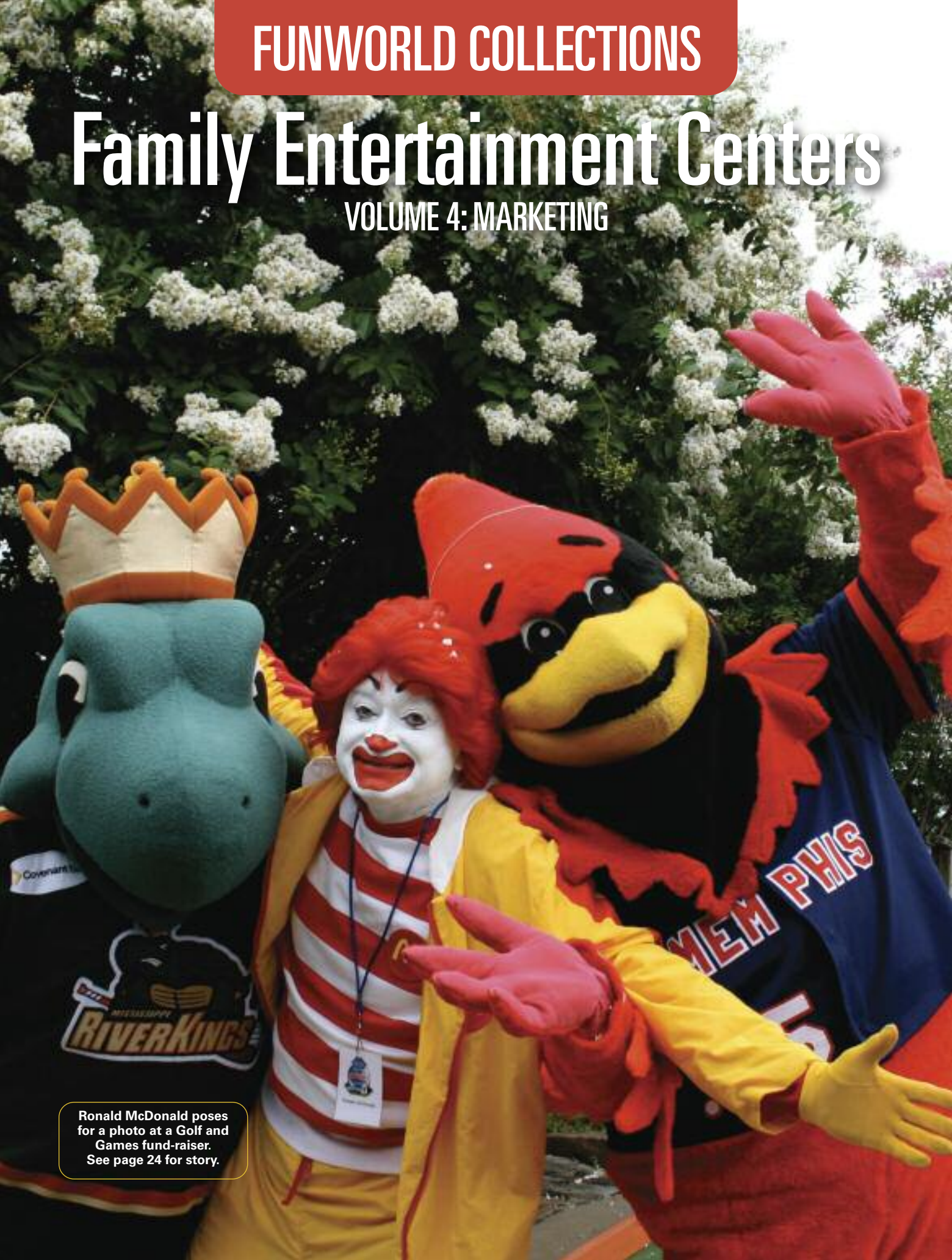


FUNWORLD COLLECTIONS

Family Entertainment Centers

VOLUME 4: MARKETING



Ronald McDonald poses for a photo at a Golf and Games fund-raiser. See page 24 for story.

FECs

VOLUME 4: MARKETING

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Untangling the Web

by Mike Bederka

Marketers, Internet experts discuss how a well-planned and user-friendly web site helps draw more guests

With a strong online presence, it's easy to get customers trapped in a web. Take Sam Westgate, for instance, who relays a quick story demonstrating the power of Internet marketing.

His daughter and her friends wanted to go to a lake resort for a vacation. After clicking around the computer for a bit, they made their decision. They picked the place with the nicest web site, but not necessarily the best resort out there.

"That was their decision-making process," says Westgate, general manager of the coin-operated equipment supplier in Carmi, Illinois—the web site was the key.

By the same token, many people don't realize a guest's first impression of a family entertainment center will come from the facility's web site. If customers find a subpar or hard-to-navigate site, they may begin to wonder, "How concerned are you about the lasting impression I'll get when I come to your park?" says Westgate, also president/chief executive officer of Advertinet Inc., a web site and Internet application development company in Carmi.

The Checklist

To make a web site as user-friendly as possible, experts recommend skipping complicated features and monstrous image files.

"People want to believe that everyone is on cable or DSL. That's just not the case," says Courtney Bourdas Henn, director of marketing for Fleming Entertainment Centers in Santa Clarita, California.

Dial-up users may get frustrated by all the extra bells and whistles a web site throws in, adds Colleen J. Wyatt, marketing manager for Hinkle Family Fun Center in Albuquerque, New Mexico (www.hinklefamilyfuncenter.com): "If it takes three hours to load your page, people won't do it."

In terms of must-haves, Henn says make sure the web site has clear, precise navigation and always includes facility contact information, directions or

a link to a map, pricing, hours, party packages, and any age, height, or weight requirements.

For additional features, do a quick survey with staff about the most common questions they are asked, Westgate says, because that information



Hinkle Family Fun Center's web site is simple enough so customers with varying Internet speeds can access its content.



by Christina
MacDonald

Partner with Local Businesses

Self-sufficiency may be a prized trait in our culture, but being a lone ranger can be a big mistake for a midsize company, especially in an increasingly global economy. Partnering with local businesses might be the key to longevity given the strength of the alliance. Julie Deon, vice president of sales and marketing for Adventure Landing FECs in Florida, lists her prerequisites for partnering with local businesses to attain mutually beneficial goals.

STEP 1 Cater to Your Niche Demographic

Deon says a surefire way to boost park awareness and the bottom line is to pair with local companies and tailor events to community subsets. To tap into her local animal-enthusiast demographic, Deon planned a daylong event for dog lovers by asking six animal shelters and 20 pet-related vendors to attend. With each vendor paying Adventure Landing a certain amount to exhibit, both the park and the companies benefited from the large turnout.

STEP 2 Target Businesses That Share Your Mission

“We partner with local businesses that are trying to tap into the family audience that likes to have fun,” says Deon. “This is a proven plan for success.” Deon approached the local PBS affiliate and asked it to sponsor a “Learn to Read” day for children and parents. The park didn’t have a big budget but offered PBS a chance to have one of its kid-friendly characters, Arthur, at the park to promote the show. The park also publicized the affiliate by putting the logo on all advertising collateral used to promote the event. In exchange, the affiliate promoted the facility through free commercials.

STEP 3 Put Yourself in Their Place

Deon relays the importance of third-party tie-ins: “It’s always good to have a promotion established, as this increases awareness and provides credibility to the campaign. You have to approach the partnership with the underlying maxim of ‘How will they benefit from this partnership? Are they looking for branding, on-air exposure, radio tags, or park signage?’” However, Deon conveys the importance of having a qualitative sales booklet where values are assigned to all promotional exposure opportunities you can provide. “Always have a starting point for park signage,” she says. “It’s all negotiable and can be customized to meet both of your goals, but this keeps your best interest intact.”

STEP 4 Consider Working with Charities

Deon suggests pairing with charities that are proactive in the community. “Look for a sophisticated charity,” she says. “One that can do e-mail blasts and spread the word on your company.” Deon relays the win-win situation that came as a result of partnering with the local Boys and Girls Club. “Oftentimes, large charities are underwritten by large companies,” Deon remarks. “Our Boys and Girls Club chapter is underwritten by CitiBank. CitiBank provided us with 20 of their employees who staffed the event and allowed us to save exponentially as a result.”

STEP 5 Host Fund-raisers That Give Back

According to Deon, nothing brings in the bucks like approaching a local company to see if it is interested in organizing a team-building event at your park during the slow season, where proceeds benefit a charity. “We are always talking to companies in our community between September and October,” says Deon. “We basically sell the tickets at a discounted rate to a company that wants to promote the event in-house and then the company sells those tickets at a higher price to their employees with proceeds going to a charity. Everyone benefits as a result.”

STEP 6 Be Creative

“You need to focus on different ways to attract whichever audience you are trying to draw in,” says Deon. “And sometimes this requires thinking outside the box and researching what these demographics spend their money on.” To bring in mothers and children during the park’s off-season, Deon partnered with a local make-your-own pottery company. Both parties promoted the program on their web sites and in the end benefited from the enhanced sales.

STEP 7 Contact the Airport, Not the Airline

When the president and CEO of Delta Airlines failed to return her call regarding a one-off promotion, Deon struck gold by contacting the Daytona International Airport’s marketing department. By making a contact at the airport, Deon was able to promote the park in a “register to win a free trip to Daytona” promotion, including free airfare, hotel accommodations, and tickets to the park. The park’s logo made it onto the company’s advertising collateral, which was aggressively promoted in multiple U.S. markets.

Party Time

Family entertainment centers go after older audiences *by Mike Bederka*

Just because people have double-digit candles on their cakes, that doesn't mean family entertainment centers can't take a slice of their birthday party business.

