

The Great Outdoors

Striking the right balance between indoor and outdoor attractions can be the key to driving revenue and profits throughout the year.

BY BARRY SPARKS

WHILE SCHOOL KIDS, beach goers and golfers look forward to the summer time, many bowling proprietors and FEC operators dread the warm, sunny weather. It usually signals a dramatic drop in revenues. It can be the financial equivalent of falling off a cliff.

In an effort to create a year-round business and balance their revenues, many proprietors are adding outdoor attractions. The concept also works in reverse. FECs heavy on outdoor attractions — especially in four-season regions — are adding more indoor entertainment.

“Summers can be rough for businesses in many parts of the country,” says Howard McAuliffe, Vice President of Pinnacle Entertainment Group. “When the weather’s nice, people want to be outside. There’s certainly been a movement in the past several years to add outdoor attractions.”

Popular outdoor attractions include miniature golf courses, go-kart tracks, rock climbing walls, ziplines, ropes courses, amusement rides, bumper boats, bungee jumping and others.

The Paradise Island Bowl & Beach in Neville Island, Pa., located on the Ohio River about 20 minutes from downtown Pittsburgh, started as a 16-lane bowling center. In the early 2000s, a beach with palm trees, sand volleyball court and a small bar was added.

“We’ve tried to add some outside attraction every year or two,” says General Manager Ashley Saunier. “Our goal was to take advantage of the summer weather and even out our revenues.”

Over the years, Paradise Island has greatly expanded its bar, set up an outdoor restaurant that seats more than 100 people, and added horseshoe pits, corn hole games, cabanas (with televisions, ceiling fans and lights), bocce and more. It also offers live entertainment.

As a result, Paradise Island hosts a variety of functions, including private parties, corporate gatherings and weddings for up to 500 people.

“Our location, right on the Ohio River, is a great attraction in itself,” says Saunier.



AT A GLANCE

Venue: Paradise Island Bowl & Beach

Location: Neville Island, Pa.

Proprietor: Brian Saunier

Architectural/Design Services: Sullivan Design-Equipment

Bowling Capital Equipment:

QubicaAMF (HyperBowling, XLI Edge Pinspotters, BES-X Ultimate scoring, Harmony Infinity furniture)

Arcade Game Distributor: Betson Enterprises

Redemption: Intercard

Virtual Reality: Hologate

Music Source: Bowling Music Network

ATM: Halo II

Debit Card System: Tempus Technologies



“People can dock their boats right where the outdoor bar and restaurant are located.”

The outdoor activities attract the over-21 crowd at night and families during the day. A popular sand volleyball league keeps a core of customers coming back week after week.

Of course, the outdoor season is heavily weather-dependent and typically runs from Memorial Day to



AT A GLANCE

Venue: Thunder Road Entertainment

Location: Sioux Falls, S.D.

President: Al Novstrup

Architectural Services: Cornerstone Architecture

Design Services: Cornerstone Architecture and Brand New Designs

Pinsetting Machines: QubicaAMF
Edge String Pinspotters

Furniture: Venue Industries

Specialty Lighting: Ventola Projects

Arcade Game Distributor: Betson Enterprises

Redemption: Redemption Plus

Miniature Golf: American Miniature Golf

Bumper Cars: Amusement Products

Go-Karts: Shaller

Laser Tag Arena Design: Art Attack

Laser Tag Equipment:

Zone Laser Tag

Laser Maze: Funovation

Axe Throwing: Axe Pros

7D Theater: Simnoa

Music Source: Bowling Music Network

Debit Card System: Intercard

Labor Day.

With Pittsburgh’s reputation for brutal winters, Paradise Island also makes sure its patrons have a variety of indoor activities to choose from. In 2006, the center underwent a full remodel, expanding from 16 to 32 bowling lanes. As demand changed, the center removed eight lanes in 2019 and added eight axe-throwing lanes and a Hologate virtual-reality attraction.

Bullwinkle’s in Wilsonville, Ore., has been a popular FEC for decades, and time-tested outdoor attractions such as miniature golf and go-karts had been the most popular over the years. But General Manager Darren Harmon says he is always looking for appealing attractions.

