

ENVIRONMENT AND PEOPLE: TWO CRITICAL ELEMENTS OF EXPERIENCE VENUES

by Randy White

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Offering a successful entertainment experience requires a lot more than just the physical components. Yes, the entertainment is important, whether it is rides, bowling, laser tag, games or other attractions. But entertainment alone does not create an experience that generates a profit and makes consumers not only want to stay, but eager to return. The environment in which the entertainment takes place and the guests who attend are both critical elements of the overall experience. In today's challenging economic climate, getting these two elements right is even more critical to business survival and success than ever.

Environments can powerfully influence emotions and feelings, which affect a guest's behavior, including whether they want to stay, leave or ever return. The environment, which includes the layout, finishes, colors, lighting, scale of the space, seating, ambiance, aromas, music acoustics, etc., has an impact often experienced on only a subconscious level, but nevertheless has an effect on emotions and behavior. A business wins when it consciously creates the right environment, one that matches the desired experience, as well as the values, tastes and preferences of the targeted niche of guests. White Hutchinson coined a term a number of years ago for the overall environmental qualities called 'quality-of-place.' Create a mismatched quality-of-place to the quest, and roadkill can ensue.

Women perceive and react to environments differently than men do. Women are much more discriminating and pay closer attention to décor, colors, fabrics, aroma, cleanliness and lighting. Men respond to structural elements. Women like textures, softness and curves. Men like right angles, boxy designs and metallic finishes. Women like more intimate spaces with lower ceilings; men like cavernous spaces with high ceilings.

Some facilities target women very successfully through their quality-of-place. A good example is *Panera Bread Co.* It has a softer, more intimate feel and subdued colors that appeal to women. Most classic white-tablecloth steak houses with their heavy dark wood finishes and lower lighting levels appeal to men. *The Cheesecake Factory* is a good example of an environment with a balanced gender appeal. Women relate to its soft, warm colors, good lighting and fine finishes like marble. At the same time, men don't feel out of place because of its strong architecture with large columns, beams and crown moldings. *Dave &*

Buster's, through its interior design, also has achieved a balanced gender appeal.

Even the table setting can influence gender appeal. Women like table linen, unless they have young children with them. Men prefer solid surface tabletops, as they are messier eaters and don't want to feel guilty about soiling a nice table linen. More gender neutral are tables covered from large rolls of craft or white paper. Women consider it fancier than a bare tabletop, and men don't have to feel guilty if they make a mess because they know the paper will be thrown away. Paper table coverings also appeal to women with young children, because the surface is new and clean. They know their children can draw on it to stay occupied, and there is also no guilt when the kids get it dirty.

Not only is there a difference in genders perception of environments and quality-of-place, there is also a difference based upon people's socio-economics/ lifestyles (SELS). This is driven not only by upbringing, but also by education level. There is an old saying that holds enormous truth, "Birds of a feather flock together." People like to hang out in environments with people like themselves. You have to design the nest for the particular variety of bird you want to attract.

SELS vary not only based upon income, but also based on needs, tastes, preferences, values, hopes and fears, which is important in customizing an appealing entertainment experience. Quite simply, *Denny's* restaurant designs its environment to appeal to a much lower SEL than does *Carrabba's Italian Grill*. Often, the SEL that loves one of those restaurants won't be caught dead in the other; it doesn't match their SEL and self-image. The same holds true for *Walmart* and *Target*. *Target* has a much higher level of finish than *Walmart* and therefore appeals to a higher SEL.

When it comes to children and the environment, it's a whole different story. To learn more about how the environment impacts children, we suggest you read our article, [*Adults are from Earth; children are from the Moon: Designing for children, a complex challenge*](#).

Having an experience solo is completely different than having an experience with a group of people. Group experiences are shared experiences and all about socialization. The dynamic of group validation is an important factor that differentiates a group experience. This is one of the main reasons bowling, billiards and miniature golf have stood the test of time. Group members validate the play of each other. One person plays while the others watch, comment on and review that person's performance. Bowling, miniature golf and billiards played alone has little appeal except for just practice. Another example is a

circular ride for children. Every time the ride goes around, the child gets validation from his or her parents who are watching (hopefully). Skeeball and other alley games often set up the same validation dynamics, as they typically are played in parallel, or with parents watching.

Bonding is an essential component of group social dynamics. Sitting and sharing food and drink is the oldest form of group bonding. It started when ancient man sat around the campfire, and now it's encoded in our genes. This is why food and beverage greatly enhances an entertainment experience. Yes, entertainment alone can offer group validation, but it doesn't offer the primal campfire bonding experience food and beverage bring to the table. That is why many pure entertainment venues have evolved into the more successful eatertainment concepts of today. Walking around from ride to ride or game to game doesn't create the strong bonding that sharing food and drink together offers. Add bonding through food and drink and entertainment experiences suddenly have far greater appeal (and higher per capita sales). Examples include FECs that have now morphed into pizza buffet/entertainment centers, children's pay-for-play centers that have evolved into play cafés, and bowling alleys that have become bowling lounges.

Yes, the entertainment is important, but without the right environment that supports socialization, you really aren't offering people a rich experience they will want to repeat and even pay a premium to enjoy.

Randy White is the CEO of the Kansas City, Missouri- and Doha, Qatar-based White Hutchinson Leisure & Learning Group. The company specializes in the feasibility, design and production of location-based entertainment and leisure venues. Randy can be reached at +816.931-1040, ext 100 or via the company's website www.whitehutchinson.com