An increasing number of facilities have realized the potential in attracting tweens, teens, and even adults. However, matching balloons, paper plates, and hats won't cut it for these crowds. FECs must make special considerations for adult birthday parties to be a success, operators say.

Less Hand-Holding

Dorothy Lewis, marketing manager of Maxx Fun in Atlanta and Fun Station USA in Danbury, Connecticut, introduced a teen party about 10 years ago after seeing a need in that demographic. By age 12, most kids stopped coming in for parties, she says, and "I wasn't ready to give up that part of the business."

Called "VIP Parties," these celebrations put the teen in charge of the show; no host follows the group's every move. The guest of honor determines what time they eat and do the attractions, and as an extra bonus, after-hours they get to use the soft play—an off-limits spot for them during regular hours. "They feel like big shots," Lewis says. In addition

to this special treatment, they go to the soda fountains themselves and can drink as much as they want. And the pizza looks more like delivery to make it seem as if they're just hanging out with friends on a Friday night.

"The whole point is to not embarrass them," explains Cathy Scherbarth, regional director of sales and marketing for Boondocks Fun Center, which has three locations. For her "Xtreme Birthday Bash," geared for ages 12 to 18, you won't see any decorations, singing, or people being wrapped up in tickets, as she does with the younger kids. Instead, the teens can chomp down on an extra slice of pizza and have three hours of unlimited laser tag, bumper boats, go-karts, and miniature golf.

Free rein on the attractions, along with all-you-can-consume pizza and soda, are big selling points at Family Fun Center and Bullwinkle's Restaurant. The FEC, with two locations, hosts a "Late Night Bash" only on Friday and Saturday from 6 to 10 p.m. With fewer little kids running around, the teens can enjoy themselves without being bothered, says Jennifer Lillie, corporate and group sales manager: "They just want to come in, do the rides, and eat as much pizza as they possibly can." The Bash has brought in some impressive crowds, she says, averaging 300 teens over a typical weekend. These parties make up one-third of their overall birthday business. They charge \$21.95 per person (food included).

The cheapest way to market teen parties is by showing them off, Lewis adds. During food time, she doesn't shove the kids into a room in the back. Instead, she sections off some of the outside tables on the main floor, dubbing it a VIP area. "Other teens say: 'Why do they get to go over there? Why



Birthdays at Maxx Fun

do they have those VIP passes on? How do I get to do that?” she says.

The Big Kids

For Lewis, the opportunity for birthday business continues well after the teenage years. She regularly hosts parties for folks turning 30, 40, and 50. “The best part is they get the facility an hour after we close,” she says. “It’s exclusive.” Of course, management still has a presence in the building, cleaning up or doing paperwork. Adult parties won’t be booked on the same nights as teens because they use the same area. Also, the food gets taken up a notch; they offer catered munchies and sandwich platters.

Beth Standlee recommends three to five food choices. Appetizers especially enhance an adult party, says the chief sales officer for Trainertainment, a sales training company based in North Richland Hills, Texas, focused on the FEC industry; alcohol options will help boost revenue. She urges FECs to be proactive in the adult party arena. For example, when customers call and say they want to have a party, the person working the phones should ask, “Are you planning for an adult or a child?”

“We know almost all the time they’re planning for a child,” Standlee says. “But when we plant the seed about adult parties, then they start thinking they can have an over-40 bash.”

As of late, more older people have warmed up to this concept, and FECs have the ability to chip away at the business usually thrown to the local bar or restaurant.

“If you can give them a place to meet, eat, and play all together, then you win,” she says. ■

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Ten Tips to Make All Birthday Parties Shine

- 1. Focus on customer service.** Make the guest feel special throughout the whole facility, not just the party area, says Cathy Scherbarth of Boondocks Fun Center. If employees see a child with a name tag or crown, they always should say, “Have a great day,” or “Happy birthday.”
- 2. Wear an apron.** This way staff doesn’t have to scramble around looking for matches for the cake lighting or a pen for additional food orders, says Trainertainment’s Beth Standlee. Everything is handy.
- 3. Don’t become stuck in a routine.** That’s the No. 1 mistake FECs make with their birthdays, says Dorothy Lewis of Maxx Fun. Have surveys that gauge interest and show where you need improvement.
- 4. Use e-mail newsletters.** Services such as Constant Contact (www.constantcontact.com) allow management to market the FEC and promote birthday specials at a relatively low cost. For Standlee’s own business, she pays less than \$40 a month.
- 5. Put checks in bill holders.** These make the party look more professional and improve the tip, Standlee says. Credit card companies typically provide these for free.
- 6. Keep the number of options to a minimum.** Ten different birthday packages can be overwhelming for the guest, says Jennifer Lillie of Bullwinkle’s Restaurant. Just stick to three or four basic packages. Also, list the recommended age range for each offering.
- 7. Wear costumes.** A staffer doesn’t need a full Spider-Man outfit, but fairy wings or Mickey Mouse ears put employees in a more theatrical, animated mood, Standlee says. The kids love it, too.
- 8. Have a host.** Parents like the extra attention, Standlee says: “You can make five other mistakes, but if you’re waiting for them at the front door, Mom thinks you’re the best.” She suggests raising the overall price of the birthday package to cover the labor costs, if needed.
- 9. Don’t skimp on the marketing.** Use the facility’s web site to the fullest by posting high-quality pictures of guests having fun. Throwing the greatest party ever won’t matter if it’s captured in grainy or small photos.
- 10. Finally, never take party business for granted.** Even though it’s an FEC staple, people always can go elsewhere.

—Mike Bederka



PROMOTIONS

Marketing Magic

FEC operators share their budget-conscious and creative tips on effective marketing

by Mike Bederka

YOU JUST SPENT THOUSANDS OF DOLLARS on the latest attractions and worked countless hours to make your frontline employees super-staffers. Your facility should be tokens above the competition. But when Saturday night rolls around, the crowds are surprisingly light. What happened?

Sub-par or off-target marketing efforts may be to blame.

First Things First

Family entertainment centers can't just rush their marketing messages out there, says industry expert Scott Brown. Aimlessly placing ads can waste buckets of money.

Owners and operators must first take a step back to examine who makes up their audience and what they think about the facility, notes Brown, author of "Who Cares? Creating a Culture of Service in Your Business."

He recommends a few easy, cheap ways to gauge customers.

Counter surveys typically only solicit the best and worst comments. To help avoid an unfair representation, offer guests a blank space to write down exactly what they thought about an employee, the food, etc. In addition, with numeric scales, use an even number of choices so people can't choose an "average" answer, and avoid giving customers too wide a spread. "What's the difference between a 7 and an 8?" Brown asks. Brown prefers a scale from 1 to 6. It's concise and helps to separate the superior from the inferior.

He also suggests more focused follow-up phone calls to guests. General questions elicit general responses.



Well-crafted direct-mail messages can be very effective marketing tools

So, don't just ask, "How was everything?" You'll probably get a simple "good" or "OK" in return. Instead, probe exactly what was *good*: the service? the birthday party? "If they don't have anything to say, then you have some problems," says Brown. Always see if the customer would recommend you, and then, of course, ask "why?" or "why not?"

Do you have the best pizza in a 10-mile radius? Does your redemption selection have people digging deep for quarters? Will people wait in line for a half hour to ride the go-karts? Positive answers to these types of questions can help tailor marketing campaigns. "If you know what's driving your audience," Brown says, "you know what you need to say."

Traditional Marketing

Where that message goes, however, is another issue altogether. For decades, FECs relied on newspapers, magazines, direct mail, directories, radio, rack cards, television, and billboards. The rise of the Internet has shifted where the dollars go, but Ken Kobane still believes certain traditional methods have a place in facilities' marketing budgets.

"A well-crafted message on a very tight direct mail campaign still is a valuable tool," says Kobane, vice president of sales and marketing for Zuma Holdings, which has 16 locations. FECs must be willing, though, to put in the time and effort to make sure they reach households with children.

Radio advertising also can work, as long as owners understand the value of being a savvy media buyer, he says. Negotiate stations against one another. All stations will offer 30-second spots, but can they include a promotion as part of the deal? For example, will they run a listener contest where the eighth caller receives a free party at your facility? "It's added value," says Kobane, a 25-year industry vet.

Despite a few bright spots with "old-school" options, e-marketing is the future, he concedes. "When was the last time you looked at the Yellow Pages or any of the directories?" Kobane asks. "These were things that we used to spend a lot of money on."

The lack of trackable evidence about return on investment is one problem with traditional marketing. "We sold \$400,000 worth of wristbands for all-day passes," he says. "How much do you attribute that to the fact that we spent \$8,000 on a two-week radio campaign? That's a tough little judgment."

Another downside is having an audience with a shorter attention span, says Cathy Scherbarth, regional director of sales and marketing for Boondocks Fun Center, which has three locations. The advent of TiVo and similar devices allows potential guests to zoom through TV commercials, she says. Also, many people bypass the car radio for their iPods.

Newer Techniques

Rather than fight change, FECs should embrace today's technology, Scherbarth says, as a facility's web site can be its best marketing tool. Post the URL on all print materials and at the bottom of any TV spots; this way, even if people hit fast forward,

Quick Marketing Tips for FECs

- » **Survey customers; ask them for specific information on what they liked/didn't like.**
- » **Follow up with customers for more details, if necessary.**
- » **Ask pointed, specific questions; avoid general questions such as, "How did you like the food?"**
- » **Direct mail is a powerful tool; use it wisely and with a well-crafted message.**
- » **Embrace technology; your web site can be a strong marketing tool.**
- » **Use video sharing sites (YouTube.com) and social networking sites (MySpace.com) to your advantage.**

they still can see the vital info.

