

FUNWORLD COLLECTIONS

Family Entertainment Centers

VOLUME 5: GROUP SALES & SPECIAL EVENTS



Events such as the Irish Dance Competition help draw thousands of dancers to Quassy Amusement Park each year.

FECs

VOLUME 5: GROUP SALES & SPECIAL EVENTS

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Thinking Outside the Calendar

Non-traditional holidays can prove a gold mine for creative FECs

by Mike Bederka

Asking for a show of hands, professional speaker Silvana Clark polled a room full of family entertainment center operators at last year's Fun Expo in Las Vegas to find out how many facilities celebrate Halloween.

Almost all, not surprisingly, acknowledged they—at minimum—tack up some fake cobwebs and like to put a little scare in their guests.

While the days leading up to and including Oct. 31 may be an FEC staple, the tried-and-true holiday usually won't cause members of the fourth estate to stop the presses, Clark says bluntly, because "the media doesn't care about another Halloween party."

A better idea is to think outside the calendar and celebrate holidays and events that are a bit out of the ordinary, she says. "What about World Farmers Day?" she asked the audience—on Oct. 12, guests who dress up in overalls and gingham blouses could get reduced admission. Or how

about asking a local 4-H group to set up a petting zoo of farm animals and see if a local dairy will participate. Adults might like a miniature farmer's market full of fresh, tasty fruits and vegetables.

The press will more likely cover an event if an FEC tries something unconventional. (See sidebar for additional ideas.) And in turn, the greater the exposure, the more customers will follow.

Standing Out

Clark knows some FEC operators, content with mini-golf, arcade games, and go-karts, might be a little hesitant to try something new. "It's so easy to do what you're comfortable with," she tells FUNWORLD. However, in the perpetual quest to stand out from the competition, FECs must dedicate some time, money, and effort to being creative.

"You have to keep people's interest," Clark emphasizes. "If my daughter has been to a birthday party three times at your facility, and she gets an invitation for another, more likely she's going to say, 'It's the same thing. I don't want to go.'"

"But if there's a different theme or different focus, then we're there."

FEC operators won't necessarily have to do all the work alone, either. Some holidays lend themselves to corporate sponsors. With National Twinkie Day (April 6), for example, contact the corporate offices of Hostess, Clark suggests, tell them you're letting guests in for half price if they wear beige or yellow, and you would like some Twinkies to give out as treats. Any leftover snacks, you explain, will go to the area food



Guests enjoy "Dog Lovers Day" at Adventure Landing in Jacksonville Beach, Florida.

bank—an altruistic fact that might help bring in a few extra folks, as well.

“It turns into a bigger thing,” says Clark, as a holiday like this lends itself to some clever marketing. Rather than just e-mailing local media a simple press release or ad, snail mail them a few Twinkies with a personalized note attached. Even if newspapers don’t send a reporter, they might assign a photographer to capture the day, which could have the same positive effect.

“Seeing that picture of a happy little child immediately makes you as a parent go, ‘I want to make my child happy. We’re going down to that same facility,’” Clark says.

Other Tips

To have a truly successful event, all employees must be brought on board, Clark says. If they don’t want to wear the overalls or have frowns on their faces the whole day, that lack of enthusiasm will carry over to the customers.

“It takes more work,” she says. “Sometimes staff has to be convinced. They have to feel like they’re part of it.” As a precaution, Clark says, applicants should be told during the hiring process they might have to give a little extra on special occasions.

Courtney Bourdas Henn offers another tip for FECs considering unusual holidays or events: Pay close attention to your geography. “Some things wouldn’t work in Southern California that might work in Middle America,” says Henn, director of marketing for Fleming Entertainment Centers in Santa Clarita, California.

She recently celebrated “TV-Turnoff Week” by bringing in a petting zoo and a caricature artist. It did take a lot of extra work to create and coordinate the special promotion, she says, but the end result of a packed house made it worthwhile: “It was a huge, huge success.”

Hank Woodburn, president of Adventure Landing, headquartered in Jacksonville Beach, Florida, also had a winner with “Dog Lovers Day.” He held it in February 2006 and is making it an annual event. Hundreds of people came out to parade their dogs around, he says, and he invited the Humane Society, as well. That day, the organization placed about 35 pooches with Adventure Landing guests. “They loved it,” he says.

Woodburn threw in a few extra freebies for customers, such as dancers and a karate demonstration, to round out the festivities. He plans to hold other unconventional events in the future but didn’t want to divulge any specifics at press time.

Clark applauds the creativity displayed by these and other like-minded FEC operators. It’s the only way to get people back time and time again, she stresses: “The newness, the fresh factor has to be there.” 

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Be the First FEC in the Neighborhood to Celebrate ...

