I can get the full experience without bothering anyone."

Along with third partner Marvin Clamme, the ButtKicker's other co-inventor, Luden and McCaw began selling the shakers toward the end of 1999. They targeted several different audiences, including audiophiles or home-theater buffs, commercial-theater owners (Luden said ButtKickers will be installed in a new theater in Orlando, Fla.), amusement-ride operators and military-simulation builders.

Another audience is professional musicians, who use ButtKickers as sound monitors during performances so they can feel the rhythms on stage.

Among the performers who have used ButtKickers on tour, Luden said, are the Backstreet Boys, Barbra Streisand, Creed and Fuel.

The ButtKickers sell for \$700 with an amplifier included.

Guitammer has invested \$500,000 into ButtKicker, and is looking to raise another \$500,000 to market the product for commercial use, Luden said. The group also is trying to raise \$5 million to develop a \$300 version that could be sold at places like Circuit City and Best Buy.

Luden and McCaw estimate there's a \$100 million-a-year market for such a speaker.

If ButtKicker sales ever reach those heights, it would invoke another classic song: Jerry Lee Lewis's Whole Lotta Shaking Goin' On.



What's in a name?

If you remember nothing else about the ButtKicker, you'll probably remember its name.

"It's an aggressive name and there are reasons for it," said Mark Luden, president and CEO of the Guitammer Co., which makes the ButtKicker. "It's descriptive, it's fun and it's memorable."

But the ButtKicker was almost christened something else.

"We started with the ButtKicker name but then we got politically correct and changed it," Luden said.

The other name: Subsonics Technology.

If you just yawned, you're not alone. Guitammer surveyed many people about the two names, and Subsonics Technology got its butt kicked.

"People love the ButtKicker name," Luden said. "It resonates with them."

And it's still a topic of discussion when Luden tries to raise capital for the company.

"We go to investors who are mostly white guys in their 50s," he said. "They always say, 'Well, what about that name?' "

-- Erik Battenberg