She notes a dozen critical items for any FEC web site to have: hours of operation, attractions info, pricing, group sales, birthday options, food, rules and requirements inside the venue, FAQ, news, directions, about us, and job openings. Work with a web company familiar with the industry, Scherbarth adds. "They understand what we're selling. Otherwise, it may be pretty but not very user-friendly for what our guests are trying to do."

Scherbarth says the web site should be simple; fancy designs and graphics can frustrate customers with slow Internet connections. FECs also should capitalize on e-newsletters, she says. Collect e-mail addresses from your customers and send them periodic updates on special promotions. To avoid spamming, only hit them four to six times a year, and make sure they can opt out at any time. A "Hey, we're here!" message along with a \$2-off coupon might get on people's nerves. However, a great discount or info about a brand-new New Year's Eve party will keep them interested, Scherbarth explains.

Social networking web sites also can help spread the word. Scherbarth used MySpace (www.myspace.com) to contact local high school class presidents and promote her grad nights. Other FECs have created MySpace profiles for their facilities. The Corning Family Entertainment Center in Corning, California (www.myspace.com/corningfamilycenter), lists specials and events, and boasts more than 100 friends.

YouTube (www.youtube.com), a free video-sharing web site, lets FECs upload and post clips of their facilities in action. With some forethought, a catchy video has the potential to become a viral phenomenon. "It has to be different," Scherbarth advises. "It has to be something worth them passing along. You're getting other people to do the work for you." Stay away from making videos that just list hours and give other basic information, Brown adds: "People are looking to be entertained by your message, not just receive it." ■

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FEC: MEDIA

Becoming Media Savvy

Effective press releases and events can drive FEC business

by Mike Bederka

ADS COST MONEY—SOMETIMES A LOT OF MONEY—so in a tight market, family entertainment centers hope to save a few bucks anywhere they can.

A well-written press release or first-name familiarity with the media can do just that, all while driving sales and, perhaps, having more impact than traditional advertising techniques. While economical, this type of marketing to print, online, radio, and TV outlets can be tricky and requires a flare for creativity and an eye for news.

What to Promote

First off, think of the types of things you would like to promote to the media. A common mistake is sending releases on non-events, says marketing expert Leigh Choate, who has consulted with Austin's Park, Amazing Jake's, Boomers, and Incredible Pizza Company. "Nobody cares that you changed your prices or got a new cheese supplier," Choate says.

Instead, focus on the most newsworthy, exciting aspects of your facility. Do you own a unique ride or attraction that no one else has in a 100-mile radius? Are you hosting a fund-raiser, where a percentage of the day's sales go to an area charity? Is a staff member trying to break the world endurance record for "Dance Dance Revolution"? "They're always looking for quirky and local," says Karen Kraus, marketing director for Action City

in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. Prior to working here, she spent almost 10 years as a reporter and anchor in TV and radio.

It also helps to tailor your release to a particular area of the press. For example, a newspaper business reporter may be interested in your new manager or if you offer corporate team building or office parties. A features writer for a parenting magazine might want to know how families can spend the day together at your facility.

To keep all your contacts straight, Choate says, make a comprehensive media list, including the name of appropriate editor and writer, snail mail and e-mail address, phone number, and web site.

If you don't know the best person, just call the outlet and ask. Releases sent to a general address or the wrong person may go straight to the trash heap. "We don't want to waste their time for something that doesn't pertain to them," says Julie Dion, vice president of sales and marketing for Adventure Landing, which has nine locations across the United States. For more on this topic, read the handout from last year's Expo session on press-release writing. It is located at <http://www.iaapaimis.org/intproject/HandOuts/iae2007/PressReleaseWriting.pdf>.



Adventure Landing donated the proceeds from its Frog Frolic to charity.

Press Release Writing Basics

Once you know the press release topic and who will receive it, it's time to hit the keyboard and start writing. Skip the flowery words and exclamation points, suggests Dion, who's also the agency of record for Ghost Town in the Sky in Maggie Valley, North Carolina.

"You're not writing an ad," she says. "It reduces the credibility when you use terms like, 'come on out' and 'take advantage of our special offer.' The media is going to shun that, thinking you're just trying to get free exposure."

In press release writing, lead with the most interesting info, be concise, double check spelling and grammar, and follow the journalism staple of the five W's and one H: who, what, when, where, why, and how. "You tend to be so wrapped up in your event that sometimes you forget the basics like the date and location," Kraus says.

"Try to write the story for them—answer every question you can think of, so they have all the information they need to publish the article," Choate adds.

Make sure the subject line (if sending electronically) or headline (mail or fax) is catchy or at least gives some quick, basic information, Dion notes. For instance, say: "New Slide Coming to Adventure Landing," rather than just "Adventure Landing."

In the release, list a contact name and number, including a cell phone, in case the reporter needs to get in touch ASAP. For electronic releases, copy the text to the body of the e-mail, Choate recommends. Messages with attachments may scare off some computer virus-leery writers.

Finally, it's a good habit to touch base by phone with the recipient right before the release goes out, Dion says: "It's more personable. They don't feel like it's going to everyone in the world." However, a word of caution: Don't be overly persistent. Multiple phone calls of "Did you publish my release?" or "Will you write an article about us?" could irritate the reporter.

Media Events

Beyond releases, FECs can forge a solid relationship with the local media by hosting press-only events. "Invite the media to



Smile for the Camera

High-quality photos of your FEC can serve as a nice complement to any electronic press release—the key being *high quality*. "If your picture doesn't look good, the assumption—very inaccurately—can be made that your facility doesn't look good," says Karen Kraus of Action City.

To help ensure a crisp shot, aim for a large image, with a DPI resolution of 300 or higher, explains Ghost Town in the Sky's Julie Dion. That matters more than the format itself; most publications can use EPS, TIFF, or JPEG files.

Avoid photos of empty game rooms or customers just milling around with their hands in their pockets. "You want to see smiling faces," Kraus says. "You want to see people have fun."

Besides pictures, Dion e-mails videos (which also can be viewed at www.ghosttowninthesky.com/special/whatsnew.html), along with the press release, to promote Ghost Town.

A final point: For both mediums, make sure you have signed releases from any guests shown, Dion says, as you don't want to use anything without their permission.

—Mike Bederka

come out and play," Kraus says. "They can let loose and see what your facility has to offer."

More than 100 members of the press came out for a recent media day at Ghost Town. The free event included lunch and guided tours, and they had the opportunity to interview staff and state representatives.

Media events are a no-brainer, well worth any initial costs. Kraus says. "They may be much more receptive to come back and pay, or keep you in mind when they're doing a story." ■

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FEC: TRENDS

On Target

More family entertainment centers enter the laser tag arena

by Mike Bederka

LASER TAG CONTINUES TO HIT THE MARK AT FAMILY ENTERTAINMENT CENTERS AROUND THE WORLD.

From 2002 to 2007, the number of FECs that opened with laser tag almost doubled, according to the International Laser Tag Association. In the same five-year stretch, about 25 percent more stand-alone facilities debuted.

This success comes from the attraction scoring points on three major fronts, explains Eric Gaizat, of membership services for the Indianapolis, Indiana-based organization. "It's reliable, fun, and, most important, profitable."

Wide Audience

AJ's Family Fun Center in Ludington, Michigan, installed a laser tag arena in 2006 as part of a park overhaul. They wanted to move from a seasonal to a year-round business, says Jason Rice, general manager. "It has paid for itself already," he says. "We would be kind of lost without it."

His sales jumped because laser tag attracts a wide range of guests. Construction workers, seniors at post-prom functions, and members of church groups all pay them a visit. And, of course, laser tag remains a popular birthday party activity. "Laser tag is a game that can be fun for anyone who can hold the phaser and wear the pack," Gaizat says.

The Lasertron Interactive Entertainment Center in Amherst, New York, hosts many corporate events thanks in part to a full liquor license.

About 40 percent of guests top 21 years old, says Jim Kessler, chief of imagination and performance. Many of them grew up on laser tag and enjoy reconnecting with their youth, he says.

Like AJ's, Lasertron has found financial success with laser tag. This year, the facility—which also features go-karts and an arcade—will do \$1.2 million just in laser tag business, he projects.

New Trends

The key to making money from laser tag comes from having a large venue, says Kessler, also president and chief executive officer of Lasertron Inc., a manufacturer of laser tag equipment and arenas. After his facility went multilevel (6,900 square feet on the first floor and 2,300 square feet upstairs), sales and the "wow" factor went way up.

Guests don't have to worry about enemies just from the front and back, left and right. "Once you add that second level, it becomes 3-D in a sense," he says. "You can get tagged above and below. The size of it looks so much bigger."

Two-level arenas outperform and outlast single-level arenas nearly two to one, Gaizat notes: "This results in a better return on investment and greater experiences as well as raises the bar for any competition in the area."

Beyond the venue landscape, laser tag has expanded with its technology. Long gone are the days of clunky helmets and basic games.

The lighter, more durable equipment has clearer sound and more color options, Gaizat says.

What's the Cost?

The average FEC will spend \$100,000 to \$150,000 to add laser tag as an attraction, according to the International Laser Tag Association. A stand-alone facility can run \$300,000 to \$700,000, depending on location, size, food prep, number of packs, and type of equipment.

Companies also offer different additions to their software packages. Players can upgrade the packs or unlock hidden features, including stealth, rapid fire, and freeze ray. Managers can change the game length as well as the number of lives allotted.

The constant variety equals more repeat play, Kessler says: “It adds something to the game experience. Guests never know what they’re going to get.”