National Bubble Wrap Appreciation Day (Jan. 27)

- Give families an egg, bubble wrap, and other assorted “packing” devices. Ask them to wrap the egg so it doesn’t break after being dropped from a high rooftop.
- Serve a “popping good” snack, like popcorn.
- Give everyone a piece of construction paper. Pour different colored paint on paper plates. Wad up small pieces of bubble wrap and use as paintbrushes to create abstract pictures.
- Give everyone a strip of bubble wrap. On “Go!” everyone jumps on the bubble wrap for a safe way to make firecracker sounds. (This is a nice photo opportunity for the media, who should be sent a press release—surrounded by bubble wrap, of course.)

Paul Bunyan Day (June 28)

- Read the story of mythical lumberjack Paul Bunyan and his big, blue ox, Babe. As the tale goes, Babe grew so fast that one morning his entire barn rested on his back. Let children pretend to be Babe while balancing a large pillow (instead of a barn) on their back. Have races to see who can cross the finish line without the pillow failing off.
- Contact members of a local Toastmasters group and see if they’ll come to your facility to share some lavish tall tales.
- Make something big and blue. For example, ask an appliance store to save you a large refrigerator box. Let the children paint the box blue to create a fort, spaceship, or barn. Have an adult cut out openings for doors and windows.
- Ask kids a series of questions, such as, “How do squirrels remember where they hide their nuts?” See what kind of tall tales they can spin.

Helpful Resources for Unconventional Events:

- www.chases.com
- www.holidays.net
- www.holidayorigins.com
- www.brownielocks.com
- “Every Day a Holiday,” by Silvana Clark, available at www.silvanaclark.com

Mom, Me, and FEC

How a facility can open up to the pre-K set

by Mike Bederka

On a typical week, how crowded is your family entertainment center at 10 a.m. on a Monday?

Smart money would say during this time your go-karts sit firmly in park and nobody has hit a high score on any of your arcade games.

So, what can you do with a near-empty facility at the downest of down times? How about opening your doors and creating a “mom-and-me” program for the pre-k crowd. “Mothers are desperate for something to do with their kids in the morning,” said professional speaker Silvana Clark recently to a room full of FEC operators.

“I can’t think of any reason why people shouldn’t consider it,” adds Dorothy E. Lewis, vice president of marketing for Fun Station Associates in Danbury, Connecticut. “It’s using everything that you have.”

Mom-and-me programs can be held in an empty birthday party room, Lewis says, and FECs require no special insurance or licensing to run them. Also, your employees don’t necessarily need any extra training since parents stick with their children.

Lewis says some early childhood education majors from local colleges join the staff, bringing with them a wealth of knowledge. “It’s wonderful if you have exposure to that,” she says. “But really, anyone who has a great personality and is good with kids can do it.”

Managers, however, stay on site to make sure everything runs smoothly.

While younger staff members participate in Paradise Park’s mom-and-me program, a team of retired school teachers serve as the main instructors, greeting parents and taking charge of the activities.

These teachers have more experience in dealing with younger kids, says Geoff Hill, director of group sales and special events at the facility in Lee’s Summit, Missouri.

Paradise Park wraps up its third mom-and-me program this month. It ran for six straight Mondays at the children’s “edutainment” center—its anchor attraction that emphasizes hands-on learning.

Like most, this FEC searched for something to fill in the gaps and drive in traffic during the slow

times. The 90-minute program also impacts other revenue-generating areas, Hill says. Families generally stay around afterward to munch on lunch in the café, and mom-and-me helps cross-promote and expose parents to different features of the facility, such as birthday parties.



Mom-and-me programs are easy to execute, FEC operators say, and they can make a significant impact on the bottom line.

As children get older, hopefully they'll make their way over to Paradise Park's "other" side for the mini-golf, arcade games, rock climbing wall, and batting cages, he says.

Mom-and-me programs help to groom your market, Lewis has observed. "You're creating loyalty from a very young age."

Program Particulars

It needs to be noted, though, that the name, "mom-and-me," isn't exactly accurate. Dads, grandparents, and caregivers all can participate in this non-discriminatory program. "We call it 'mom-and-me' because it rolls off the tongue," jokes Hill, but admitted mothers make up the majority of paying customers.

His six-week program costs \$75 for a mom and child; each additional kiddie may be enrolled for \$50. If the parent-child pair comes in during the middle, Paradise Park will charge a prorated fee.

Lewis says the mom and child pay \$15 per class—with a four-class minimum—at Fun Station.

When the program first started, her facility had a lax drop-in policy. Some weeks, 30 people showed up, other times only 10, making it tough to plan out activities and staff. "You need a commitment," she says. "You want a full class each time."

Her FEC had the fortunate problem of too much interest in the mom-and-me program. It started out just on Tuesdays, but management added classes on Wednesdays and Thursday to fill the growing need.

Paradise Park caps off the class at about 30 parents and kids total. This allows for greater one-on-

one interaction and more memorable moments.

The start time also can play a big role in participants' interest and attendance. Last year, Hill moved it from 10 a.m. to 11:30 a.m., to 11 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. "It actually hurt us," he says.

