

RePlay magazine

FRANK TALK



Three Es of Family Entertainment Centers

By **FRANK SENINSKY**

Frank is president of the Alpha-Omega group of companies (Amusement Entertainment Management LLC, Alpha-Omega Amusements, Alpha-BET Entertainment and Alpha-Omega Sales).

Entertainment
Education
Experience



We've all heard about the three Rs, crucial to the education of our youngsters. At this fall's Fun Expo, I also learned from Don Marinelli, our keynote speaker from the Carnegie Mellon University Entertainment Technology Center, about the three Es of successful family fun: entertainment, education, and experience.

These three components are essential to creating a product that not only attracts families, but keeps them coming back for more. That's important because there is still a tremendous amount of growth potential for the family entertainment industry. Our business is taking neat turns, and we are just about to be recognized by our communities and by the nation as the place where families can go to enjoy an active bonding experience.

Evidence of this growth trend can be seen with the entry of new blood (i.e., investment dollars) coming into the family fun industry, which still represents a good return on investment, as well as an essential leisure attraction in just about any kind of new development, including residential real estate and commercial retail and restaurant projects.

In most cases, the developers aren't necessarily specifying what kind of family entertainment, and that's where we

as an industry come into play. I just recently was hired to do a feasibility study for a family entertainment complex right in the middle of a choice location: an 83-acre commercial (retail and restaurants) zone surrounded by a planned development of 3,000-plus new homes (including the building of four schools and recreation facilities within the development zone). The phrase "We've come a long way, Baby" really hits home. The importance of the family discretionary dollar has definitely put the amusement biz back on the table as something that must be considered when a new project gets underway.

As a society, many different communities are now becoming bonded with entertainment options. For instance, universities, our bastions of learning, are beginning to incorporate family entertainment options even though they aren't strictly family-oriented facilities. All of this leads us right back to the three Es (entertainment, education and experience), which account for why such a diverse range of facilities are looking to add a component that will offer a fun, unique and rewarding experience that will stick in the minds of customers and provide an infinite number of cross-marketing possibilities.

It only makes sense that en-

tertainment centers that offer a unique experience also make logical partners with educational endeavors. And the IAIEI trade association, particularly through its partnerships with groups like the Carnegie Mellon University Entertainment Technology Center and local colleges and public and private schools, offer the logical glue to stick these two elements together.

The blending of education and experience is already easy to see in more recent home game titles from video companies. For instance, sports games from companies like EA are all about ongoing environments where players build their skills through repeated performance and are then able to leverage that accrued accomplishment in future games. Now, coin-op companies are beginning to trade on these concepts as well with player-card based video games. These include the creation of custom characters with special-earned features and animals in the case of horse racing games such as *Derby Owner's Club* and *Breeders' Cup*. There is also the opportunity to translate points earned during play into tangible prizes through online redemption systems with Web-based retailers.

At the attractions level, I recently saw first hand a great

example of blending the three Es for a successful leisure product at MagiQuest in Myrtle Beach, S.C. Patrons can dress up in medieval garb and play by the hour in a castle-themed environment, using special magic wands to collect gold and points, and use their skills to complete a series of quests, which in turn help them slay the dragon. MagiQuest is a real-life version of increasingly popular role-playing games. I saw people of all ages, families playing together, families helping other families, including retired couples without their grandchildren, enjoying themselves. The wand acts like a smart card that can also be used at special dueling stations, where two Magi try to outsmart each other using their powers and talents that they have built up during the course of their quests (see www.magiquest.com).

So here is an example of a family entertainment experience and education-based concept that could possibly be rolled out to FECs through a license arrangement, something that includes skills like reading, clues, questions and tests and is still fun and enticing for customers of all ages. It's the first time I have ever seen parents using their skills to assist the computer skills of their kids and then taking time out from their own quests to help other families (strangers). Let me tell you that this is a powerful concept. Some of the players have come back as many as 25 times during a summer season! I think this will make a good retrofit for older laser tag arenas that have too small a footprint (1,500-2,000 sq. ft. to compete with today's larger multi-level laser tags.

Retail is also a big portion of MagiQuest, as it is at many museums. Retail is a market that our industry has yet to get a good handle on. Meanwhile, attractions like museums are increasingly making inroads into entertainment by incorporating a wide range of entertainment and amusement options. They just keep adding FEC dimensions and expanding the concept of education to include, you got it, entertainment and experience.

The big question for readers of *RePlay* is how can you as operators, particularly of family fun centers and arcades, tap into this phenomenon? Fortunately, industry suppliers are going to start coming up with products that tie into these concepts and attempt to attract broader family leisure spending. But you have to look carefully, sometimes taking a chance on new, untested companies with innovative ideas, because the major entrenched suppliers are often the most resistant to change. In the meantime, FEC owners should start learning more about the idea of "experience" and how they can offer that to their customers.

Maybe the answer is a new activity, or even something as simple as a special take-home (remembrance) item. All it has to be is something that a customer remembers. Frank Price in his Birthday University seminars asks for everybody to close their eyes and think back and try to remember their best birthday party ever, and then their worst birthday party. His whole point is to tap into the reasons that both experiences were memorable dozens of years later, one in a positive way and

the other in a negative way. That offers a good starting point, once properly analyzed, for what works and what doesn't.

In today's competitive climate, you can't survive with just good entertainment. Just like in the restaurant business, you can't guarantee success simply by making good food. People expect more. Operators need to learn more about how to display retail redemption and theme party rooms, both of which will create a more lasting experience. Have you been into a Cabela's store? Talk about an entertainment experience combined with a little bit of education! Some of their stores do more than \$7 million in revenues selling outdoor equipment supplies. What do they know that we don't know?

Once you understand this concept, experience and education are easy to incorporate into entertainment. As we have said many times in these pages, for game operators it all falls under the broad heading of becoming a marketing company. We offer impulse entertainment to someone else's customer base. You can't be just a game operating company because there is very little future in that kind of single-mindedness. Expand your horizon and develop additional business and marketing skills. There is a heck of a lot of money out there for us to capture. We might just add a 4th E — "Earnings."

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12 Elkins Road - East Brunswick, NJ 08816

P: 732-254-3773 F: 732-254-6223

fseninsky@aol.com
profitwizz@aol.com

www.AEMLLC.com

Frank Seninsky is president of Alpha-Omega Group of companies, which includes a consulting agency, Amusement Entertainment Management, LLC (AEM) and a nationwide revenue sharing equipment provider, Alpha-BET Entertainment; all are headquartered in East Brunswick, New Jersey. During his 36 years in coin-op, Seninsky has presented nearly 250 seminars and penned more than 1,000 articles. He has served as president of the Amusement and Music Operators Association (AMOA) from 1999-2000, sits on the AMOA board of directors and is currently serving as President for the International Association for the Leisure & Entertainment Industry (IALEI). Seninsky can be reached at telephone: 732/254-3773 or by email: fseninsky@aol.com and www.AEMLLC.com.