

HOW TO SELECT NEW ENTERTAINMENT OPTIONS FOR YOUR CENTER

BY RANDY WHITE

Bowling center owners are trying new ways to offset the loss of league lineage. This is good. Sometimes, though, the approach is like that of a disc jockey who wants to please everyone. First he plays Dylan, then Bennie Goodman to Boyz II Men to Elton John to Hank Williams to the artist formerly known as Prince, all in a futile attempt to reach the widest possible audience. The result is chaos on the dance floor. This is not so good.

League play is declining. We all know that. The traditional approach of recruiting league bowlers to contract to visit 35 weeks a year isn't widely successful anymore, and the old 70/30 formula of league lineage to open play is rapidly approaching 50/50. Bowling centers can no longer afford to treat league bowlers as preferred guests at the expense of open play bowlers.

Many proprietors are broadening the mix of offerings at their centers, sliding away from the bowling center end of the continuum and closer to being a family entertainment center. This happens in varying degrees, from adding a game room to adding other anchor attractions such as soft modular play equipment, laser tag, sand volleyball or miniature golf.

Sandy Hansell made some important observations about this trend in his November 1994 *International Bowling Industry* article, "Bowling Is What Brought You to the Dance." He pointed out that "broad diversification beyond bowling's traditional lines of business may not be the silver

bullet needed to resurrect the industry." He also said that:

- True family entertainment centers essentially represent a different business, which requires new and different knowledge and skills."

- Other recreational activities may offer little or no synergy with bowling.

- A wide range of activities can blur the bowling center's image and market thrust.

- Sticking to the core business of bowling continues to be successful for good operators.

Hansell is absolutely right when he

CENTER DIVERSIFICATION

cautions bowling center owners to remember why guests came to "your dance," and to stay focused.

The feeling here is that any successful center *must* have a focus, but that focus need not be *strictly* on bowling.

During the feasibility and concept development phase of modernization and diversification projects, the first step is to clearly define who you are trying to attract to the center. The second step is to select a focused assortment of activities to attract them. For existing centers, this approach includes a thorough analysis of current bowlers: who they are, and why they come to the center. Keep in mind, then, that bowling is

not necessarily the motivation for their visit.

5 Ways to Increase Business

When planning the strategy for remodeling or expansion, it's important to remember that for all location-based entertainment businesses, there are only five ways to increase business. The first on the list are the easiest, and the last are the most difficult:

1. Retain existing guests and lower their defection rate.
2. Get existing guests to spend more on each visit.
3. Get existing guests to visit the location more frequently.
4. Obtain new customers from within the existing market area.
5. Expand the market area.

Three of the five ways deal with existing guests, and those are the easiest ways on the list. Obviously, this is the place to start.

Getting the Best Return

No matter how simple and small, or complex and large, your remodeling or expansion program must appeal to your existing guests first. They are the ones already out there "dancing," and they are the easiest to encourage to spend more money, come more frequently and continue to be loyal customers.

Adding impulse sales or anchor attractions that appeal to these guests is called *focused assortment*, and it means to broaden the assortment of offerings for a focused group of guests. This approach is the one that gives you the best return for the money.

Bowling center owners often make the mistake of ignoring existing bowlers by expanding the facility with new sections that have no synergy with the existing bowling business and that don't capture additional business from bowlers. It's like building an ice skating rink next door to a bowling center; you've created two different businesses and two destinations. The two businesses can actually end up competing with one another.

To get the best return on investment, bowling should be one of the anchor attractions and become an integral part of the expanded facility. The added attractions should offer existing bowlers additional value, reasons to visit and opportunities to engage in entertainment activities and spend their money.

To offer a broader focused assort-

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ment to your current guests, you must first determine who they are, why they come to your center, and their likes, needs and expectations. This involves research. The most effective vehicles for compiling this kind of information are mail and intercept (in-house) surveys.

The survey design is important, too. It's important that the surveys be designed so as not to introduce bias in the answers or give only a pre-selected list of options. Open-ended questions will give you an in-depth knowledge of your current bowlers.

Even if your strategy is to attract new bowlers to the center, you'll still want to focus on your existing guests. The new customers who will be easiest to attract are those folks' families, or people like your current guests. Part of this process, then, is to identify the center's market area and conduct secondary market research on the people who live there, including

demographics, psychographics and lifestyles.

Analyzing the Target Market

All of this information then is analyzed to identify the target markets for the remodel or expansion. The target markets are identified by:

- Demographic and lifestyle characteristics.
- Affinity groups (people who come to the center together).
- Motivators (why guests come to the center).

For example, if serious middle-aged bowlers are one target market, an inviting lounge often will increase sales. That's because these bowlers are likely to want to unwind with their friends after bowling. A game room, in contrast, would have little, if any, appeal for these folks.

Research has shown that most bowlers today are not serious about persuing bowling as a sport, but rather are people who come together to socialize with their friends while bowling. In this case, that same lounge could generate additional visits as it could also become a destination for socializing. If you add games to the lounge, like electronic darts, you could increase per capita expenditures or possibly generate additional visits.

When it comes to adding new customers, the easiest to attract are the families of existing bowlers. It's important to make sure the research identifies bowler families' composition so their make-up can be cross-tabulated to the market area's composition. If you add more anchor attractions, they should be ones that not only appeal to part of the existing bowler base, but also to a sufficient portion of the target market.

Despite its declining league base, bowling still is a solid anchor and offers many opportunities for impulse sales.

Bowling also can serve as one of the anchors for a multi-anchor family entertainment center. Naturally, though, this kind of project must be approached with care. Adding new anchors to bowling won't help if the bowling business itself isn't well run. If it's healthy, though, the expansion can succeed if the center clearly focuses on a market segment that includes most current bowlers.

Don't lose sight of who is already out there on the "dance floor." These people are the reason you're in business,

and they are the foundation on which you must build you expansion. ⌘



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