Parents would rather not interrupt lunch, Hill speculates. "Moms who want to get out and do activities with their kids are probably more apt to do it in the morning hours and be done by the mid-afternoon." This year, it went back to beginning at 10 a.m.

From "penguins," to "valentines," to "snowmen," each class had a different wintertime theme to encourage parent-child interaction and social, physical, mental, and emotional development, Hill says. The program is designed for children 12 to 36 months old.

"It's always a learning experience," Lewis adds. "It's not to replace preschool. We don't ever say that we're teachers. We build social skills. It's networking. It's a get-together."

Clark, from Nashville, Tennessee, says FEC operators shouldn't stress about thinking up intricate (and expensive) programs for their littlest guests. "With preschoolers, everything is magical," she says. "You don't need all the bells and whistles."

A program's success can depend on how well you present the activities, says Clark, who directed a preschool for a decade. For example, a mundane paper plate can become "the most special thing in the world. We can roll it, fly it, eat off it, paint it, and cut it into a spiral and make a snake."

Clark suggests a few simple, FEC-friendly ideas for the pre-k set:

1. Draw a large circle on a paved area and divide it into "pizza sections." Let each child decorate his or her own slice with chalk.
2. Pin the tail on the dog, the feather on the turkey, the nose on the clown, etc.
3. Stuffed animal day. Kids bring in their favorite stuffed animals and parade them through the facility. Or have a "talent show" with them.
4. Spin the watermelon: Paint a "face" on the end of a watermelon. "Watermelon red, watermelon green, spin that watermelon so it smiles at me," a staff member can shout out.
5. Have the instructor pre-make Rice Krispie treats and cut them into pyramid shapes. Then, turn them into giant Hershey Kisses by letting the kids wrap foil around the snack. Add a tag to the top that reads, "I had a good time at 'Your FEC,'" to extend your brand name. 🍷



The Holiday Spirit

by Mike Bederka

Celebrating Halloween, Christmas, and New Year's Eve can bring in the crowds

When Professor Van Boogersnot visits the Putt-Putt FunHouse, others surely follow. Swarms of kids—and Houston television stations—flock to this family entertainment center to catch hungry alligators popping out of bushes, bats swirling in a cave, and an assortment of costumed characters wandering about, including the aforementioned instructor, who likes to shoot Silly String out of his nose. (Fred the Head also stops by from time to time to regurgitate prizes from his puppet mouth.)

Jim Saxe's facility in Webster, Texas, has celebrated Halloween for the past eight years, transforming one of his three miniature golf courses into "Haunted Holes." The owner separates his event from others in the area by making it a more family-friendly environment.

"We don't do blood, guts, and chainsaws," he says. "Everybody else does something you can't take kids to."

This distinction allows Saxe to draw in tons of customers during what would be an otherwise

slow time in the FEC world. Similarly, planning around Christmas and New Year's Eve can help facilities beat the winter blues.

Scaring Up Business

Keep in mind, though, that putting together a Halloween event is more than just randomly tossing up a few cobwebs in the corner. Facilities must take the time to thoroughly think out their activities. "A lot of FECs have tried to do something Halloween and failed miserably," warns Larry Kirchner, publisher of St. Louis, Missouri-based *Hauntworld* magazine. "If it doesn't come across right, it could end up hurting them more than helping them."

Facilities should avoid the common mistake of going for both the young children and teen audiences, Kirchner notes. The two groups don't mix well in a Halloween environment, and operators could risk sending mixed signals to their markets.

For a place that doesn't have much space or a tremendous budget, he recommends a family-orientated event for the younger set. (A true haunted house can be expensive and labor-intensive, requiring at least 15 to 30 staffers to run, Kirchner says.)

Decorate with hay, pumpkins, and corn stalks, and offer face painting as cheaper alternatives. To shop for additional supplies, he suggests those Halloween superstores that spring up in the fall,



Children trick-or-treat along the miniature golf course during Hinkle Family Fun Center's Fall Fest.

big-box stores like Target, or web sites such as www.ghostride.com or www.hauntedhousesupplies.com.

Try for a healthy balance when creating a Halloween festival, says Kirchner. “I wouldn’t make it too scary, but I wouldn’t make it too stupid either,” he says.

The Hinkle Family Fun Center in Albuquerque, New Mexico, has found a way to get around the potentially prohibitive costs of Halloween. Last year for almost two weeks, a local haunted house set up at the FEC in a huge tent. The two joined through a revenue/expense share, explains Colleen Wyatt, Hinkle’s marketing manager: “It created an incredible addition to our facility for virtually no money.” This year, it will add “less scare, more thrill” matinees for younger audiences.

In addition to the haunted house, the facility hosts a Fall Fest every year on the Sunday prior to Halloween. Kids—as long as they’re in costume—can trick-or-treat at the 50-plus sponsored (and decorated) booths around the miniature golf course. Sponsor reps, who also must be dressed up, bring in enough candy for about 4,000 children. The festival is free for sponsors and participants.