Other features that make laser tag exciting rely on enhanced sights and sounds. Fog makes the lasers visible and creates a fun environment, Gaizat says. “And the right music is crucial to saturating the player in the reality the operator is trying to create,” he says. “In the past, the norm has been to use heavy techno music. Now, more arenas use music that may mirror the theme they’ve chosen for their facility.”

Maintenance Issues

Kessler takes these special effects seriously. “In our facility, you can lose your job if the fog machine isn’t working correctly,” he says.

Luckily, maintenance doesn’t generally cause many snafus, Kessler says. If FEC operators stick to weekly quality control checks, larger problems shouldn’t develop. For example, Kessler spends more time dealing with the 37 games in his arcade than the laser tag equipment.

10 Groups to Seek Out for Laser Tag

- Wedding Rehearsal Dinners
- Birthday Parties for All Ages
- Church Lock-ins
- Corporate Team Building
- Graduation Parties
- Bar and Bat Mitzvahs
- New Year’s Parties
- Fund-raisers
- Tournaments and Leagues
- Volunteer Organizations

Rice agreed about the attraction’s ease of use. He can easily handle switching out batteries or cleaning a vest. With bigger troubles, Rice uses phone support from the manufacturer.

“Some things are beyond me,” he says with a laugh.

The good news is parts have become easier to replace or fix if broken, Gaizat says.

To help keep routine costs down, some facilities have made special efforts to become more energy efficient.

Davor Franicevich, owner of Laser Tag of Baton Rouge, in Louisiana, recommends having a lighting and HVAC

management system for the building. This way, lights only pop on when needed and all the air-conditioning units can be synchronized.

Payback on setting up a system like this takes less than two years, Franicevich says.

Another tip is to buy LED lighting. They probably will cost more money than traditional lights to purchase, but they make up for it by using less power and lasting longer.

For more information about the International Laser Tag Association, visit www.lasertag.org. ■

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IAAPA F.I.R.S.T. Program – Learn more about the IAAPA FEC insurance program by contacting American Specialty at +1 260/672-8800 or at amerspec@amerspec.com.



FEC: WEB DESIGN

Primetime Online

10 ways to make web sites stand out

by Mike Bederka

AFTER 15 YEARS, BADGER SPORTS PARK FINALLY decided to launch a new web site in May. The decision was long overdue, jokes Cindy Bruecker, administrator for the family entertainment center in Appleton, Wisconsin.

“Imagine what the Internet looked like when it first started,” she says of their previous digital fossil.

Bruecker, the FEC’s point person for www.badger-sportspark.com, believes a strong Internet presence will be the facility’s best marketing tool. FECs without an attractive web site miss a key way to entice guests of all ages, she notes.

Many experts agree, and they offer 10 tips to improve your site.

1. Find a Designer

First off, don’t haphazardly hire a web site designer, especially since the creation of a new site can run anywhere from \$3,000 to \$8,000, says Katie R. Bruno, director of [wddonline](http://wddonline.com), a web site design and development company in Wadsworth, Ohio. See what other sites they’ve worked on and be sure to get lots of references, Bruecker adds.

Also, you always can choose to make a web site yourself or tap the talents of a tech-savvy employee. “It can definitely be cheaper,” says Bruno, a frequent lecturer at the IAAPA Attractions Expo. “On the other hand, if you lose that person, no else knows what to do.”

2. Be in Control

Bruno suggests picking a professional instead of a do-it-yourself job. The site will most likely look better, and the

company can help you to understand important issues like search engine optimization (more on that later). However, she advises going with a firm that has a content management system available. This feature allows owners and operators to change the information on the web site (like coupons, hours, and prices) with just a few keystrokes. Bruecker has little trouble with her content management system and enjoys the instant control for updates. “I don’t want to wait for someone for a week or two,” she says.

3. Focus on the Home Page

Make a strong impression with the home page—it’s the first thing your guests will see, says Amy Madson, general manager for Cool-de-Sac Play Café in Miami, Florida. Her FEC hired



Cool-de-Sac in Miami hired a professional photographer to ensure its home page made a good first impression.

a professional photographer to capture fun shots for the home page and the rest of the site (www.cool-de-sac.com). Beyond powerful images, include the basic info you want customers to know: hours, prices, e-mail address, phone number, types of attractions, and food. For directions, make your address link directly to Yahoo Maps (<http://maps.yahoo.com>) or a similar web site, Bruno says. Posting these nuts and bolts, Madson says, frees your staff from answering the same question 20 times daily on the phone.

4. Don't Forget the Extras

Remember the web site shouldn't be bare bones. You want people to come back to your site often.

Think about coupons and printable birthday party invitations, Bruno says. Have another section where people can sign up for an electronic newsletter. With this, you can send occasional messages on specials and new attractions. (A tip: People will more readily offer up their e-mail addresses if there's some sort of contest and they have a chance to win free passes, Bruno says.)

5. Go Multimedia

Also, don't be afraid to add a couple extra bells and whistles to make the web site more interactive. Bruecker included some virtual tours, and Bruno says FECs should jump on YouTube (www.youtube.com). "It's totally underutilized by most facilities," she says. The free site allows people to quickly and easily upload and share short videos. You can record a few spins around the go-kart track or kids engrossed in your brand-new games. "It doesn't have to be extremely professional," Bruno explains.

6. Use Your Staff

While you may not want your employees to completely create your web site, it would be a mistake to not look to them for suggestions, Madson says. Younger staff members, in fact, may have more web experience than you. Plus, they could create some art pieces or designs to be used online. As a result, they feel like part of the company, Madson says: "It gives the staff a sense of ownership."

7. Writing Copy

Text for the web differs from copy you would generally use in print, Bruno says. For example, reduce the number of adjectives and adverbs; people will just scan right over them. In addition, opt for bulleted lists instead of paragraphs, and avoid a hodgepodge of colors and fonts. They can be tough on the eyes. Rather, stick with a few themes that match your logo.



Badger Sports Park's web site added virtual tours of the facility to make the Internet portal more interactive.

8. Search Engine Optimization

Your copy must be aesthetically pleasing, but it also has to pack a virtual punch, Bruno says. Content is the most important aspect of search engine optimization—or how to get your facility listed on the first Google page, not the 13th. "If you want to be found under 'mini-golf in Cleveland,' you actually have to say 'mini-golf in Cleveland' several times on the page," she says. A quick warning, though: Watch out for fly-by-night companies that promise to boost your web ranking.

For more on search engine optimization, visit www.seoachat.com/seo-tools. And to read more about search engine optimization, see the Digital World column in the June 2008 issue of FUNWORLD.

9. Check Out the Competition

Running dry on other ways to make your site stand out? Visit the web sites of your competitors and others that you respect in the industry. "That's a great place to start," Bruno says. "That's what your customers are seeing." You don't have to copy them link for link, but you may get a couple ideas on how to jazz up your site.

10. Show It Off

Finally, you have this great site. Now, flaunt it. Plaster that URL everywhere you can, from outdoor banners to menus to notepads. And be sure to feature it on all traditional pieces of advertising: radio, TV, and print. ■



FEC: SPONSORSHIPS

A Word from Our Sponsors

Local partnerships help FECs increase revenue and connect with communities

by Mike Bederka

FOR YEARS, AMUSEMENT PARKS HAVE ENJOYED THE SPOILS OF CORPORATE SPONSORS. Now, some pioneering family entertainment centers look to these collaborations to boost nontraditional revenues in a tight economy and maybe, more important, strengthen ties in the community.

“Don’t just go after the dollars,” urges David Shook, events and partnerships director for Paradise Park Inc., in Lee’s Summit, Missouri. “Go after the relationship. That’s what we’re doing.”

Other FECs soon may join them on this two-part quest, anticipates Emily Rogers, sponsorship expert and managing director of IEG Advisory Services Group in Chicago, Illinois. “This sector is really new to sponsorships,” she says, describing FECs as an “emerging property type.”

What to Offer

First off, some clarification: Rogers defines sponsorship as a company that pays a rights fee to have a marketing relationship with a property. Traditional advertising is static, she says, whereas sponsorship is more integrated and can include features like signage, and vending and promotional rights.

Paradise Park offers three levels of sponsorship, with a global partnership being the highest level of commitment. For example, Hy-Vee, a local grocery store chain, set up a mock mini-market in the “edutainment center” that attracts many school field trips. Kids learn about nutrition and money from the experience. Event partnerships, a less expensive opportunity, can be linked to a specific date or time, like a fall hayride. And, last, go-kart sponsors get their company logos decal on the speedster.

Hal Rogers Family Entertainment Center also follows a tiered approach with its sponsorships, says Diane Bruers, general manager of the Williamsburg, Kentucky, facility. A banner outside the park costs \$200, while \$30,000 allows a company to be an exclusive vendor, she says. Many opt for the platinum (\$5,000) or silver (\$2,000) level. Here, they get a bunch of signage, a link on its web site, and free passes.

“You have to offer them something back besides the advertising,” Bruers notes. The passes have become a huge hit and are a big reason why sponsors return every year.

FECs also can cash in from the extra volume. Part of Paradise Park’s sponsorship package allows companies to use its meeting space at a discounted rate or free of charge. “We

want those group events, summer picnics, and Christmas parties,” Shook says.

Whom to Target

Shook plans to grow his FEC’s sponsorship program, and that will come by targeting companies with similar philosophies: family and fun. That’s an accurate model to follow, Rogers says. “Many sponsors are seeking to interact and market to families. They want to be tied to a local community-related property.”

Her research shows the most active company types for sponsorships include financial services, beverages, cars, and telecommunications. Rogers recommends staying far away from anything controversial like tobacco or alcohol. She also says the facility’s point person (a manager or someone involved in sales, vending, marketing, or public relations) should be well versed in the FEC industry. The potential sponsor may need some education about the business.

