

# Bowling for dollars



Jerry Merola

*New breeds of bowling centers are breathing new life into the family entertainment industry.*

In the entertainment industry, people often ask, "What's next?" It's a realistic question, and one that every savvy operator should think about often.

Over the last 25 years or so, we've seen the advent of the dedicated childrens' play facility, the full-blown family entertainment center (FEC), the indoor waterpark, the pizza buffet combination, and now, the hybrid bowling center.

Those that have been watching the market closely over the last 10 years have seen the evolution of the bowling model in two variants: The first represents the "boutique" segment, often characterized by facilities of 14,000 to 28,000 square-feet that contain as few as eight and as many as 18 lanes. The other derivative—known as the "hybrid" center—combines traditional family entertainment with newer-age bowling attributes. In either case, these formats are remarkably different from traditional bowling centers, offering unique ambience, a greater number of amenities, and a broader appeal for the average consumer.

## BOUTIQUE BOWLING

A boutique bowling format is built around the philosophy that present-day consumers are seeking entertainment venues that are both relaxing and exciting. Leather furniture, fine wood trim and millwork, soft lighting, and mega-screen video broadcasts set the mood for the guest. In almost all examples, a boutique facility incorporates a fast/casual food service offering, along with a full beverage program. In fact, based on the performance histories of current operators, the bowling attraction itself doesn't tend to be the lead revenue generator.

In the early stages of its evolution, the boutique bowling facility was seen as a perfect match for the 20, 30, and

40-something consumer. In addition, the fine detail and strong guest service models found in many of these facilities also proved effective in luring corporate eyes, many of whom utilized these facilities for team-building and employee relations purposes. The largely adult format provided something that the traditional bar or tavern seemed to be missing—male and female-friendly activities.

Yet the most interesting surprise was one that wasn't anticipated: the incorporation of children's birthday parties. As it turned out, kids from the ages of seven to 11 saw the boutique bowling model as a "celebrity" venue, and wanted to participate in this largely adult lifestyle, albeit during the daytime hours.

Part nightclub, part eatery, part bowling center; the boutique format combines the best of all worlds and has become the place to "see" and "be seen." The use of efficient technologies—such as Web-based lane scheduling, lane-side ordering, and custom video selections—has continued to customize the experience for guests, and permitted these venues to price themselves substantially above traditional bowling centers.

Going forward, I predict that the boutique segment will continue to grow within the U.S., moving from largely urban locales and entertainment hubs to well-populated suburban markets. By capturing a variety of user subsets—including adults, corporate users, and even children—boutiques can make efficient use of their smaller footprint sizes while maximizing guest spending at the same time.

## HYBRID BOWLING CENTERS

Few people realize that nearly 70 million Americans bowled at least one time last year. That makes bowling

one of the most popular leisure activities within this country's culture. Of those 70 million participants, more than 22 million fall into the youth classification, with females represents slightly more than half of the user group.

Despite these encouraging statistics, many traditional centers continue to struggle from a performance perspective. One of the key reasons for this relates to the single-dimension format of a traditional center—there's really only one activity available.

Enter the hybrid center. Hybrids are popping up in urban and suburban markets, and for good reason. Some

and disinfectant wipes to meet a guest's cleanliness standards. Most are using electronic card systems and point-of-sale (POS) systems that relieve the guest of having to make individual purchases. Instead, the guest can charge their facility card at any in-venue kiosk, and participate in all that the center has to offer.

Hybrid centers truly represent the evolution of the traditional FEC. As with the boutique format, the use of large mega-screen masking units over the pinsetters creates an impactful indoor environment. Coupled with custom animated graphics developed by bowling manufacturers, these factors

downturn, with many posting modest growth.

If you're considering the development of a FEC, or even an upgrade to your current facility, consider what the new age of bowling has to offer. With more than 70 such venues spread across the U.S., the concept isn't exactly new, but it remains one of the most intriguing to today's guests. Best of all, you might just learn the secret to bowling a perfect "300" game. ▲

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have been "remanufactured" from older bowling centers, while others are completely new builds with state-of-the-art components, unique building designs, and upscale interiors. However, the defining point for hybrids is the use of multiple entertainment components—often five or more—that expand the facility's appeal to a variety of age groups and preferences.

As compared to the boutique style, hybrids are generally much larger, with footprints of 40,000 to 65,000-square-feet. Each will typically contain 24 to 32 lanes, with the balance of space reserved for full-scale dining, amusement games, interactive attractions or rides, and a host of guest service amenities.

Even the guest service model is different. Many venues will now deliver bowling shoes to your lane, offer "fitting services" for the selection of the proper bowling ball, and provide socks

and have moved bowling from a sport to an entertainment attraction. Glow-in-the-dark lanes and balls, blacklighting, and child-friendly automatic bumpers allow the facility to come alive with an experience that can't be duplicated on any Xbox or PlayStation.

The proof is in the revenues: Most hybrid venues are grossing 35 to 50-percent more than the stand-alone FEC, which is largely the result of incorporating parents into the overall spending model. When every guest that walks through the door becomes a participant (and therefore a spender), revenues begin to rise remarkably.

#### **IS BOWLING IN YOUR FUTURE?**

Even during tough economic times, bowling and cinema operations appear to be the two standouts within our industry. Each has remained remarkably stable during this economic



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