While Halloween events can be a great draw during the fall season, FECs should be aware of a couple things, advises Courtney Bourdas Henn, director of marketing of Fleming Entertainment Centers based in Santa Clarita, California. First, their success or failure can depend on the market. For example, her company has a location in the greater Los Angeles area. “It’s so close to Hollywood,” Bourdas Henn says, “unless you’re going to do something blockbuster, it’s not going to impress the kids. Nothing is special to them, and sometimes decorations can be a turnoff.”

Second, don’t skimp with the spiders and skulls. “Picking up only a few decorations isn’t in anyone’s best interest because then your facility looks half done,” she says.

’Tis the Season

The spirit of decorating can follow through to the winter months, Bourdas Henn says. Fleming will deck its facilities out with Christmas trees

adorned with lights and ornaments, wrapped presents, holly and hanging stockings, and painted windows. To help save some money, purchase decorations at the end of the season for the next year, Wyatt says—just make sure everything gets carefully boxed and stored.

In addition, Wyatt will pore through redemption catalogs for cheap themed items, and solicit decorations from the community. Through its partnership with the local schools, the FEC has children color holiday-themed fliers that cover the facility. “Because I’m a mom, we award prizes to each participant,” she says.

Also, don’t let the calendar restrict when the holiday is celebrated,

Bourdas Henn notes. Fleming holds a “Christmas in July” promotion with Santa Claus and carolers. The event serves as a fund-raiser for the local sheriff’s department annual toy drive. Guests who bring in a gift valued at \$10 or more receive free admission. The good will equals good press and attention. Plus, there’s little competition out there, as most venues won’t put on such an event during the summer. Fleming usually gets a “fantastic” crowd, Bourdas Henn says, with 500 to 600 people showing up.

FECs, of course, have less wiggle room when it comes to Dec. 31, but that doesn’t mean the event will be any less successful. Saxe has hosted an alcohol-free New Year’s Eve event for the past two years and plans to do so again to usher in 2008. Guests receive noisemakers, hats, and champagne glasses filled with grape juice or apple cider. Karaoke and a constantly spinning prize wheel pack the night, which culminates in a big balloon drop.

The party runs in conjunction with a Putt-Putt FunHouse promotion where each customer receives unlimited attractions for \$15. Roughly 60 people showed up last year, Saxe says. Through word of mouth, he expects the event to keep growing.

FEC owners should be prepared for a fair amount of work if they want to pull off something similar, but don’t let that be a deterrent, Saxe stresses, because it’s definitely worth the effort. “It’s neat to see families together to celebrate,” he says proudly. “They have so much fun.” 

Fleming Entertainment Center’s “Christmas in July” promotion draws between 500 and 600 people.

Corporate Takeover

by Mike Bederka

Family entertainment centers go after big business with corporate sales and events for adults

When Olivier Sermet looks at the books for his family entertainment centers, he sees a big fat zero in the corporate sales column. That will soon change, though, because his three California locations, each dubbed The Jungle, have plans to start actively pursuing this slice of the business pie.

It makes perfect sense now, the owner explains. Area software companies, snug in the Silicon Valley, have seen a nice resurgence over the past few years. With more disposable income, they'll be looking for a place to hold off-site meetings, holiday parties, and team-building events.

"I feel it's very lucrative," Sermet says, and members of the FEC community around the country agree. Corporate sales can account for 30 percent to 40 percent of group sales, says Randy Thomas, owner of Randy Thomas and Associates, a San Clemente, California-based attraction group sales agency. Like birthday parties, strong corporate sales can translate into solid repeat customers. For example, if a mother visits for a work function and has a good time,

she will most likely bring in her whole family for a Friday night of fun.

"People are now looking at Castle Park in a way they never, ever looked at it before," says Melissa McKay, director of sales and marketing for the FEC in Riverside, California. With her corporate events, McKay includes a coupon so the guests can return at no charge. "I don't want to do a package where they don't come back," she says. "What's the sense?"

What to Offer

When McKay joined Castle Park in February, she saw the huge potential in corporate sales and began to ramp up the FEC's offerings. "We had space that was totally underutilized," she notes. "We can do anything anyone wants us to do."

The facility hosts company picnics, handles meetings with all the standard audio-visual needs, and encourages team building on the miniature-golf course or during an elaborate murder mystery evening where customers search the park for clues.

Management must focus on food quality and presentation to successfully lure corporate business, stresses Pasquel Terwilligar, sales and marketing manager for the Family Fun Center in Tukwila, Washington. Present dishes on silver platters and use white tablecloths, and smash the notion that FECs just serve up pizza, chicken fingers, and the other standard snack bar fare, she says: "You don't have to do prime rib, but you can have Italian with pasta and bread." For additional dining ideas, talk to respective food vendors and attend food shows, Terwilligar recom-



Melissa McKay, director of corporate sales at California's Castle Park, includes a coupon so group guests can return for free.

mends. Both will help expand the menu.