Bruers has the drill down with 50 to 60 area companies on her annual pitch list. She will first mail them some literature, and if she doesn’t hear anything back, she follows up in person. Bruers tries to coordinate the proposal with the company’s budget planning.

A cold call is another good place to start, says Rogers, adding that people should ask for the marketing, community relations, or maybe even sponsorship department. Also, Paradise Park includes sponsorship information on its web site (www.paradise-park.com/sponsorship.html), but Shook says 90 percent of the time he does the legwork. With his pitch, he describes the bonding that occurs with the community as well as the networking with other area companies. They have special nights for sponsor get-togethers.



Sponsorship Facts and Tips

- Sponsorship spending continues to steadily increase. In North America, it went from \$6.8 billion in 1998 to approximately \$14.9 billion in 2007.
- The top sponsor objectives are increase brand loyalty, create awareness/visibility, change/reinforce image, drive retailer/dealer traffic, stimulate sales/trial/usage, community/social responsibility, platform for experiential branding, and sample/display products/services.
- Sponsors want to know audience demographics, psychographics, buying habits, and loyalty/affinity to property; and sponsor recall/awareness and loyalty/propensity to purchase.
- Define success in advance, and be clear with the objectives. So, instead of, “Showcase corporate citizenship,” say, “Increase awareness of company as socially responsible from 12 percent to 18 percent over the six-month period as determined by responses from monthly tracking research.”

Source: IEG

“When they see what the potential is,” Shook says, “then that dollar figure we ask is a minimal investment on an annual basis.”

Keeping in Touch

That’s not to say the partnership is self-sustaining. “The sponsorship business is all about accountability these days,” Rogers says. Bare minimum, FECs should have formal check-ins once a quarter, she says. This would document the benefits delivered and details of any promotions. “You’re obviously going to be in touch throughout the year as things are going on at the property,” Rogers says.

Bruers invites sponsors to attend special events (like a Fourth of July party), sends a thank-you letter after the summer, and mails a small gift around the holidays. With the latter, she includes a note saying how the park did during the season and lets them know she will be in touch soon to discuss renewing the contract.

Shook uses his FEC’s monthly e-newsletter as a reason to keep in constant contact. “I’m not feeling obtrusive,” he says of the solicitation for articles and information. “I just send them a friendly e-mail and give them a follow-up call of what would you like us to promote.” ■



FEC: OPERATIONS

Grand Slam

Seven ways to draw crowds with batting cages

by Mike Bederka

LIKE A CLUTCH HITTER, BATTING CAGES have served as a reliable and consistent attraction to many family entertainment centers for years. “Ours are always packed,” says Dave Pfefferle, owner and general manager of Westerville Mini Golf and Batting Cages in Westerville, Ohio.

Yet, in a tight economy, nothing is certain and FEC management must stay vigilant to keep that business strong. Here are seven ways to hit a home run with your batting cages.

Offer Lessons

Pfefferle puts his minor league baseball experience to good use. He offers hitting lessons as another way to draw in guests. (Two college baseball players and a high school coach also make up his teaching crew.) For one person, he charges \$20 for a 15-minute lesson and \$30 for a half-hour.

With teams, it runs \$50 for 30 minutes. “It could be hundreds of dollars at other places,” said Pfefferle, noting the bargain for customers.

Market to Coaches

Often, area coaches will have an orientation meeting before the season starts to discuss rules and to pick their teams. Daniel Decker makes it a point to stop by then to drop off fliers. He promotes his venue and describes the value of extra batting practice. “It will make their league better,” says Decker, floor manager for Prime Time Family Enter-

Coverage Issues

It’s important for FECs to confirm with their insurance brokers that there are no limitations or exclusions in their general liability policies for including a batting cage or for any element of its operation, says David A. Harris, executive vice president of insurance services for American Specialty Insurance and Risk Services. As an example, make sure there are no warranties relative to pitching speed or a requirement for wearing helmets contained within the wording of the policy.

tainment Center in Abilene, Texas.

Build the Relationship

At Park Lanes Family Entertainment Center in Hillsboro, Oregon, relationships with local baseball and softball associations continues throughout the season. The facility takes part in several sponsorships where they give time in the cage in exchange for field signage and inclusion in the program books, says owner Dean Johnson. He also lets the coaches use the meeting room for a team signup or other functions at no charge. Outside of the sponsorship, Johnson encourages teams to have their end-of-the-season parties at his venue.

Expand the Season

For Johnson, the outdoor batting cage season peaks from March to May; business is slim at best from October to February, attributed mainly to cold, windy weather in the northwestern United States. To help break out of the slump and make it a better year-round attraction, he plans to go indoors with the cages.

Cater to Corporate

Batting cages can be a strong seller with local businesses, Johnson notes. Market them as a location for corporate events and as a place to practice for company baseball or softball teams.

Host a Batting League

FECs can put a different spin on the cage experience by creating a batting league, said Bob Hansen, owner of Funway Ultimate Entertainment Center in Batavia, Illinois. The games pit two people against one another for a few innings. They score points based on where the ball travels (for example, zero points for a strikeout, one for a popup, and two for a line drive).

Batting Cages: 10 Tips for Loss Prevention

1. Understand and follow any guidelines and restrictions recommended by the equipment manufacturers.
2. Have a radar gun available and operational.
3. Have a fire extinguisher placed in a designated location adjacent to pitching machines.
4. Have self-closing and latching doors to restrict people from inadvertently entering a live cage.
5. Provide and require helmets for use inside all batting cages.
6. Post rule signage stating (at a minimum): no swinging bats outside of cages, batting helmets are to be worn at all times when in the cage, and one person allowed in a cage at a time. In addition, provide signage outside of cages noting the type of ball and speed of pitches so guests understand the experience prior to entering.
7. Within the cage, have home plate, the batter's box, and a "do not cross" line (forward of batter's box) clearly marked.
8. Complete and retain for records daily documented safety inspections covering: pitch speed and location calibration for each machine; fencing, netting, and padding are in place and in good repair; bats, balls, and helmets are clean and in good repair; all signage is in place and readable; pitching machine equipment and surrounding netting is in place and in good repair; batter's box, home plate, and "do not cross" line are clearly visible.
9. Complete training of all operations staff on daily inspections, standard operating procedures for batting cage equipment and protocols, and emergency response procedures in case of injury, severe weather, etc.
10. Provide supervision of area for assistance to employees and guests as needed, to monitor staff behavior, and to enforce park rules.

Source: Russ Kietzman, assistant vice president in the loss control department for American Specialty Insurance and Risk Services in Roanoke, Indiana. Ask about IAAPA's F.I.R.S.T. insurance program. www.amerspec.com

Maintain the Attraction

Negative word of mouth ruins a batting cage, Hansen says: "You can get a bad reputation among leagues if your equipment doesn't pitch well or it always seems to be breaking down." Pfefferle says all repairs should be done immediately, and that means overnighting parts if necessary. "You have to keep every cage running at all times," he stresses. ■



Santa's Village in Jefferson, New Hampshire, uses its web site for general admission, two-day tickets, and season passes.

FEC: TICKETING

Digital Dollars

Online ticketing presents new frontier for FECs

by Mike Bederka

MANY FAMILY ENTERTAINMENT CENTERS USE THEIR WEB SITES AS A WAREHOUSE FOR DIRECTIONS, PRICES, AND PHOTOS. Few let their online portals be a place where guests can buy all-day passes, book and pay for birthday parties, and coordinate consignment efforts.

Katie Bruno saw a similar hesitation in the amusement park industry years ago. But after some trial and error and subsequent success, most large venues now take full advantage of digital sales. "FECs will follow the same cycle," says Bruno, director of wddonline, a web site design and development company in Wadsworth, Ohio. "It might take a little bit longer, but they're going to get there."

Many Benefits

Like the large parks, FECs have many reasons to consider online ticketing, Bruno says:

- It offers 24/7 convenience for guests.

- People often make decisions online.
- It collects information to tailor guest incentive programs and to build up marketing lists.
- Managers can easily track effectiveness.
- Other places do it.

That last point may be the most important, she notes. "FECs have to be competitive with other entertainment options: shows, sporting events, movies. More and more, people are buying those things online."

Scott Brown adds another advantage to the list: easy transactions. When customers buy the tickets and print them at home, they can be processed more quickly at the gate. "We scan the paper, and they're good to go," says Brown, director of sales for Swings-N-Things Family Fun Park in Olmsted Township, Ohio. "It saves us time. We don't have to explain everything. They already know what they're getting."

Plus, the FEC already has the guests' money before they come out. So, even if customers don't show up, the venue still collects the cash.

Choices to Make

ED LABONTE OF SANTA'S VILLAGE extensively researched online ticketing companies before settling on one. Price and ease of use topped the list of determining factors for him. LaBonte opted for a third party to help with his web sales, but some point-of-sale (POS) systems can handle online ticketing.

Katie Bruno of wddonline recommends FECs go with their own POS system as a first choice, if their vendors have that feature available. "All the money is in the same place," she says.

For a detailed breakdown of third-party online ticketing and POS vendors, visit http://presentations.wddonline.com/public/iaapa/2008/index.cfm?current_root=146 and continue through the slides.

Areas of Focus

Bruno sees two strong areas facilities can take advantage of with e-commerce: consignment and birthday parties. For the former, the online option simplifies the steps for the FEC. In the past, Bruno had to count up

an allotment of tickets and ship them out to each business; companies had to pay for unsold tickets. Now, businesses just get a code and employees can buy the discounted tickets online.

With birthday parties, the FEC determines the parameters available to guests, including packages and costs, maximum and minimum group sizes, room sizes, time slots, and add-ons. However, the communication with guests shouldn't end when they input their credit card info and click "submit." Birthdays are "very personalized," Bruno stresses, and FEC staff should call parents before the party to strengthen the relationship and confirm all the particulars.

