

Is Your Family Entertainment Center Up To Snuff?

Jerry Merola

Amusement Entertainment Management LLC

With the close of summer fast approaching, patrons once again will turn their sights toward the local and regional family entertainment centers that blanket almost every market of the United States. The water and theme parks have commanded top billing during the hot summer months, but as families settle back down into the Fall routine, they will each seek local destinations for quality entertainment. First impressions can be everlasting, so it's critical that your facility is ready for this influx of patrons and is operating at peak effectiveness.

Now is the perfect time to conduct your own "Performance Audit". This can be challenging to do as an owner, as it becomes quite difficult to correctly evaluate a facility's effectiveness with as critical an eye as a third party. The goal of this "audit" is to see your facility through the eyes of a potential guest and therefore identify the processes that appear substandard, particularly when compared to your competition. Below is a general overview of conditions I typically look for:

Cleanliness

We've all heard it said before, "Cleanliness is next to Godliness". More importantly than ever before, an entertainment center must always appear immaculate, as if today was the grand opening. When I'm performing an audit for a client, I rate the cleanliness of each of the attractions, and in particular, the soft play unit. Parents are always concerned about the well-being of their children, and will avoid areas where the threat of germs or bacteria are believed to be present. Dust is a major culprit, particularly for soft play units. Each day, staff and facility personnel must thoroughly wipe down the unit - not just the heavily traveled areas, but along the structural supports as well. Areas below the unit must be fully vacuumed daily, with any signs of visible wrappers or trash removed. Amusement games must be cleaned with an ammonia-based cleaner to remove accumulated hand prints on monitors and cabinets. Lasertag units, bumper cars, and other such attractions must be wiped down each day and then thoroughly cleaned weekly (during off hours) to preserve their appearance. Every member of the staff should be permanently assigned to "cleaning and trash patrol" as twenty eyes and hands can cover a whole lot more territory than two.

Responsible Housekeeping

By design, a family entertainment center appeals to all members of a family, right down to its smallest members. As these facilities are typically frequented by younger age groups, FEC owners have an enormous responsibility to insure that the safety of its patrons is not compromised. On a recent performance audit of a client's facility, I noted two critical violations of this principle, for which I have seen many times before. The first was an unlocked (and ajar) storage room door. Upon entering the 8 x 12 room, I found the two main circuit breaker boxes open and easily accessible by anyone over 2 1/2 feet tall. Upon attempting to close the room's entrance door, I found that a service ladder placed against a wall was preventing the door from fully closing. From the looks of it, the ladder had been there for some time, suggesting that the site manager, and perhaps the owner, were conscious of the condition but failed to act on it.

During the same visit, I observed two one quart paint cans lying against a wall adjacent to the food concession. A motivated staff member had identified unsightly scrapes on a support beam and smartly disguised the damage with a matching coat of paint. Unfortunately, he was called off to assist an arriving group of birthday party patrons and failed to reseal and remove the paint cans from the area. Any curious child might have seen these two cans of yellow paint and assumed they were a new type of drink.

Accidents will happen, however accidents stemming from poor housekeeping cannot be tolerated. All staff members must be trained on the importance of closing (and locking) counter doors, janitorial areas, and utility rooms. If a parent believes that your facility poses potential risks to his or her child, they will probably not visit again. Even worse, a child could be hurt or killed by such poor housekeeping practices, forever tarnishing the reputation of the facility.

Attractions should be inspected frequently for wear, broken components, or sharp edges that could result in injury. Many jurisdictions require that rides be examined by a qualified inspector on a preset time schedule throughout the year. Be certain that electrical cords and dedicated power supplies are out of a patron's reach and carefully labeled to also prevent injury to staff members. Service walks, entrance thresholds, and perimeter fencing should all be examined for gaps and tears that might result in injury to patrons. Finally, confirm that all interior and exterior lighting is fully functional and that

parking areas are well- illuminated for the upcoming change in seasonal patterns.

Helpful and Courteous Staff

Ask any consumer these days, and they'll tell you that "customer service" among retailers has hit an all-time low. It's no secret that many consumers are willing to pay more for better service and in most cases, increase their level of loyalty toward a merchant or retailer to consistently insure a more pleasant experience. The same concept holds true for family entertainment, whereby consumers will typically frequent facilities where the staff and management are happy to see them, and go out of their way to provide a high-quality experience.

Training is the key to successful staff development. For starters, every staff member must look at an incoming patron as the facility's "guest" - a VIP. Simple greetings and offers of assistance will go a long way toward enhancing a patron's perception of the facility. Friendly, helpful staff members present the facility in the best possible light and encourage patrons to not only ask questions, but purchase MORE of what the facility has to offer. Walk into almost any theme park in the country and this cheerful attitude appears almost engrained in the mind of every staff member.

Perceived Value

The Fall season is also an excellent time to review the offerings and promotional packages available at your facility. Start by surveying the competition. Are they offering more rides, tokens, or attractions for the same money? Are there a sufficient number of packages available to meet a variety of budgets in your target market? How worthwhile is the experience at your facility in comparison to that of the competition? Sometimes it's helpful to enlist the help of some trusted family friends to serve as a "test family" in gauging consumer perceptions. Provide them with a spending account equal to the typical per capita spending level of the facility's patron multiplied by the number of members in the test family. Commonly, I have found the per-person spending level to average \$8 -12 per visit, dependent upon attraction offerings and region of the country. Ask each member of the test family to rate the facility according to the following criteria: 1) appearance, 2) functionality and appeal of available attractions, 3) courteousness of staff, and 4) quality of the experience. No one should be informed of their arrival and no special preparations should be made. In answering the last question, "quality of the experience" , ask each test family member how much time passed between their arrival and the exhaustion of their spending account. If the average time falls below two hours, chances are that the facility's perceived value rating will fall short of the competition. To counter this, consider adding additional attractions or time allotments to the facility's promotional packages to improve both the experience and value. By doing so, patrons are more likely to revisit the facility more often and share their good fortune with others members of the community.

Don't Delay!

There's never a time like the present to review your own score card. A safe, well-organized, and well-managed facility is by far the most appealing to consumers, while at the same time lessen the influx of competition entering the area. As the facility owner or general manager, set the standard far enough up the bar and encourage your staff to rise to the challenge. Recognition among their peers combined with well-publicized incentive programs can go a long way toward developing a staff that consistently strives to maximize the guest experience and in turn enhance the reputation of your facility.

[Return to top](#)
www.AEMLLC.com