Some events, especially holiday parties, might lend themselves to alcohol being served as well. In the state of Washington, guests can purchase a banquet permit at any liquor store and put the FEC as the venue. The Family Fun Center will then set up a beer garden, tended by an employee over 21 years old. Many times, Terwillegar says, the bottles go unopened because “we have so many attractions and so much going on, it’s not needed.”

Spreading the Word

The Family Fun Center has hosted numerous retirement parties, sales lunches, showers, and laser tag lunches (a favorite for the local Nordstrom staff). But without proper marketing, strong salesmanship, and superior customer service, these corporate opportunities would fizzle.

To get new business, Thomas recommends first going to a qualified list manufacturer. “That’s the best way to go,” he says. As a cheaper alternative, consult a manufacturer’s guide. Don’t forget to contact previous groups, either. The head of a church group who visited last month also might be the manager of a neighborhood grocery store, opening your facility up to a new customer base.”

Cold call any new local business or one that’s expanding, adds McKay, noting the importance of contacting the right individual. The human resources director probably heads the company picnic, while a sales or marketing director makes decisions on where to hold a meeting.

McKay also suggests doing research and going after segments of business rather than every corporation within a 25-mile radius. For instance, she knows utility companies in her area host many off-site activities. “That is a great niche for us,” she says.

To help highlight all its group sales events, Castle Park holds periodic VIP nights. Here, the FEC shows off the facility and its various packages, such as the murder mystery dinner or the Internet-ready meeting rooms. Castle Park always tells prospective guests it can offer more activities at a cheaper price than the hotel down the street. Plus, the FEC serves the same quality food as the competition.

Terwillegar also strives for in-person meetings with potential clients where she shows them mock setups and a scrapbook of past events. “If I can get them here, I have an 80-percent chance of getting [their business],” she says proudly. “They realize there’s so much more than what

they see driving by on the freeway.”

FECs often falter when sealing the deal with companies, Thomas cautions. “Don’t take a ride operator and just turn him into a salesman who lacks the resources and skills to go after business. Instead, properly train or hire a bona fide sales rep.”

“You get the right person,” McKay contends, “and you’ll see a huge increase in business.”

Next, make sure the informational material on corporate packages is clear, concise, and of good

“If I can get them here, I have an 80-percent chance of getting [their business]. They realize there’s so much more than what they see driving by on the freeway.”

—Pasquel Terwillegar, Family Fun Center

quality. “It doesn’t have to be four- or two-color, but quit Xeroxing,” Thomas says. “You don’t have to spend a lot of money.” Watch the typos, too. “That’s why they invented spell check,” he says with a laugh. Finally, always follow up with a phone call or, even better, a personal visit.

When a company signs the contract, remember that the customer service doesn’t end there. Terwillegar’s staff will create a fully customized e-vite, paycheck stuffer, or poster to promote the event. At the check-in table, they make a welcome sign with the company’s logo. And while guests are there, staff will be at their total disposal. “Our motto is one call, and we’ll do it all,” she says. “I don’t want them to have to lift a finger.”

After the event, Terwillegar will send flowers or candy as a thank-you. Special touches like these have allowed corporate sales to flourish at the Family Fun Center. Facilities, regardless of size, can follow this lead, she says, and create a place where large businesses want to come and spend their money.

“A mistake a lot of FECs make is they just look at themselves and think, ‘I can only do birthdays,’” Terwillegar says. “You should never limit your options.” 

FEC: HALLOWEEN

Scaring up Revenue

Ten ways to make Halloween at an FEC a success

by Mike Bederka

A SUCCESSFUL HALLOWEEN ATTRACTION CAN TAKE THE SCARE OUT OF OCTOBER—a traditionally slower time for family entertainment centers.

For example, the haunted house at Boondocks Fun Center in Northglenn, Colorado, increased business 20 percent to 30 percent and brought in an estimated 15,000 guests a year during the Halloween season. “That’s good stuff,” says Casey Lee, general manager. You, too, can earn some of those boo bucks. Here’s how.

1. Make it scary. “You need to create an entire atmosphere,” explains John Henry, owner of Henry Haunted House Productions in Londonderry, New Hampshire. Some FECs, he says, mistakenly have guests walk through “a pristine white entrance,” and it only gets spooky in one back nook of the facility. “We fog the entire park,” Henry says. “When you pull into the parking lot, it’s a different world.”

2. Pick a good theme. Be creative, says Bill Balfour, general manager of the newly opened EnterTRAINment Junction in West Chester, Ohio. His “Nightmare Junction” will consist of two 4,500-square-foot mazes. “Ripper’s Revenge” re-creates the seedy alleys of Victorian London where famed mass murderer Jack the Ripper will “scare the blazes out of you,” he says, while evil clowns menace guests in the “Fear

Factory.” At Boondocks, “The Asylum,” which features mad doctors and scientists and lots of animatronics, resembles an old hospital.