"Think of it as another sales tool, not necessarily a tool to complete the whole process," Bruno cautions.

Marketing Mind-set

Amid the potential for higher volume sales, don't forget about the basic ticket choices. Santa's Village in Jefferson, New Hampshire, uses its web site for general admission, two-day tickets, and season passes, says Ed LaBonte, information technology manager. From this past May to December, the facility sold

Online Ticketing: Going Through the Motions

1. Guest selects ticket types and amounts, and views the total.
2. Guest inputs payment information and submits the order.
3. Payment process: credit card and transaction info sent to payment gateway (a virtual terminal that directs the online transaction); gateway contacts consumer's account to approve or reject the transaction and reserve the purchase amount; consumer's account sends approval or rejection to gateway; gateway sends message to ticketing software.
4. Approval message received by ticket program.
5. Order summary given to consumer.
6. Guest prints the ticket at home and brings to the FEC.
7. FEC staff scans the barcode and ticket becomes invalid for further use.

2,200 tickets on the site. "We're just getting our feet wet," he says of his first year selling tickets online, hoping to grow this number in 2009.

One sure way to boost online interest is through marketing, Bruno says. For example, Brown makes the ticket feature prominent on the Swings-N-Things home page and gives an \$8 discount for a family of four if they purchase through the web site. The site makes up a "relatively small but growing" part of the overall sales, he says, having used the system for two years.

"You have to be patient with it," acknowledges Brown. "You can't just put it there and expect the sales to come in. You have to market it. You have to send people there."

Not for Everyone (or Everything)

In some cases, though, FECs should be cautious with online tickets. Those facilities with low price points, for instance, might want to stick to hard cash, Bruno says. FECs must factor in fees to the online ticketing vendor and the credit card company, as well, which she estimates at about \$1.50 per ticket: "If your ticket only costs \$4, it doesn't really make sense."

Also, Bruno wouldn't recommend using online ticketing for larger events. She says the complexity and variability of something like a 600-person corporate picnic requires a lot more attention to detail and a personal touch that can't be replicated by a computer. ■





Online and social networking advertising is becoming more crucial for FECs.

FEC: ADVERTISING

Ad Aware

10 smart ways to enhance your FEC's message

by Mike Bederka

SOME FAMILY ENTERTAINMENT CENTERS DON'T HAVE TO ADVERTISE AT ALL. For these fortunate facilities, guests gleefully line up without being exposed to a single TV commercial, web link, or radio spot.

However, most other FECs rely on ads and other types of marketing. A successful campaign can drum up hearty business, but it can also drain your life savings if done haphazardly. FEC experts offer these 10 tips on how to be smart with your advertising dollars and efficiently market your venue.

1. Text Away

Saletta Coleman spends less than a penny each time she reaches out to her young audience. The cheap and simple technique: text messaging.

"They aren't anywhere but online and on their cell phones," says Coleman, director of sales and marketing for Martin Luther King Jr. Park and Family Entertainment Center, of her young potential visitors. "Anyone who hasn't figured that out is really behind the eight ball."

She posts a sign-up list at her Chicago venue. In exchange for their cell phone numbers, guests have the chance to win prizes. People on the list, now more than a thousand names strong, receive once or twice a week updates on upcoming events, Coleman says. They can opt out from the messages at any time, lessening the worry of spam. Also, texting easily allows cell phone users to share the info with their friends not on the list. "It's like a virus," she says.

2. Pre-promotion

Roger Allan opened FunWorks FunZone this past June, but the general manager's marketing efforts started well before that.

A slice of the FEC, located at a mall in Clifton Park, New York, moved into a kiosk at the food court about six months prior to the facility's full opening, promoting gem mining and "stuff your own animal" on a small scale. After the 2007 holidays, he upgraded to a temporary in-line store across from the FunWorks construction site where he featured a larger retail display and added an inflatable.

Allan didn't attempt to make "loads and loads of money" with the pre-promotion. Instead, he wanted to describe FunWorks' concept and raise awareness to future customers.

"It worked very well," he said. "By the time we opened, people knew who we were."

3. On Target

In 2008, Swing-N-Things Family Fun Park in Olmstead Township, Ohio, made the push toward online advertising and pulled back on everything else: radio, print, and television. With traditional advertising, the facility couldn't specifically identify what the marketing dollars generated, explains Scott Brown, director of sales. However, online options allow Brown to track specific things like upticks in group sales or birthday parties.

"You don't need to sacrifice all your radio, TV, and print, if you like it," he notes. "With Google AdWords, you can spend a dollar a day, 30 bucks a month. You can definitely go in and dabble. If you see it paying dividends, you invest a little more."

Google allows people to choose words or phrases related to their business and create a sponsored ad that appears on the side of the search page, increasing exposure. You only pay if someone clicks on the ad.

4. Go Guerilla

Allan doesn't confine his attractions and staff to FunWorks' four walls. He partners with a local hockey team and brings

his inflatables to select home games. Kids attending can come out and bounce around before or after the game, or between periods. “We get a coupon and a flyer into Mom’s hand,” he says. His town also hosts a large Fourth of July celebration. Here, too, Allan sends an inflatable for the event, giving his employees time to work the crowd.

The only cost for these two promotions: a little bit of payroll for staff.

“Never, ever, underestimate the value of guerilla marketing,” Allan enthuses.

5. Social Marketing

If you haven’t found your way to Facebook, MySpace, or YouTube yet, your employees surely have. These free social networking and video-sharing web sites offer huge potential for FECs,

Coleman says. Missing out on them would be a huge mistake.

“I don’t know how you’re going to survive in the industry if you’re not one to embrace technology,” she says.

Coleman has a “little army” of staffers maintaining the facility’s Facebook (www.facebook.com) and MySpace (www.myspace.com) pages. She gives them content to post and periodically reviews the sites to make sure everything

appears the way it should. With YouTube (www.youtube.com) in mind, Brown filmed this past New Year’s Eve party for a future promotion. Later this year, people will be able to click on a link and watch all the fun guests had. Videos like this take little time and effort, and facilities don’t have to worry about fancy production. Just keep everything casual, Brown advises. ■

Five More Advertising Tips

- 1. Avoid the hard sell.** Ads that shout “Buy now!” or “Ask your parents!” can turn off guests, says Raquel Felicio of the Brazilian Association of Amusement Parks.
- 2. Ask for a deal.** Many radio stations offer an agency discount to anyone, says Roger Allan of FunWorks FunZone. He saved 15 percent recently just by saying he was his own agency.
- 3. Use coupon codes.** They help track and gauge ad effectiveness, Allan says.
- 4. Be selective.** Watch out for companies that want you to advertise on their web sites, says Scott Brown of Swings-N-Things. FECs can run up a large tab if not careful.
- 5. Check the calendar.** Buy TV and radio spots during the first quarter when prices generally dip, Allan says: “You can grab fire sales.”



Moonbounce Adventures has collected more than 5,000 subscribers to its monthly e-mail newsletter.

FEC: MARKETING

You've Got Mail

Family entertainment centers shift toward e-newsletters for marketing

by Mike Bederka

DIRECT MAIL, A SIGNATURE ADVERTISING TECHNIQUE FOR YEARS, soon may end up in the great recycling bin in the sky. More and more family entertainment centers have scrapped or scaled back on snail mailers in favor of e-marketing.

Newsletters zipped to people's inboxes offer several advantages over their hard copy predecessors, explains Katie Bruno, director of wddonline, a web site design and development company in Wadsworth, Ohio. They drive traffic to the web site, stimulate online sales, bring in a high return on investment, maintain consumer engagement, and effectively target guests.

Building the Database

Elaborating on the last point, Bruno recommends FECs set up a system where guests opt in to the newsletter. This strategy helps to avoid issues with spam (unsolicited e-mail) and guarantees the customer actually wants to read the marketing message.

Facilities have numerous ways to collect names and build their databases. For example, Mountasia Fun Center, in Santa Clarita, California, has a link on its web site, inviting people to sign up.

Courtney Bourdas Henn, director of marketing, also believes in a grassroots approach. She recently manned her FEC's booth at a Girl Scouts fair. With roughly 5,000 people in attendance, she had ample opportunity to collect e-mail addresses.

Always take advantage of multiple avenues to promote the newsletter, agrees Garrick Weaver, partner with Moonbounce Adventures/Boomers Family Fun Center, which has four Pennsylvania locations.

He created signage and posted a link on the web site, and he requires his staff to be involved in the process. When parents sign in, employees urge them to join; they also hit the play floor with sign-up slips.

Weaver trains his staff to politely ask for the information and to detail the newsletter benefits—namely coupons. “If they say they don't want to, you don't push them,” he says.

As an extra enticement for joining, guests qualify for monthly raffles with the winners receiving free passes.

Since starting the newsletter in October 2007 (and really making a push in 2008), the list has now ballooned to more than 5,300 names, Weaver proudly notes.

How to Send

FECs can choose from several computer programs to send out

their newsletters. Bruno suggests Constant Contact (www.constantcontact.com) or iContact (www.icontact.com) as some places to start looking. People should expect to pay \$20 to \$50 per month.

For the money, the programs help operators by telling them how many people receive and open the message, what links they click on, and by flagging words that might trigger spam filters.

To bypass junk mail problems right away, Bruno says avoid excessive photos, logos, and exclamation points; and include ways to opt out or suggest valid postal addresses. Also, for aesthetic reasons, skip all the different font sizes and colors. “That makes the newsletter look confusing and cheesy,” she says.

Another mistake is cramming in too much text. “Short and sweet” works much better, Bruno says.