A Skyline Trail ropes course and a Soaring Eagle Zipline have ramped up the excitement level at the FEC. The ropes course is 20 feet above the ground and customers, who are harnessed, have to maneuver through four different ropes obstacles. The zipline is an 800-foot, two-way thrill ride that takes customers backwards to the top of the 75-foot tower and then zips

them back down at speeds up to 25 miles per hour.

“Our big challenge is to find outdoor attractions with a high through-put and low labor costs,” says Harren. “Plus, we want sustainability. Attractions should offer an experience that doesn’t get old.”

Bullwinkle’s recently pumped up its indoor attractions by adding 16 lanes of bowling and a bar. Other indoor attractions include a two-story, 100-game arcade, XD Dark Ride, LaserXtreme, Kidopolis Playland and more.

“Bowling and the bar are working well together,” says Harmon. “The combination has allowed us to attract an older audience who tend to stay longer and spend more money. We also have increased our number of corporate parties.”

While Harmon says the bulk of Bullwinkle’s business still occurs during the summer months, the indoor facility was very busy prior to the outbreak of COVID-19. He’s optimistic that revenue will be more balanced between the summer and winter months when Bullwinkle’s can fully open.

Thunder Road Entertainment in Sioux Falls, S.D., started as an outdoor park, featuring miniature golf and go-karts, 25 years ago. In a major expansion in

2010, the park added a second go-kart track, a climbing wall, bumper boats, Water Wars, Euro Bungy, Tilt-A-Whirl rides, batting cages and a laser maze.

General Manager Ryan Friez says 90% of the facility’s revenue was generated between the beginning of May and the end of September. After a long, hard winter, South Dakotans enjoy getting outdoors.

With an eye toward providing entertainment during the winter, Thunder Road began construction of a 30,000-sq.-ft. facility in 2019. It opened last September.

The indoor attractions include eight lanes of bowling with HyperBowling (which combines bowling and gaming), four lanes of mini-bowling, bumper cars, axe throwing, laser tag, a 7D Theater and an arcade.

“Everyone identifies with bowling,” says Friez. “HyperBowling has been very popular and the mini-bowling helps us to accommodate all ages.”

Friez says bowling at Thunder Road is more than an activity; it’s an experience. Low lighting, comfortable couches, and quality flooring and countertops create an appealing atmosphere where customers feel relaxed.

“Our goal is to create a good level of income throughout the year,” he stresses. “Having indoor and

outdoor attractions should allow us to do that.”

Friez says Thunder Road is always looking for the next great attraction in a constantly changing environment.

Understandably, not every FEC or bowling center has the room to expand. But for those that do, McAuliffe suggests that proprietors consider the demographics of the current clientele and the desired future clientele.

Two key questions to consider are:

1. How can you appeal to your targeted demographics?
2. What's your budget?

Outdoor or indoor attractions don't have to be added all at once. Many centers add a couple initially and then introduce one new attraction each year or so. With a wide range of prices, there's an attraction for every budget.

Adding an attraction is a significant financial decision. McAuliffe encourages proprietors and operators to do their homework.

“Attending conferences and expos — such as F2FEC, the IAAPA Expo and Bowl Expo — are great opportunities to learn about the latest attractions, talk to industry

leaders, network with others and find out what's working for various proprietors and operators,” he notes.

McAuliffe emphasizes that there is no one attraction or combination of attractions guaranteed to succeed at all venues. Every market is different. What may work in one area may not work in another. He also cautions proprietors not to make their decisions based on attractions they personally like. The success of an attraction depends on reaching your targeted demographics.

One of the most important elements for success, he adds, is integrating your indoor and outdoor attractions.

“They should be connected, operationally and physically,” he says. “Customers should be able to easily move from one area to another. You don't want them to be perceived as separate entities. There should be synergy between the two.

“Some operators are achieving this synergy by offering indoor/outdoor package deals and requiring customers to come into the facility to purchase their tickets for outdoor attractions. You want customers to see everything you have to offer.”