3. Do your research. Whether you outsource your haunted attraction or not (see sidebar), FEC management must always look for the hottest trends, Balfour urges: “Treat it like any other part of your business.” He attended several haunt conferences to prepare for “Nightmare Junction’s” debut. Also, subscribe to industry magazines and visit as



A scary creature from the Haunted Mansion at Victorian Park

many other dark attractions as possible, says Larry Kirchner, president of the St. Louis, Missouri-based Halloween Productions Inc.

4. Forget skimping. “If you don’t do your attractions first-class,” Kirchner warns, “then the savvy haunt buyers will leave a trail of carnage across the web.” Obviously, a couple goofy masks from the local dollar store won’t cut it. Investing in some more expensive features should pay for itself. (Balfour hopes to freak people out with his “infinity mirrors.”)

5. Avoid mixing crowds. Lee doesn’t recommend “The Asylum” for any guests under 12 years old. That’s probably not surprising considering all the chainsaw-welding characters and “the electric chair room.” “To create a true scary haunted house, the target market is adults,” he notes.

However, some FECs opt for a lights-on attraction during the day. At EnterTRAINment Junction, young kids will wander around in more of a low-fright, fun house-type environment, dubbed “Jack-O’-Lantern Junction.” “You’ll still see the bugs on the wall, but we won’t have any bloody corpses lying around,” Balfour says with a laugh. He also plans to get a candy sponsor so they can have trick-or-treating.

6. Utilize online promotion. Kirchner suggests having a separate web site for the haunted house and packing it full of photos and videos to show off the gore. (Don’t forget to add the videos to YouTube.com, a free video-sharing site, for some extra viral buzz.) Also, if possible, sell tickets online, he says. More people have turned to the web to make these purchases.

7. Buy in bulk. Haunted attractions lend themselves to being part of package deals. For instance, at one of Henry’s FEC partners, the facility offers a “fright pass,” which comes with some tokens, ice cream, a round of golf, and the haunted house.

8. Use space appropriately. FECs should avoid taking up valuable room inside their facilities for a haunted house, Lee says. Instead of putting the ghosts and goblins in the arcade or laser tag arena, perhaps opt for a separate outdoor structure.

9. Start planning early. Considering the various logistics

Outsource or Not?

FECs MUST DECIDE whether they will handle the Halloween activities in house or partner with a company that specializes in haunt attractions. Casey Lee, of Boondocks Fun Center, strongly recommends the latter. “If you can have the experts do it, that’s the way to go,” he says. “It can be a pretty big animal.”

The company he works with sets up a tent in the Boondocks parking lot for the haunted house. It handles all the labor, expenses, hiring, and permits.

Boondocks benefits by earning a percentage of the revenues and controlling the point of sale for the haunted house. “That’s one of the secrets,” Lee says. “You have to bring guests into the facility to purchase tickets. This way, they have the opportunity to walk through the arcade and they usually end up playing go-karts and things like that.”

Facilities should collaborate to increase revenues and avoid pitfalls, John Henry agrees. With the extra equipment and city codes/regulations, dark attractions run a lot differently than a typical FEC. “A lot of people don’t realize what they’re getting into,” says Henry, of Henry Haunted House Productions. “We have that experience.” For the past 14 years, he has partnered with Victorian Park Family Entertainment Center in Salem, New Hampshire, on its “Haunted Mansion and Forbidden Forest.”

On the other hand, Bill Balfour, of EnterTRAINment Junction, will operate “Nightmare Junction” without outside assistance—beyond the construction of his Halloween-themed mazes.

He ran the entertainment department at Kings Island for about 15 years, so he feels confident in his abilities to handle the job internally. Balfour also thinks the attraction will be more profitable this way.

—Mike Bederka

with Halloween events (hiring extra staff, adhering to fire codes, planning promotions), the sooner, the better, Henry says.

10. Have fun. By its nature, Halloween is an entertaining holiday. Take this opportunity to show off your imagination. FECs that fully embrace the season should be rewarded a few extra “treats” in the cash register. ■

Respect the Risks Halloween Safety Tips from American Specialty

- Don’t take shortcuts with electrical wiring—strictly follow NEC standards.
- Have your fire marshal involved at all stages of planning and construction; follow fire marshal directions at all times.
- Train employees thoroughly on the SOP and emergency procedures; have all training documented.
- Conduct evacuation drills prior to opening.

—Rich Powers, American Specialty.

For more information about the FEC insurance program, contact American Specialty at +1 260/672-8800 or at amerspec@amerspec.com



FEC: MARKETING

All in the Family

FECs focus on adults, too

by Mike Bederka

FAMILY ENTERTAINMENT CENTERS ARE NO LONGER JUST CHILD'S PLAY. More and more facilities have learned to capture the cash out of guests' shrinking wallets, they have to expand their reach.

So through new attractions, higher-quality food, alcoholic drinks, and more comfortable features, FECs turn to the adult crowd for business.

