

## DESIGNING A WINNING LAYOUT

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Quite often, my firm is called upon to assist in the design of a new facility's physical layout or a retrofit of an existing site's now-dated format. Other times, we're initiating a performance audit for a client and ultimately determine that the layout is impeding the facility's ability to generate appropriate revenue levels. I can't emphasize enough the importance of carefully developing and fine-tuning your facility's layout, whether it be 5,000 or 50,000 square feet. A well-designed facility dramatically improves your guests awareness of the available attractions, enhances their sense of entertainment value, increases their length of stay, and most importantly, improves the likelihood that they'll spend more during each visit. Why? Well, the answers are straightforward in nature and are best summed up by sharing the results of location-specific "opinion" polls that we've taken at our clients' facilities over the years.

The first standard we've learned to live by is that every market is different. There isn't a demographic report available that can tell you about the specific likes and dislikes of your typical patron, their perception of quality, or their sense of value. The only way to ascertain this information is to ASK YOUR GUESTS! So, that's exactly what we do. Initially, and then on a routine basis, we've polled guests that are entering and exiting a client's facility during different time periods, and in exchange for a moment of their time, offered coupons good for free game and ride tokens. The information we have gained has, at times, been alarming. A common response to our question, "What did you think of the XXXX attraction?" is "Where was it? I didn't see it." Others were unaware of special promotional discount packages, which grouped attraction offerings together at reduced prices. Instead, they sampled two or three attraction offerings, and then chose to forego the remaining offerings based solely on economics. Other common responses related to a general lack of customer service ("There was no one at the attraction/counter to help me") or "The attendant at the "YYYY" ride never checked to make sure my son's strap was fastened." Believe it or not, most of these negative responses result from less-than-optimum operating layouts that confuse patrons, limit management's ability to supervise, and ultimately hamper revenue generation efforts. To reduce the likelihood of such occurrences, here's a short list of items worthy of extra attention when developing or redeveloping your entertainment facility:

### **Maintain Lines Of Site To All Areas Of The Facility**

While there never seems to be enough space to adequately place all of the attractions, food concessions, party facilities, customer and redemption counters, and control kiosks, a little extra planning can go a long way in improving your guest's stay. For starters, it's critically important that a guest be able to see as many of the facility's offerings as possible from several vantage points, as eye contact greatly enhances the decision making process. Keep the central areas clear of tall games, concessions, or attractions that hinder site lines. Whenever possible, particularly in larger facilities, clearly mark the location of attractions, either by utilizing signs hung from the ceiling or decorative murals painted on the walls adjacent to such offerings. Well-placed signage permits your guests to not only find attractions quickly and easily, but alerts them to the existence of ALL attractions. This becomes especially important with attractions such as laser tag or motion theaters, where the activity is, by design, hidden from plain view.

### **Attraction Placement Considerations**

Have you ever walked into a competitor's facility and remarked about how poorly the layout flowed? It seemed as though great marketing opportunities were lost because the site managers chose to visually segregate various attractions by erecting walls or artificial boundaries. The net result was a facility that felt "chopped up" and poorly integrated. As a general rule, if you make it difficult for the patron to navigate from one attraction to another, he or she will make it difficult on you (by spending less). Let's start with the amusement games: here's an opportunity to substantially build facility revenues, but oftentimes I find the games huddled together and tucked away in a dark corner. To be effective, games must be connected to the main traffic flow of the facility, where visual stimulation will cause impulse reactions from patrons. Don't be afraid to let your patrons pass directly through the amusement game area to reach other destinations in the facility - after all, the casino industry has been using this method for years with much success.

Double check to make sure that cue lines for rides and simulators are not impeding traffic patterns by first determining the least restrictive points of entry and exit for each unit. Showcase your most appealing attractions by placing them in areas where they can be best viewed from a variety of other areas within the facility. Brightly lit, moving attractions add to the facility's "window dressing" and help to increase the level of excitement, even during off-peak hours when only a small volume of patrons are in attendance.

Effective placement of the redemption center and food concessions will also go a long way toward improving the facility's visual presentation and processing patron orders speedily. Redemption counters should be of sufficient size and length to adequately support anticipated volumes. "L" and "U" shaped counters help to maximize patron viewing areas, and when used in conjunction with carefully-placed ticket centers/eaters, can help to form natural cue lines for patrons. The redemption counter's placement is critical, as you'll want all patrons to observe the high-quality prizes hanging from the ceiling and wall-mounted displays. A well-dressed redemption counter lends a quality feel to the facility and sends an important message to your guests: you want them to be winners!

