

Remember to sweat the details



Jerry Merola

High standards, like clean restrooms, are necessary to make a consistently good impression on guests, who are a vital part of the economic engine that runs an entertainment facility.

Operating a family entertainment facility is certainly more than fun and games. In fact, it can be downright challenging. Keeping your eye on the ball takes real finesse, discipline, and time management.

Unlike other business models, an entertainment operation is subject to a myriad of changing events, including weather, competition, labor shortages, and even the consumer's philosophies on value and free time. The rules are always changing, and as a result, it can become increasingly difficult to consistently exceed expectations.

Over the years, I've assembled a list of sensitive elements that simply can't be overlooked in day-to-day operations. These elements affect different facility styles in varying degrees, but each is worthy of consideration by all operators.

MARKETING

Your facility's marketing plan should be revisited monthly, and during peak season, weekly. There isn't a day that goes by when a competitor or alternate leisure provider hasn't "upped the ante" with a new special or an enhanced value.

A new competitor in the market can easily steal your guests faster than you can react, so it's critical that your marketing focus remain proactive. Don't ever feel as though you can't compete with the new guy.

You're probably in a better position to do so, as a newly established venue often carries with it a significant debt load. Remember to incorporate social media into your marketing strategy, as the various Internet conveyances have quickly become a mainstay for reaching today's consumers. Not using social media? Hurry, or you'll miss out!

STAFFING

Ask any consumer today and you'll quickly discover that their number one

complaint when visiting retail stores remains "ineffective customer service." Consumers in every market segment expect very high degrees of customer service, often to the point where they will select shopping locations based upon service levels.

Sure, a downturn in local economies has pushed cash-strapped consumers into the discount stores, but this phenomenon will certainly not last forever. As consumer confidence returns, expect to see even stronger expectations for higher quality service.

As a result, the quality and quantity of staff that we employ becomes paramount to our success. Entertainment center owners sometimes fail to spot the signs of an untrained or under-trained staff.

One negative impression can have a lasting effect on not only a particular guest, but every member of their social circle as well. Consumers visit entertainment venues in hopes of reducing their stress level and daily frustrations. Let's do our part to help them achieve their goal.

INVENTORY

It sounds like an easy standard to follow, but it's actually quite difficult to properly anticipate and stock an entertainment venue with sufficient quantities of food, prizes, white goods, and maintenance supplies.

Consumer visitation can vary wildly based upon weather conditions, outdoor temperatures, area events, vacations, and school recesses. While just-in-time delivery methods would solve many of these inventory challenges, few suppliers are capable of offering this level of service.

There's nothing more frustrating to a consumer than viewing an empty display case—or worse—being told that the facility "just sold the last one." Lack of on-site storage is often to

blame, as square footage is often at a premium in every entertainment application.

One effective solution is to establish an electronic ordering system that triggers reorders when stock falls below a predetermined level. To aid in the process, some operators are now stor-

is much more than stopping in each lavatory on a daily basis. It involves maintaining a condition report with respect to the functionality of fixtures, availability of necessary hand soaps, drying towels (or blowers), and hand sanitizer solution, and the cleanliness of floors, walls, and sinks.

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ing additional inventory in local storage units, or at times, within on-site storage containers on the property. Remember, a lost sale can never be recovered!

CASH FLOW

Nothing strangles a business more than a lack of available operating cash. The signs of restrained cash flows are often evident in the noticeable absence of staff, lack of routine maintenance, and selection of lower quality prizes and supplies.

To the consumer, negative changes such as these serve to erode the “value proposition,” whereby the relationship between dollars spent and entertainment received begins to decline.

Planning ahead is a critical step in insuring sufficient cash flows for operation. For starters, a new business should never open its doors without reserve capital equal to three months of operating expenses.

An existing business should maintain at least two months of reserve funds or insure that a working capital credit line is readily available. The “rainy day fund” is best initiated during the good times, when cash flows are stronger and operator mindsets remain positive.

RESTROOMS

There’s one sure-fire way to lose your guests: Stop paying attention to the restrooms. Restroom maintenance

Every dollar spent on marketing is lost if a patron’s experience in the restroom falls below par. Many entertainment operators now perform restroom inspections every two to three hours each day, sometimes more often during peak periods.

Given the availability of new-age sanitary devices and well-documented procedural standards within the industry, it has become unacceptable to display restrooms that do not match the expectations of the consumer experience.

CONCLUSION

Success in entertainment is often conditioned upon a high level of repeat business. Each and every guest is an important part of the economic engine that runs a family entertainment center (FEC), and as such, it’s imperative that the business consistently maintains high standards.

While there are certainly many aspects of daily operation that demand the attention of management, few can match the level of urgency offered by the above elements. In FEC operations, it’s just another day of sweating the details. ▲

Jerry Merola is the CFO of Amusement Entertainment Management (AEM) LLC, a subsidiary of Alpha-Omega Amusements. He has conducted feasibility studies in almost all regions of the United States and Canada. He can be reached at (732)254-3773; fax (732)254-6223; e-mail (profitwizz@aol.com).



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Contact Frank Seninsky
or Jerry Merola at:
Fseninsky@aol.com
Profitwizz@aol.com

(732) 254-3773

www.AEMLLC.com