As an alternative to copy overload, provide multiple links to the facility’s web site, she says: “If they’re stimulated by what they see, they should be able to respond immediately.”

The subject line also plays a big part in whether a person will fully engage the message, Bruno says. If customers feel they’re being pounded with a sales pitch, they will probably

push “delete” without a second thought. Other big subject line gaffes: using all capital letters and not including the facility name.

For instance, go with “ABC Family Entertainment Center Newsletter—October 2009,” not “HALLOWEEN SPECIALS!!!”

E-newsletters: Five More Tips

- 1. Use a reputable newsletter program.** Some fly-by-night companies won’t charge any money, says Garrick Weaver of Moonbounce Adventures/Boomers Family Fun Center, “but in parentheses, they say we can take your e-mail list and do anything we want with it.”
- 2. Proofread the content.** A sloppy newsletter can reflect poorly on the FEC, stresses Courtney Bourdas Henn, of Mountasia Fun Center. People should plan to spend a full day to start it up and one to two hours per mailing, estimates Katie Bruno, of wddonline.
- 3. Get updated information.** People frequently change their e-mail addresses. Make sure you have the newest one on file, Weaver says.
- 4. Stick with it.** Interest in the newsletter may be slow at first, Weaver says, but people will eventually see the value.
- 5. Don’t totally give up on direct mail.** It can be used in conjunction with electronic efforts for a full marketing campaign, Weaver says.

What to Offer

Newsletter administrators must choose their content carefully, Bruno says. It must have value, so don’t make it sound like a commercial or fill the copy with minute details that customers won’t care about.

As a general rule, people should be able to read and digest the text in less than a minute, she says.

Weaver uses his newsletter to announce changes in hours, new attractions, and special coupons. He gives online subscribers a larger discount than what they see elsewhere for Moonbounce. “It drives up the interest,” Weaver explains.

He sends out the newsletter twice a month and may do an additional mailing for a special announcement, like the recent launch of laser tag at one of the locations.

Henn sticks to once or twice a month, usually hitting “send” around a holiday, if possible. She offers coupons and promotes featured events such as a New Year’s Eve party.

Bruno suggests no more than twice a month for most audiences. One relevant e-mail is better than 50 mediocre ones, she contends. **EW**





FEC: COMMUNITY

Ronald McDonald poses for a shot at a Golf and Games fund-raiser.

Coming Together

Community events open up family entertainment centers to new customers

by Mike Bederka

BEFORE DAVE BURKHARDT EVEN OPENED THE DOORS TO KID JUNCTION in the early days of 2007, he already had donated 100 passes to a local school for a spelling program. The promotion went over so well the owner of two New Jersey family entertainment centers made community outreach a major part of his business operation.

“It’s a relatively inexpensive, not time-consuming way to branch out to new people,” Burkhardt says.

Philanthropy and marketing can mix quite nicely, agrees Tom Uphold, director of marketing at Golf and Games Family Park in Memphis, Tennessee: “Most silent auction gifts we give are birthday parties. That’s going to expose eight to 10 families that may not have been here before.”

‘A’ for Effort

The Memphis community has kept Golf and Games going strong for 45 years, Uphold says. The FEC management uses donations and fund-raisers as a way to thank residents for their decades of support and loyalty. “I don’t think I’ve turned down anyone since I’ve been here,”

he says proudly. He receives three or four requests a day. In 2008, Golf and Games donated \$315,000 of services, including miniature golf, parties, and wristbands.

Uphold particularly enjoys participating in the partners in education programs. With this, school administrators receive 500 free games of mini-golf, which they can distribute to their students for good grades, conduct, and attendance. Again, it potentially opens the facility to a new audience, and if Mom and Dad want to play a round, they’ll have to pay. Plus, the school handles most of the logistics.

Fund-raisers, though, will take up more time for the FEC because of the additional manpower and resources required, Uphold admits. His facility holds three major fund-raisers a year. Mini-golf tournaments for the Boy Scouts, Ronald McDonald House, and Les Passes (a children’s charity) draw 600 to 800 people total, with a percentage of sales going to the organizations.

Like Uphold, Burkhardt stays busy with donations. He averages 50 requests a month and revels in the interest his facilities generate. “I care about my name being out there,” Burkhardt

notes. Kid Junction has a varied roster of contributions, including free birthday parties to summer reading programs, discounts to United Way supporters, and being a sponsor of a little league team, which Burkhardt coaches. He also does a lot with children with special needs. The facility will open an hour early on select days to allow the kids to have the place to themselves.



Golf and Games hosts fund-raisers for Ronald McDonald House.

Other Tips

The positive vibes, along with the limited sacrifice, should make donations a worthwhile venture for any FEC. “It makes you feel better,” Burkhardt says. “And what’s the cost to give away a birthday

party? Not much.”

However, folks new to the game may trip up in the early going. Experts offer some pointers to help ensure charitable efforts run smoothly:

- **Be selective.** “Make your donation something you’re willing to give away,” Uphold urges. “Don’t give away your high-ticket items.”
- **Look for a good fit.** Some organizations that contact you may not be in line with your target audience, Burkhardt says. For instance, politely decline high-school groups if you primarily serve children age 8 and under.
- **Don’t slack.** Keep on top of requests because they can stack up quickly, Burkhardt says. “When you OK one, you’re going to get hit with 25.”
- **Class it up.** Uphold uses glossy paper for the free mini-golf game certificates. “We don’t mind if schools give them out,” he says, “but we don’t want it photocopied over and over and over.”
- **Advertise it.** Don’t be bashful about the charity promotions. To spike interest, Burkhardt posts signs in his

Community Collation Turns Competitors into Allies

Hotel concierges, sales managers, front desk staff, and bellhops can quickly turn a random tourist into a paying customer with a few choice words about your FEC. Therefore, wooing them becomes a must for referrals. But in entertainment-rich areas like Orlando, hospitality workers receive countless invites to attend parties at local attractions.

“How do you compete among all those options?” asks Mark Brisson, director of marketing for Fun Spot Action Park. For him, the answer came as the Orlando Fun Partners, a collation Fun Spot joined in 2000. Brisson works with 11 other second-tier attractions in Central Florida to plan four large parties a year for area hospitality employees.

The events rotate among facilities, but at each party, all partners have a booth where people can get to know the attractions’ offerings a little bit better. Other members range from a mini-golf course to a nightclub to a dinner show.

As an added benefit, members will refer guests to one another’s facility. So, for example, when a couple asks a Fun Spot employee for a good place to go out dancing, he will steer them toward an Orlando Fun Partner. Vice versa happens, if the clubbing couple wants to ride some go-karts the next day.

“It turns competitors into allies,” Brisson says.

For more information, visit www.orlandofunpartners.com.

stores and puts plugs in his e-newsletter.

- **Stay sharp.** Having a strong reputation in the community will make you the go-to facility for donations. “Then partner with someone to further that image,” Burkhardt explains. “That would be my best piece of advice.” ■

CyberCity promotes games that involve parents and kids together.



PHOTO COURTESY CYBERCITY

FEC: MARKETING

New Frontiers

FECs search outside their comfort zone for new business

by Mike Bederka

FOR YEARS, ONE FAMILY ENTERTAINMENT CENTER dominated the city. Long lines, however, lulled the facility's staff into a false sense of security. The premier venue entered a dangerous comfort zone and, subsequently, let the place go—stale games, paint peeling, the whole shebang.

Owners of an upstart FEC saw an opportunity. With innovative ideas in tow, they broke ground just a few miles away from the tired staple. As a result, customers drifted to the shiny new facility, taking their wallets with them.

This real-life anecdote teaches an important lesson: FECs can never remain stagnant, especially in a tight economy where guests value every penny.

To remain viable in uncertain times, management must keep a venue fresh, be it adding a hot ride or attraction or a different menu item. Also, in that same vein, facilities should look to new markets to boost their bottom lines—or at least engage their existing customers in

different ways. Experts describe five possible audiences to tap.

Unite the Family

Mark Jubb has noticed an odd trend popping up in the industry—FECs forgetting what the “F” stands for in their name. There should never be a situation where the kids run off and play and the parents plop down on a bench bored to tears, he says. At CyberCity Family Entertainment Center in Eureka, California, where Jubb is the owner/operator, he guards against this.

CyberCity features Wii gaming on big projection screens and laser tag competitions to help “get the family together again,” Jubb says. These friendly child-versus-parent clashes

Additional Tips

Still stuck on how to increase attendance? Experts dish out some more advice:

- **Don't Give Up.** “You have to be vigilant with marketing campaigns,” says Harry Haynes Jr., owner of Madd Fun LLC in New York City. A strong response to advertising probably won't come right away. Wait at least a few months to see results.
- **Talk to Your Customers.** See what groups they belong to, says Robin Creswick of Rockin' Robin's Amazone Family Entertainment Center in Medina, Ohio. With some quick conversations, guests could introduce you to new sports teams, clubs, or organizations.
- **Stay Focused.** An FEC can cater to many different ages, says Mark Jubb of CyberCity Family Entertainment Center in Eureka, California. Each segment has unique tastes. “You can't just blanket everyone and accomplish what you want to do. Figure out your money makers, find your audience, and target that specifically.”

keep everyone happy—and spending money. He cost-effectively promotes his family-centric offerings through e-newsletter blasts.

Have an Idea? Did you just tap into a new market? Share your success stories with FUNWORLD magazine by e-mailing Contributing Editor Mike Bederka at mbederka@IAAPA.org. We'll post your suggestions on our In the Queue blog at www.IAAPA.org/blog.