Speed Racer

With two kids, Edison Hamann has visited his fair share of FECs. Most offer him slim sources of entertainment. "I'm bored to death," admits Hamann, managing member of Andretti Thrill Park in Melbourne, Florida. He figured many other parents felt the same way, so in 2006 he conducted a survey asking older guests if they wanted an attraction that went beyond the typical FEC fare: a high-performance outdoor go-kart that can reach speeds of 40 miles per hour.

They answered a resounding "yes" and subsequently backed up their positive response. The \$400,000 investment paid for itself in the first year, Hamann proudly notes. Guests pay roughly \$10 or \$20 (depending on if they have a wristband) for one eight-minute heat. Riders must be taller than 60 inches and have a valid driver's license. To create a true racing feel, the "Andretti Challenge" has traffic lights and a timing system so drivers know their speeds.

Catering to adult adrenaline junkies has allowed Thrill Park to increase its corporate sales, Hamann says. For \$30 to \$40 a person, businesses get a wired meeting room, food, and free spins around the go-kart track. "It gives companies a much more affordable and interactive way to set up meetings," says Hamann, using hotels as a comparison.

Plus, the "Andretti Challenge" brings in people who probably would not have come to the park otherwise. He'll get a group of four guys looking for something to do during their lunch break as well as weekly leagues with up to 80 participants, he says. With the latter, Thrill Park charges \$20 a per-

son, with pizza and soda included. The winner can come back the following week and race free of charge.

Good Food and Drink

Like Hamann, Jose Luis Bueno was inspired by his own experiences. The owner of Cool-de-Sac Play Café in Miami, Florida, couldn't find an FEC for both him and his three kids, so he created one, explains Amy Madson, the facility's general manager. At the restaurant, adults can munch on grilled mahi mahi or churrasco, with real silverware and plates. (For more menu items, see sidebar.) Servers come right to the table. "Here, people can sit down and actually have an adult conversation," Madson says. "It's a real dining experience."

That experience, however, isn't for everyone, she cautions: "There's definitely a premium to be paid." Sandwiches cost between \$9-\$12 and entrees run \$14-\$18; a bottle of spring water is \$4.

"The restaurant is our strong revenue center," Madson says. "I don't want to say the kids' play is secondary, but they're definitely coming to eat." And to drink. Cool-de-Sac offers a modest wine and beer selection; guests can choose from five different wines (\$8 a glass) and a handful of beers (\$4-\$5 a bottle).

Other FECs are also pairing the adult beverages with their higher-end menu items. For example, at Blue Sky Family Club parents can select a nice sauvignon blanc to go with a fresh organic salad, says Patrick O'Loughlin, owner of the facility in Emeryville, California, nestled close to the area's wine country. Food value is also increased, he says. Instead of gobbling down a greasy deep-dish pie, adults can order "Blue Sky Pizza" topped with grilled chicken, broccoli rabe, roasted garlic, and chili flakes. "It's their weekend and weeknight, too," O'Loughlin says. "We have things that fit their sensibilities."

Eugene "Ditto" Basso plans to serve a wide audience as well when Pirate Pete's Family Entertainment Centers opens early 2009 in Marion, Illinois. "I think we can take care of every different age group and make it interesting," he says.

At first, though, the concept of serving alcohol troubled the owner. "I wondered, do family entertainment and a margarita mix?" he asked. "And you know, yes, they do." His facility sits near a major college community, so he plans to target this demographic with package deals like pizza, a pitcher of beer, and three rounds of laser tag. "Every hour is going to be happy hour," Basso boasts.

Other Tips

Basso remains mindful of mixing his crowds too much. He doesn't want kids bouncing around playing video games to interrupt adults shooting pool or college students blowing off some steam.

As a solution, he'll have different sections at his FEC:



young children in one area, redemption in another, darts and pool somewhere else, etc.

Facilities have a few other tricks to create a more enjoyable experience for the older folks:

- Blue Sky Family Club offers big comfy couches. “They have a pleasant place to sit rather than a little orange bench,” O’Loughlin says.
- Cool-de-Sac has 42-inch plasma TVs in the restaurant that show news and sports.
- A basket of toys is available for Cool-de-Sac dinners to keep the kids entertained.
- Last, the Miami FEC subscribes to roughly 50 magazines, so adults always have something to flip through. ■

On the Menu

What’s the most important feature for an FEC looking to attract more adults?

The food—no question, says Amy Madson of Cool-de-Sac. “You can’t skimp on the quality,” she notes. “Even if you sell hot dogs, they should be gourmet hot dogs.”

Her facility spends thousands of dollars on food each week, and “everything is made to order.”

Take a quick look at some of its menu items:

- **Sesame Pepper Seared Tuna:** fresh sushi-grade ahi tuna crusted with black and white sesame seeds and cracked black pepper with ponzu sauce and ginger vinaigrette, served with rice.
- **Avocado Grilled Chicken:** grilled chicken breast topped with sliced avocado, bacon strips, sliced tomato, and julienne romaine with mustard sauce on whole grain bread.
- **Chocolate Decadence:** a slice of “pure heavenly” dark chocolate cake rich in flavonoids, a natural antioxidant.



