

Where Are All The Customers? Getting Started Can Be A Challenging Affair

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Opening any new business can be challenging, let alone a family entertainment center. There are countless tasks at hand in the early stages, including the selection of an operating site, developing an effective amusement layout, choosing a general contractor, and hiring a small army of staff members, all of whom need to possess excellent communication and personal skills. Then of course, there's the ordering of supplies, negotiation with food vendors, acquisition of computers, selection of signage - the list goes on and on. Finally, opening day rolls around, and just hours before the first patron steps through the doors, a weary but determined owner carefully positions the "Specials" display above the squeaky-clean food concession. In fact, the paint is still drying in the womens room.

What happens next is sometimes a crap shoot. I've observed new facilities that have literally been barreled over by visiting patrons, all of whom have probably been marking off their calendars one day at a time since construction started. Frantic owners call for morale support, or in some cases, reinforcements, as the business accelerates from zero to one hundred miles per hour with the turn of a key. Others are not so fortunate. Despite thousands of hours of preparation and a stunning assortment of entertainment rides, attractions, and games, sometimes the public just doesn't know you exist. If this sounds familiar, it might be time to take the "Public Awareness" test. Here are the steps:

Step #1: Know Your Trade Market

By now, I will assume that anyone undertaking the task of creating an entertainment facility has performed a feasibility study within the region in which the business is housed. If you have not, this step is for you. It's critical that the market be analyzed to determine "who" will utilize the facility and "where" they will come from. Often, prospective clients will indicate a desire to position an entertainment facility to cater to a specific niche market, perhaps age 4 to 8. Early investigation reveals that the physical number of potential users within a reasonable drive time pales in comparison to the 2 to 12 market, and in some cases is much too low to bet the ranch on. Many projects are saved from future doom at this point, and repositioned within a market that can support the contemplated level of investment.

If feasibility research was left off the initial agenda, now's the time to capture what you may be missing. What's the point of doing feasibility analysis after the facility is already open? Quite simply, if business isn't walking in the door at an appropriate clip after a reasonably aggressive marketing campaign, you might be missing the market altogether. The only way to counter this condition is to do the homework, assess the real targets, and re-focus your marketing efforts where they will have the greatest impact.

Step #2: Spend Advertising Dollars Wisely

There are many exciting ways to advertise your business, but probably only a few good ones. To initiate an effective marketing campaign, it's important to understand your customer - their style of living, their income level, their general expectations, and their family status (number of children in household). Advertising can be targeted toward children and adults, keeping in mind that children react to what they see, and adults to what they believe their children need. For community-oriented entertainment facilities, some of the best places to advertise are in religious bulletins, PTA mailers, free coupon books, and school functions. These choices can easily place your business in front of the children and the adults within the community in much of a "soft sell" kind of way. Most people appreciate a business that contributes to non-profit causes, while at the same time forming a positive alliance with respected organizations within the region. Other low-cost methods of advertising include email bulletins to known organizations within the target area, each offering discount coupons and special rate packages. There's also no substitute for establishing relationships with every school, youth, and camp organization within the region; after all, the individuals that control these programs also control the activities that their membership participate in.

Step #3: Examine The Competition

If business is slow, jump in the car and drive around to a few of your nearby competitors. Don't have a competitor? Get your hands on the city's youth calendar and drive over to a few of those events. If you know that the population exists, but they're not at your place, find out where they are. This may sound trivial, but ultimately, you'll need to understand what the region's inhabitants like to do with their free time. Once this information is known, the FEC can begin to massage its entertainment offerings to more closely match the interests of parents and kids. In some locales, childrens sports have

become so popular, there are literally waiting lists for participation. If this becomes the case in your region, consider adding some sports-related games and attractions that will encourage active lifestylers to visit. Rock climbing walls, batting cages, and extreme in-line skating arenas have become very popular with the "sports set" and may be just the ticket to pull in your patrons.

If competition is in the area, examine their parking lots for patron volumes at various times of the week. It's never easy being the new guy on the block, so don't expect to simply overwhelm the competition right out of the blocks. Are you offering better entertainment choices, better pricing, and/or better ambience? To compete, you'll need to offer at least two of the three. Should you determine that "your" targeted consumer is at the competitor's facility despite your much-improved offerings, you'll need to rethink the marketing plan, making sure to key on those items that make you different. Have the best cheesesteak in town? Are you the only one with a MaxFlight Cybercoaster? Got the tallest soft playground in the county? Share the wealth!

Step #4: Interview Current Patrons

There's no substitute for getting "just the facts". If attendance and revenues aren't everything you'd expect them to be, it's time to ask the spenders. There's nothing wrong with approaching a family on their way out of the facility and offering a free return visit in exchange for a few moments of their time. The information you can learn from your customers is amazing. Most will tell you exactly how they perceived their experience at your facility, what they liked, what they disliked, and whether they will return. It's important to keep in mind that you're asking your guest to be critical, so do expect to hear some things that you might make you a bit queasy. "The bathrooms were dirty", "My hamburger was like rubber", "All the prizes in the redemption center are cheap", and my all-time favorite, "Why can't my kid go on the ride again for free?" Some responses will be very relevant, others will be, well, economically ignorant. After the dust settles, however, you'll find that you've gathered a very strong list of factors that could be causing the drop and/or reduction in return visits from patrons. Criticism is probably the most effective means by which to improve quality, and ultimately, reduce the likelihood of failure. If you can handle criticism, you'll be a candidate for success in later periods.

Step 5: Turn Up The Flame

Okay, so maybe your first shot at entertainment center development left a few things to be desired. Perhaps the equipment line-up is a bit substandard compared to the competition, or your selection of the most "affordable" site has proven to be a bit off the beaten path. Your choices are to let the business languish in its current state until certain death or fight back! Almost nothing that has been done can't be undone. I have personally become involved with facilities that were in their "eleventh hour" that on the surface appeared to be dying a slow death. A few of these facilities suffered from poor operating formats, while a few others seemed to miss their markets entirely. Each of these is a correctable condition. Ever observe a professional baseball or football team bounce back almost overnight when the right coach came along. Entertainment facilities are no different. If your manager(s) are not booking party and group business with acceptable results, it's time to bring in fresh (but skilled) talent. The right individual can transform a facility almost overnight. I call it "the charisma factor". The folks that fall into this classification are self-motivated 'doers' that will pound the pavement until success is assured. Don't wait until too much of the spending public has written off your facility for dead - make an investment in human talent. The old saying, "You get what you pay for" applies here. If you expect to be a success, you'll need to start with those that already are.

Once you've established the right operating formula, life gets easier. Patron counts become predictable. Ordering of supplies is no longer a win-or-lose proposition. It will take some time, but ultimately, the facility will develop its niche and settle into a smooth gallop, having found the correct operating poise for the market in which it services. Not to worry though, once you begin to get comfortable, it'll be time to start thinking about "what's next".

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