

Using The Internet As A Marketing Tool

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Entertainment facility owners know that effective marketing has always been the key to building visitation volumes within their centers. Unfortunately, as expense budgets get tight, advertising dollars become scarce, leaving many facilities with limited advertising coverage within their target markets. There is, however, another solution - advertise on the internet!

I continue to be amazed by the number of "hits" that our own operating companies receive on a weekly basis (www.AmusementEntertainmentManagement.com). From my perspective, internet surfing is more than just a fad, but a way of life for the current and future generations. Many consumers have become "price shoppers", whereby they search all retailers of a particular product style and compare prices. Does it really matter who the product is ultimately purchased from? Probably not. What does matter is that these particular retailers have now infiltrated our homes and created an easy-to-use means of expanding their own businesses. The amusement and entertainment industries are no exception. Boosting patron visits and revenues can be accomplished with this same formula, provided the following ingredients have been made available:

**an effective entertainment center website
inclusion in search engine listings
promotional "internet- only" incentives**

Creating A Website

It is our business to study the trends and competitive forces within the amusement and entertainment industries. In many cases, this is often accomplished by locating and analyzing information contained on various websites of attraction manufacturers, entertainment facilities, and service vendors. On any given day, I must peruse at least 15 - 20 sites in varying degrees. In about 30% of the cases (you know who you are), no website is available for a particular facility, so a search of a particular town or city yields only information about that facility's competitors. Too bad, because if I was a mom or dad searching for a facility to have my child's birthday party, yours wouldn't have made it onto the list.

Another 30% of the sites I observe contain relatively stale information (six or more months old) or maintain a homepage with the title "Under Construction". Now let's be honest - you could build a bridge quicker than some of these webmasters are building their sites. Simply having a homepage without supporting data is of little value to the consumer. With one click of the mouse, you're gone. It really doesn't take much to get a full-compliment website up and running. Most importantly, you'll always have an opportunity to add additional information and upgrades to the site over time.

What should a website contain? To answer this question, consider your typical patron. They're curious about your attraction offerings, the cost of your birthday party options, the hours and days of operation, the physical requirements (i.e. - minimum height requirements for childrens rides), and of course, the food menu. Critically important is that you include your ADDRESS and PHONE NUMBER, as well as directions from various regional start points. You'd be amazed how many times this is left off. As an added bonus, you'll want to include information about your incentive programs, membership clubs, and community outreach/giveback events. Finally, a contact page should be included, to allow patrons to ask questions and provide feedback from their recent visits. The site needs to be easy to understand and navigate - in most cases, simpler is better. Be sure to include a helpful hint on the main page that says "Bookmark Us Now!" to encourage viewers to save the page to their directory for future reference. Include a tool bar that allows surfers to jump to specific pages of interest but avoid using photos that are too large or complex theming components that bog down the loading speed of each of the site's pages. Remember, not everyone is using a cable modem or DSL line, so your website should be tested on a variety of dial up connections to confirm that it is sufficiently effective. If it takes 2 minutes to download your webpage, no one will download it.

Search Engines: The Tool For Discovery

Once in a while, a friend will call to say that he's disappointed with the volume of internet traffic his site has received. In almost all cases, the cause of such limited traffic can be blamed on the failure to list the website with the key search engines available to the public. These search engines, which carry names such as "Yahoo", "Alta Vista", "Ask Jeeves", and others offer subscription services for webpage providers. What's the purpose of subscribing? Well, when a patron looks up "family fun center - Kalamazoo", the search engine will produce a series of listings that reasonably match this criteria. It's

entirely possible that your site will be on this list, but the bigger question is WHERE on the list? In many cases, a search might reveal 250 entries that somewhat match the inquirer's description. Is our patron really going to log through all 250? Not a chance. Quite often, once the surfing public has found a selection that meets their criteria, that's exactly the website that they'll go to. Imagine if that's your competitor? He's listed at number 4 on the search engine list but you're listed at number 248. See the problem?

While subscriptions do cost money, there are other ways to improve your website's chances of landing on the top of the search engine list. The first is to select a facility name or website description that contains the most frequently identified words that a consumer might use to find you, such as "Family Fun Center", "Games, Rides, & Fun", or "Indoor Amusement Park". For instance, if the name of your facility is "Laser Tag World", a consumer that searches for "laser tag" will likely find your facility sooner than a facility entitled "Big Al's Place For Fun" (sorry, Big Al). Alternatively, you can use words within the description of the webpage summary and throughout the body of the website that closely match the words a consumer would typically use to search for a facility like yours. The closer the word match, the more likely that a search engine will "hit" your site.

It goes without saying that the best website in the world is worthless if no one can find it. With some extra effort and a small amount of money, there's much you can do to insure that a targeted consumer finds you - the first time!

Internet Promotions

Internet promotions are fast becoming the hot ticket among entertainment center users these days. With the advent of e-mail, many facilities are asking their patrons to register in person or at their website in exchange for valuable incentives and discount offers. Through registration, a facility now has access to important information about their patrons, including birth date, frequency of visits, likes/dislikes, e-mail address, and the town in which they live. This type of information can greatly assist in releasing future birthday party mailings, targeting paper or radio advertising, and informing members of upcoming attractions, events, or incentives.

For those facilities that utilize an electronic debit card system, e-mail communications can be even more worthwhile. By examining the history of a user card, a debit card-equipped facility can determine the number of visits that a patron has made in the last year, the games/attractions used, the amount of money spent, and the amount of time spent. Armed with this type of data and an e-mail address, the facility can now send specific e-mail messages to its patrons offering everything from discounts to credits. In much the same way as the airline industry adopted the "frequent flyer" miles program, an entertainment facility can offer "frequent user" debit card credits. As an example, let's say that Johnnie Jones has visited our facility 8 times this year, spent a total of \$120, and seems to prefer the go kart attraction to all others. Since we haven't yet seen him this month, why not send him an e-mail indicating that we've credited his player's card for a free go kart ride, which is good until the end of the month? Or for a family that has spent, say, \$250 this year, why not include some bonus attractions in Jimmy's next birthday party package if it's booked before June 30th? No matter what the incentive, the key is to get the message out to the patron and follow through on promise.

Expanding Into The Virtual Entertainment Center

Now that we know the internet can be an effective tool in building our businesses, why not give it a try? You might find that your level of communication with patrons actually increases through means of the "electronic" world and that the feedback received proves more truthful and plentiful than when collected within the facility. Even better, you may find yourself staring at new faces who never actually knew your facility existed or hadn't made the effort to drive on by. If you're still curious about the merits of internet advertising, just ask the folks at Ebay whether they ever envisioned being the world's largest auction house. Hey, it all starts with just one good idea.

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