Bo's Family Fun

FEC: SPECIAL EVENTS

Stay on Top

Family entertainment centers can't afford to lose birthday parties to competitors

by Mike Bederka

THE ROOM IS GETTING CROWDED FOR BIRTHDAY PARTY BUSINESS. Family entertainment centers now have to worry about numerous traditional and unconventional venues creeping into their territory, including hair salons, clothing stores, The Home Depot, mobile spas, and ice skating rinks.

With this increased competition, FECs must stay sharp. They have to keep their parties fundamentally strong as well as search for other ways to generate revenue.

Do the Basics Well

Above everything else, a birthday party needs to be safe and fun for customers, says Patti Garrand, a partner with TreeP-aad Family Entertainment Center in Glens Falls, New York; look for maturity and an outgoing personality in the staff you hire. "If they're not smiling and bubbly, they shouldn't be doing a party," she says.

The rule of the selective staffing extends to the employee who handles reservations, says Larry Barnaby, consultant for Amusement Professionals International, during a lecture at last year's IAAPA Attractions Expo. This person could be the guest's first impression of your facility, so don't let just anyone book parties, he says. The dedicated staffer should follow a script and speak slowly, in case customers want to take down notes, Barnaby says.

He must also create a sense of urgency about the birthday, Barnaby explains. Say you can "fit them in," rather than "we have tons of availability." The latter won't do much to sell the venue as a great place to be. Finally, repeat the order (date, time, etc.) to avoid any screwups and send out a confirmation.

Bo's Family Entertainment, in Lenoir, North Carolina, has reaped the rewards of emphasizing guest services, says General Manager Andy Marchant. The FEC trained a marketing person to answer all questions and book as many birthdays as possible. He earns an hourly wage and a small commission for each event, which Marchant considers money well spent.

In a market of only 40,000 people, Bo's hosts 15 to 22 parties each weekend during the peak season, he says: "We rock it out." However, the FEC did struggle with these celebrations when it opened in 2006. "Our prices were too high for our market," Marchant says. "We felt the value was there, but at the end of the day, nobody is going to pay more than what he thinks it's worth." Counteracting this sentiment, Bo's web site now features a \$10-off coupon for a party.

Management at Fun Spot Action Park in Orlando also addressed the changing economic climate, according to Mark Brisson, director of marketing. For years the facility concentrated on the more expensive, upper-tier parties. Not anymore. "We found we had to bring back some of the value packages," he says. "Five hundred dollars is too much; they'd rather do \$150."

Special Events

Tough times mean the creativity has to flow more than ever at FECs. Marchant and his team hold weekly "war room meetings" to think of ways to drum up business. Everyone brings at least one idea—zany, serious, or otherwise. "We just lock ourselves in the office for three hours and say we're not leaving until we come up with the next 'fill in the blank,'" he says.

One recent brainstorm played off the fireman's bowling league. At the league's conclusion, the FEC will host a chili cook-off, with each firehouse bringing in its best dish. Bo's will give prizes for top bowler as well as favorite chili. The event will become a traffic generator, drawing interest from people who don't bowl, he anticipates: "The newspapers got a hold of it, and they went wild."

To entice additional guests, Fun Spot focuses on its corporate team-building events, Brisson notes. The staff breaks the company into teams, and each receives a clue list pointing to seven attractions, like go-karts, rides, and arcade games. Once teams complete a task, the attendant gives them a paragraph with one key word missing. After they figure out the seven key words, they scramble the letters to come up with a quote to give the "quizmaster"; prizes go to the first three places. FEC employees then spend 15 minutes explaining to guests how the seven paragraphs apply to their company and positions.

Boosting Business, Cutting Costs

FECs have to contend with the global recession in some capacity. Experts share five ways to improve the bottom line:

- 1. Go green.** LED lights and waterless urinals save natural resources and money, says Johanna Archila, executive director of the Colombian Parks and Attractions Association—Asociación Colombiana de Atracciones y Parques—in Bogota.
- 2. Offer more deals.** "Every day we have a special," says Andy Marchant of Bo's Family Entertainment. He likes value-added promotions in particular, where customers get a mix of go-karts, arcade games, food, and more for one low price.
- 3. Constantly review.** Shop around for the best prices from suppliers, says Patti Garrand of TreePaad Family Entertainment Center.
- 4. Use online-only invites.** Mark Brisson, with Fun Spot Action Park, recently scrapped the free invitations that came with some birthday packages. "Printing costs have gone up, and people aren't mailing out invites anymore," he explains. As an alternative, guests can print out the invitations from Fun Spot's web site.
- 5. Raise prices.** Don't eat the cost if chicken jumps a buck a pound, Marchant says. Sometimes, you have no choice but to increase the price of menu items.

Team building runs from \$500 to \$1,500, depending on the number of people, Brisson says. The FEC averages two or three events a month—mostly during slow times. "It's not going to keep us in business," he says, "but it's nice to pick up another \$30,000 a year when you can." ■