Reach Out

This year families might not take as many big trips as they did in the past, says Robin Creswick, owner of Rockin' Robin's Amazone Family Entertainment Center in Medina, Ohio. Capitalizing on the "staycation" trend, she's reaching out to people beyond her normal geographic circle of guests. "We're having booths at some shows in areas a little farther away," she explains. "We want to capture their business, especially during the summertime."

Team Building

HeyDay Family Fun Center in Norman, Oklahoma, stays busy Friday to Sunday. "Our dilemma is to drive traffic the rest of the week," says Brian Burks, entertainment and program manager.

Most companies still hold quarterly meetings or events to get staff out of the office for the day, he reasons, so Burks eyes corporate team building as another way to generate revenue for his facility. His program starts with a 45-minute PowerPoint presentation and motivational video. Then, guests play five games of laser tag where each session shows the importance of teamwork and the benefits of communicating and working as a group. A lunch buffet can be included in the package to up the price and profits.

"Team building can pay off big time," Burks says. "Our hope is they want to come out again with their family or plan a birthday party here."

Mom and Me

Like HeyDay, Amazone suffered from the dreaded "weak-day" business, Creswick says. Her solution? Targeting toddlers and stay-at-home moms. "Some of my competitors have ignored

them," she says. For marketing, Creswick runs commercials on Nick Jr., a favorite television programming block for this demographic.

Every day during the week Amazone hosts a special activity included with the paid admission. For example, Monday is movie day; Tuesday, a live animal show; Wednesday, story time and singing; and Thursday, arts and crafts. Creswick also aims for the younger audience by contacting area day care centers. She promotes her FEC to them as the go-to place for field trips.

Higher Learning

Being in a college town, Jubb thinks his FEC can do a lot more to attract the older set. What that entails, however, remains a bit sketchy. "It's just a lot more challenging," he says. "They're harder to please." CyberCity has experimented with an '80s night to offer something unique in the area, but Jubb plans to study more options to attract this fickle audience. ■

Learn more about F.I.R.S.T.
For details about the IAAPA-sponsored FEC insurance program, visit www.amerspec.com, or call +1 800/245-2744.



CYBERCITY

CyberCity promotes family-centric offerings through e-newsletter blasts.

The Game C

by Mike Bederka

Often in the business world, people step up to the proverbial cliff. They fearfully glance down at the chasm, seeing the danger in a bold venture. But at the same time, they understand the lucrative possibilities that lie beyond.

Such a decision paralyzes many.

“Most people spend their entire lives wondering if they should jump. That’s not me,” says Theresa Iliff, owner and

operator of Camp Iliff LLC, nestled in the tiny town of Newton, New Jersey (population barely more than 8,000).

“When I come up with an idea, I don’t hold back.”

Without a parachute, she hurled herself into the family entertainment center world. Along the way, she may have redefined the traditional FEC model.

**CAMP ILIFF
TWISTS THE
TRADITIONAL
FEC MODEL**



hanger

PHOTOS BY AMY PATERSON



“Just like you change your arcade games out, you have to change the style of business you are providing.” —Theresa Iliff

‘Something Great’

Camp Iliff had modest beginnings. At the turn of the millennium, Iliff was renting out a small portion of a minor league baseball park in rural northern New Jersey for a summer camp and wrestling camp. Families loved the experience for their children, and one parent in particular asked if Iliff could expand the program to after-school care in the fall. The mom hated the fact that her son had to sit in a boring classroom until he could be picked up at 6 p.m. She thought the camp seemed like a much better alternative, and Iliff agreed. So did scores of other parents.

The program jumped from just four kids in September 2000 all the way to 80 in December of that year, Iliff says. Along with this influx, the camp began hosting birthday parties on the weekend—with similar success.

Iliff realized she had outgrown the small ballpark space. She needed a new structure for her blossoming company, and hesitating at the cliff’s edge was not an option. “I had to build something great for these kids,” she recalls. With the bank’s enthusiastic thumbs up, she received a loan for a site

five miles from the stadium. During the building’s construction, another parent suggested Iliff include early childhood care as well.

The idea made sense, Iliff reasoned: “We had to do everything in one space.”

At 11,998 square feet, the new-and-improved Camp Iliff opened in 2001. The facility now offers early childhood care, after-school camp, before-school care, drop-in care, summer day camp, wrestling camp, karate camp, winter break camp, and spring break camp. Birthday party guests and the general public can use a roller rink, movie theater, inflatables, arcade games, and snack bar.

Filling the Dead Time

Camp Iliff has a simple philosophy: The “weak-day” doesn’t exist on its calendar. “It’s all about multiple revenue streams per square foot,” explains Gregg Kubala, the facility’s general manager.

FECs can’t remain busy just on the weekends, especially in a bad economy, he says: “You have to use all the space in your building at all times to really make money. That’s where these child care programs come into play.”

In fact, in five to 10 years, Kubala anticipates a seismic shift in the two compatible arenas. Standalone FECs and child care centers will soon disappear; he sees a multipurpose facility, like Camp Iliff, as the future. “These industries mesh so well together,” he says. “The day care doesn’t touch an FEC’s prime time, which is the weekends, and vice versa. We fill each other’s down time.”

Iliff firmly believes in the long-term success of her model and urges others to follow her lead before it’s too late. “The business that does not change will go under,” she says. “Just like you change your arcade games out; you have to change the style of business you are providing.”

Steady Success

Her confident attitude comes from positive numbers as well as tremendous feedback from customers. Camp Iliff hosts almost 100 birthday parties a month, and her various child care programs and camps generally run at capacity (and have a waiting list). Her prices rival other traditional programs in the area, she says: “To fill my building, we only need 50 early childhood kids. That’s about \$50,000 a month.”

Erica Casario of Hampton Township, New Jersey, is one of Iliff’s satisfied clients. Casario’s children, Abigail, 6, and Anthony, 4, have attended the camp for several years now. While their parents head to work, the pair stays busy playing on the inflatables and chasing each other around. “Each day is filled with stories of what they did with their friends,” Casario says. The mom also feels the senior staff gives her kids the individual attention they need and prepares them for kindergarten: “They learn ABCs, writing, reading, and some math. I love to see what Abigail and Anthony accomplish each day.”

The camp almost has two different staffs, Iliff notes. One group handles the birthday parties and monitors the tradi-

tional FEC activities. The classroom staff is trained for child care, but they also learn the FEC aspects.

“The key is cross-training,” says Iliff. “When hired, they’re told about the business we run. They might be expected to take a child to the potty or monitor the soft play unit.”

Spreading the Word

With her facility’s success, Iliff earned a strong reputation for her business savvy. For years, operators from around the U.S. have contacted her for advice and other helpful tidbits. A grateful Texas facility owner once phoned to thank Iliff: “I almost lost my business,” the person gushed. “Now, I’m making almost a million dollars a year. How come you don’t charge for this kind of help?”

That praise gave Iliff her next idea. And, of course, she took the plunge.

In 2006, she formally became a part-time consultant to share her model with others. Kubala came aboard in March 2007 to help expand the company. For a flat fee, “we hold their hands through the entire process,” he says. “We don’t take any residuals on how many kids they sign up. It’s not a franchise. Once the doors open, it’s their baby to run with.”

The company’s services include assistance in equipment purchases, floor plans, how-to manuals, training, birthday parties, and marketing. “We tell you where every pencil should go in the building,” Iliff explains. The consultancy has more than 40 clients on its roster in varying stages of the process. Some don’t even have a building yet; some have just begun the child care licensing process; others will be cutting the ribbon shortly.

Nothing could make Iliff happier. “Do you know how fulfilling my job is?” she asks. ■

FECs Keep Guests on the Go

CAMP ILIFF ISN’T THE ONLY FACILITY in the industry tweaking the typical definition of family entertainment center.

For example, Bulldog Interactive Fitness, with locations across Canada, combines video games, exercise, and education on nutrition. The novel concept surprised some people at first, admits Shannon Hanley-Lunn, owner of the Bulldog in Bridgewater, Nova Scotia: “The understanding wasn’t there. That was a bit of a problem.”

To bridge the gap, Hanley-Lunn, who bought the franchise in 2007, smartly marketed the idea to doctors, hospitals, and school boards. They recognized the area’s growing childhood obesity rate and embraced the unique business model. Word spread from there.

“Our video games are hooked into game bikes,” she says. “They have to pedal the bikes to make the cars move [on the screen]. They’re not just sitting on their butts. They have to stay active to do it.”

Bulldog also features the popular “Dance Dance Revolution” (guaranteed to make any player break a sweat), a climbing wall, and a traditional exercise area. Employees with fitness experience work with guests, primarily age 3 to teens, on the equipment to provide structure and guidance.


Nutrition tips are part of the program, too, Hanley-Lunn says: “We want to avoid people leaving here and going straight to McDonald’s.” Her facility sells only healthy snacks and drinks, like fruit bars, cheese and crackers, water, and sugar-free juices. For birthday parties, parents have strict instructions to leave the calorie-laden soda, burgers, and fries at home, she says.

Through this instruction, Bulldog’s staff develops a special relationship with their customers, Hanley-Lunn says, an opportunity FECs might miss out on. “I know all the kids that come to my gym by name,” she explains. “We have a personal attachment to them. They need to feel important.”

Jump Street, with two Colorado sites, also strives to blend exercise and fun, says Rex Ready, district manager for the company. He believes the trend has just started to gain some serious air in the FEC world. Jump Street has the standard inflatables, batting cages, and arcade games, but trampolines are the centerpiece attraction at this indoor park, he says: “You can literally bounce off the walls.”

Customers often find their way to the trampoline dodgeball arena, he notes. The uplifting update on the gym class favorite appeals to children of all ages, and for the older kids, they host dodgeball leagues.

—Mike Bederka



Parents like Camp Iliff because it allows their children to be active after school.