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By Verena Dobnik
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Now you can virtually joke with Jay, ride with Conan

Network opens NBC Experience

By VERENA DOBNIK
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NEW YORK — Imagine visiting New York and — surprise — ending up on *Late Night with Conan O'Brien*, then taking home a videotape to prove it to your friends.

There you are, sitting next to Conan, winging your way through his off-the-wall queries and joining him on his “wild desk ride” over Manhattan.

(But psst, it never really happened. It's a near-perfect simulation, available to anyone who can read a teleprompter.)

The NBC Experience, a 20,000-square-foot high-tech theme store that opened Tuesday at the network's headquarters in Rockefeller Center, also offers visitors a sparring session over sports trivia with Bob Costas, punctuated by his instant reprimand — if you goof. Or you can do the weather with Al Roker, just across the street from the real *Today* show on West 49th Street. Visitors also get to sit in Jay Leno's guest chair for a virtual interview — uncensored.

It all rolls in a studio complete with cameras, teleprompters, lights — and action.

“It's extremely realistic. You'll feel like you've walked into a TV set,” says NBC Experience director Guy Pepper, senior director

for NBC News.

The studio experience is free of charge; but walking away with a video costs \$15.

And you can crash a virtual set of *Saturday Night Live* or the *Tonight Show* and get a photo for \$12.95.

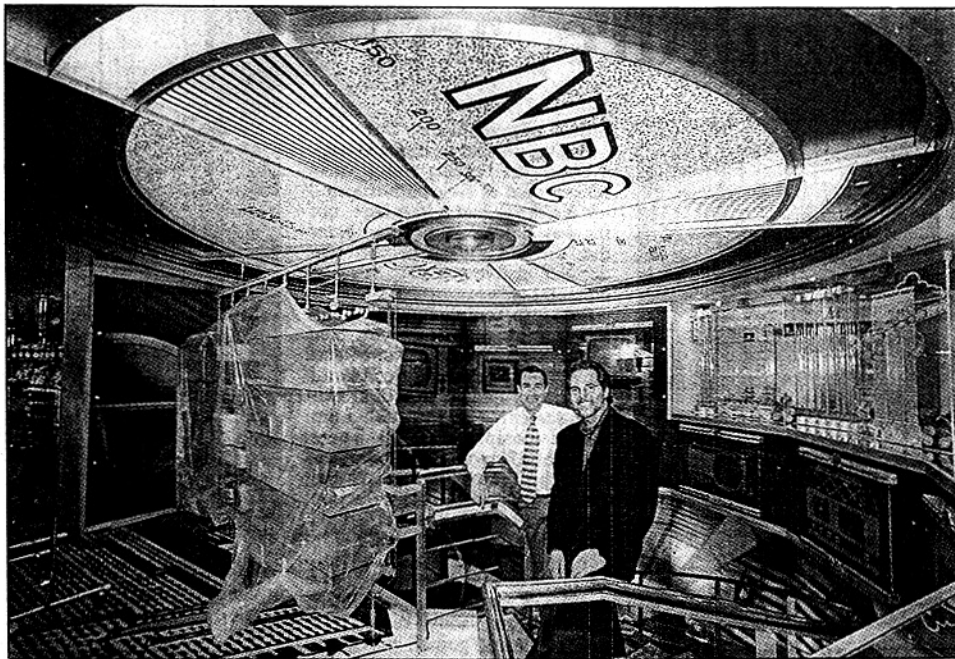
The display starts on the street level of the building that houses NBC at 30 Rockefeller Plaza, on a corner passed by about 88 million people a year, according to Rockefeller Center officials.

In a money-fueled town, the high-tech toys come with an ulterior motive. A tourist can walk away with, as Conan puts it in a taped remark, “\$10,000 worth of useless crap right here at NBC.”

But useless is fun, especially for kids. Mugs, T-shirts and TV memorabilia share space with baseball caps and collectibles such as an old tin cup from a 1960s *Bonanza* promotion.

The two-story interactive retail space doubles as a fully operational digital broadcast studio, blending touchy-feely television nostalgia with the latest technology.

That includes the ultimate TV room: One of the largest high-definition video theaters in the world — and the only one with a giant curved screen — has a soundtrack heard all around at 12,000 amps, compared to about 100 for an



ED BAILEY / AP

NBC EXPERIENCE: In the high-tech theme store of the new NBC Experience in New York City stand Barry Leffler, left, who runs NBC's retail operations, and director Guy Pepper.

average home system. The technology was created by a British company that specializes in military simulation. It's all enclosed in a circular, mirrored ball with 100,000 tiny lights that spell out

computerized graphics visible from the sidewalk.

For now, the theater projects an eight-minute documentary about the network. But by 2000, a high-definition TV version of the film

Titanic will be available for this technology.

Scattered over the two floors are 250 television monitors, some of which beam current live television feeds. Others pop up bits of NBC's

past — Bob Hope, Groucho Marx, Jack Benny, Sid Caesar, Jack Nicholson and James Dean. The display also brings back Abbott and Costello on NBC radio from the 1950s.

And visitors will hear popular old ads — “Where's the beef?” “Plop, plop...” and “I can't believe I ate the whole thing.”

The two high-tech floors “mix the old and the new, mood and technology,” says Pepper.

That could also be said of the food sold — a mish-mash of yuppie gourmet and junk food that now defines America's eating habits. On the shelves are rows of pricey oils and vinegars, right around the corner from a recreation of old New York, filled with M&Ms — in 21 colors including purple — and the usual jelly beans, gummy bears and popcorn.

The store serves as the starting point for the NBC tours, which are expected to take about a half million people through the network's operations this year.

And, of course, the space is sprinkled with NBC's favorite piece of nostalgia — the peacock logo that has chimed for decades across the country for decades.

For a bit of trivia, the familiar three notes that signal the network — G, E and C — stand for the General Electric Co., which originally owned the network.

“It's a wave of memories,” says Barry Leffler, who runs NBC's retail operations.