

Examining The Fun Factor

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When was the last time you went out with the family and really had fun? I mean so much fun that everyone in the family was talking about it for days, maybe even weeks. Years ago, when we lived in a less "commercialized" world, it seemed that having fun with the entire family was easier to do, and at times, more memorable. Perhaps more interesting is that some of my fondest memories came from activities that we invented - that's right, games and activities that we created with just ourselves in mind. Remember kick the can? How about flashlight tag? As kids we all had a blast, and I do believe the adults were having a pretty good time too. But with the passing of time, I see less and less of these activities actually occurring, replaced perhaps by intermural soccer, piano lessons, and the like.

As owners and operators of entertainment facilities, we all have a tough job. It's not easy to have the answers 365 days out of every year, yet our patrons rely on us to provide the necessary release from life's challenges. But now that our industry has grown and our patrons have been exposed to many of the attraction formats commonplace in family entertainment centers, it's become harder to lure such patrons back in the door as frequently as in the past. Sound familiar? I've always been a firm believer that one cannot rest on his laurels, but instead must constantly improve to remain one step ahead. As the prices of attractions, games, and components continue to rise, this puts even greater pressure on the entertainment center owner. What's the solution? Read on.

A New Focus

Remember my reference to kick the can? What a fun game that was. I could play it for hours with twenty of my friends. Our parents would be begging us to come home for dinner. After dinner, well, it was time for flashlight tag. Short of watching the Wonderful World of Disney on Sunday night, I can't recall spending much time in front of a television set. As kids, we didn't need to - our imaginations were in full swing.

Our society is less carefree today. Some parents are rightfully concerned about letting their 8 and 9 year old children roam the neighborhood without parental supervision. Child abductions have made the headlines in increasing numbers over the last few years, and while the number of incidents has not officially increased, the focus and attention to the matter has. It is with safety in mind that the family entertainment center offers an ideal alternative. Well developed facilities offer parents piece of mind, and can greatly minimize the impact of negative outside influences. Let's face it, it's not easy to be a parent these days. No matter where we turn, our children are exposed to situations and conditions that have altered the way in which they grow up.

Enter today's entertainment center. The entertainment center holds the key to several things. First, it is a safe, secure, environment that restricts outside influences from loitering in, or in some cases, even entering the premises. Second, it is constructive, in that the activities are designed around wholesome fun, some of which can be considered educational in nature. Third, it is available, to the tune of probably 360 days per year. And fourth, it offers value well beyond the physical payment. Examined as a whole, today's entertainment center represents the most effective choice for our changing society.

Fun Is In The Eye Of The Beholder

One area where all entertainment facilities can benefit is that of uniqueness. Over the years I've found that when business is good and our economy is humming along, many industry owners and operators tend to spend freely on new attractions, rides, and games. When the market gets tough, much of this spending is eliminated, often to preserve the nest egg and perhaps to secure the rainy day fund. It is often at this point that many owners become creative with available resources. "Homemade" attractions and activities begin to appear, many of which were built with \$50 worth of materials and a lot of sweat equity. Sound crazy? Well the amusement parks of this country have been doing it for years. My favorite story is from an amusement park that, without an attraction budget for the upcoming year, decided to create some "one-off" group play games. There were about seven in all, ranging from hoop-style tosses to "fishing for dollars". All seven were built on a budget of \$1500 out of basic materials found at the local home center. The results were indeed surprising. Not only did one unit gross almost \$50,000 in a single season, but the patrons positively loved it! It certainly didn't have the glitz that many of today's attractions offer, but the concept was easy to understand, the challenge was infectious, and the price was right. In the end, the patron had a great time, and isn't that what counts?

Good Ol' Fashioned Ingenuity

Now's probably a good time to let the creative juices flow. Want to stand out from the competition? Create an attraction, game, or activity that all of your patrons can partake in. Ask your staff members for ideas. Examine your facility and identify an under-utilized spaces. If your facility is indoor-only, might it be possible to launch an activity out-of-doors? What about adding an arts and crafts table? Maybe a water balloon fight during the sweltering heat of summer? Whatever the choice, the goal is to get your patrons involved. Remember, it's not about how much money you spent or how high-tech it is. It's about fun - lots of it. Kind of like kick the can, but this time, you can profit from it.

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