Food concessions that are designed to maximize patron throughput will prove essential during peak attendance periods. If you currently maintain a steady demand for food at your facility, an assembly-line format, whereby patrons select food choices, beverages, and dessert treats as they pass farther along the counter, may prove more effective at reducing serving time and require less overall labor. If your entertainment center exhibits significant swings in attendance throughout the day, you might want to group the food concession and redemption prize center together to permit the sharing of staff labor as needed.

### **Insuring Maximum Throughput and Capacity By "Right-Sizing" Attractions**

Nothing's worse in the mind of a guest than visiting an entertainment facility on a busy Saturday, only to find that the cue line for almost every attraction or game is jam-packed. While initially this might be seen as a good thing, the end result is that a lower level of per person spending is likely to occur on those days. Why? Quite simply, most patrons mentally establish a time frame for their visit to an entertainment facility. Whether that means, "Be home by 6 p.m. for dinner" or "The bus leaves promptly at 3:45 p.m.", the net result is that patrons can only sample (and therefore purchase) a limited number of attractions and/or concessions within the prescribed time frame. When the facility becomes very busy and waiting lines increase, the number of attractions sampled will decrease accordingly. More unfortunate, is that some patrons are actually "put off" by large crowds and will leave the facility prematurely, creating the classic short spend, whereby the targeted per capita spending level is not met during the visit. Many of you will note that cue lines at theme park attractions can be quite lengthy during busy periods (sometimes more than 2 hours!) and that their guests appear willing to wait. Of the many differences between theme parks and FEC's, one key difference is that the theme-park patron has paid their full ticket price at the gate - essentially the spending decision has already been made - whether they choose wait for a ride or not. This same luxury is not afforded to most FEC's, and as such, we must strive to provide constant entertainment with limited delay.

To guard against excessive delays, we carefully identify the average patron volume currently visiting or soon-to-be visiting the facility and confirm that, under peak conditions, a sufficient entertainment capacity is available. For instance, let's say that at 2:00 p.m. on a typical Saturday, there are 300 patrons in your facility. What percentage of these patrons can we entertain at one time with our available rides, games, concessions, and attractions, and how quickly will the entertainment cycle occur? Entertainment cycle refers to the average time a patron spends on an attraction, including loading and offloading time. If there are only 20 ride seats, 4 simulator seats, and 40 player positions on the amusement games, it's likely that the waiting lines will be somewhat lengthy. Rather than risk a "short spend" condition, consider adding some new attractions that possess greater throughput, so that more patrons can be entertained at one time. The trick is to avoid over-sizing the really expensive attractions, and instead concentrate on selecting high capacity/high throughput choices that are reasonably priced, well-established in the marketplace, and capable of being rotated out of the facility at acceptable resale values.

### **Incorporating Safety Systems Into The Design**

Accidents can and do happen. If an event occurs, such as an isolated fire, guest injury, or power failure, how far will a staff member have to travel to summon help or gather safety gear (a fire extinguisher, first aid kit, telephone, master power control switch)? Correct placement of safety devices can mean the difference between a slight disruption involving a few guests to becoming the cover story on the eleven o'clock news. Power sources and ride transformers must be appropriately segregated from patron entertainment areas whenever possible, and warning decals should be placed on any such units to prevent injuries to patrons or staff members. Also consider emergency evacuation plans, in the event of an earthquake, flood, or other such disaster. Are the exits clearly marked and can guests comfortably navigate around attractions and along pathways? Has your staff been trained to direct guests to specific exits based upon their current location within the building? Are there too many obstacles within the main arteries that might cause a guest to be trampled?

There's never a time like the present to re-examine your facility's safety protocol and confirm that all staff members know what to do and where to do it. Hopefully, the safety layout will never have cause to be put into action, but should an event occur, you'll be glad you designed it well.

### **Keeping It Fresh**

No matter what, treat your facility's layout as a constantly changing platform. In addition to bringing new attractions into the facility on a regular basis, make a point to change the position of existing attractions, so that guests continue to get a new perspective. It's amazing how much we DON'T see, whether we're driving on a highway or walking through a shopping mall. By regularly moving and "showcasing" attraction offerings, games, and theming structures, you'll find that your guests will assume many are new or perhaps rejuvenate their desire to participate once again.

With the birth of a new Millennium comes a renewed interest in being the best we can be. Why not begin with a fresh, new layout and show your guests that forward-thinking is just the beginning of what's to come.

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