

# Learning from the Masters (of Bowling Entertainment)

By **GEORGE MCAULIFFE**

President of Pinnacle Entertainment Group

**"S**tumptown," Portland, Oregon is a great city to spend a week in, especially the week during which blizzards buried much of the rest of the country in snow. With a son recently moved to Seattle, my wife and I flew to the Pacific Northwest the Saturday before, and home the Sunday after, fortunately missing most of the midweek delays and cancellations.

While a few of the attendees and speakers at the annual Brunswick Showcase weren't so fortunate, the majority made it through to attend a graduate level crash course in Bowling Entertainment Centers (BECs). Rick Heim, one of the great bowling operations & marketing consultants at Cornerstone Consulting gets the credit for coining this term.

## The Brunswick Showcase

The Showcase is really two events with the curriculum delivered in two parts, two days apiece: "Modernization," and "New Center Development." It is an invitation-only event for those planning to upgrade an existing bowling center (Modernization) or develop a new one.

Brunswick has a 150-year reputation for class, quality, and integrity and this was evident throughout the week, from the accommodations to the field trips to world class venues they have helped develop to the attendees.

**"There was some real exciting information shared. The evolution of the BEC has reached the point where we have numerous successful examples which have made it through some tough times. As the new models mature a set of best practices has emerged, and it was the sharing of these best practices that captured the audience."**

Speakers are on a strict commercial blackout and focus on education. Brunswick has formed the Brunswick Business Alliance, a carefully selected group of experts in the various fields critical to the success of a modern day BEC. As a member of that alliance I attended and spoke to both groups on arcade, redemption, and other attractions from the world of traditional FECs.

While this was the fourth showcase I participated in, it was full of terrific new information. I also felt a very positive vibe, certainly more so than the last two years of a

struggling consumer economy and tight financing markets. There was some real exciting information shared. The evolution of the BEC has reached the point where we have numerous successful examples which have made it through



some tough times. As the new models mature a set of best practices has emerged, and it was the sharing of these best practices that captured the audience.

Kurt Harz is the emporario of the showcase. As VP of Capital Equipment Sales, Kurt opened both sessions with an overview of the industry, delivered with his perspective of 35 years of experience. Aside from great content, Kurt's love of bowling and loyalty to the Brunswick brand came through clearly. Starting with the figure of 71 million bowlers annually, far

higher than golf players, playing on 220,000 lanes worldwide, half in the U.S., Kurt went on to define the variety of centers in the marketplace.

## Definition of Terms

Traditional Bowling Centers are the older model featuring bowling as a single anchor attraction supported by a lounge, snack bar and small arcade, if any. League bowling is the core revenue center but is in decline. Entertainment or casual play has filled the gap. Growth potential in these centers is limited without reinvestment to modernize the bowling experience, upgrade the food and beverage, and add state of the art family entertainment experiences leading with a redemption arcade. Obviously, after such investment, the operational model and marketing program must change as well.

The Bowling FEC model focuses on bowling as recreation and entertainment. The core customer is families, parties and events. FECs emphasize food and beverage, with expanded menus and multiple dining venues. Family entertainment elements are prominent, including state of the art redemption arcades often accompanied by laser tag (the second most productive FEC attraction), rides such as bumper cars or even go-karts,



mini golf and others. Birthday parties and group sales are important to the business model.

Boutique Bowling Centers are best described as night clubs with bowling. The business model is typically food and beverage first, with bowling the supporting entertainment. The core customer is the young adult twenty and thirty somethings, although age appeal is wider on both ends.

Like Dave & Buster's, which works hard to position itself as not for kids, the dirty

little secret is that Boutique Centers can be family friendly as well. For the older customer, and speaking personally, we fifty somethings have a blast on a night out to a Boutique. Grand Central, which we visited while in Portland, is as great an example of a Boutique center that exists today. Believe it or not, Bass Pro Shops is adding Boutique bowling to its huge retail operations. Brunswick's first installation in Bass Pro, Des Moines, IA has been a

great success and more are in the works.

This brings us to the Hybrid Center. A combination of the Bowling FEC and Boutique, the casual observer might be forgiven for combining the business models. Architect Kevin Mills of Architectural Concepts in Denver, having pioneered many of the design concepts in use today, took the audience through the subtle design nuances to the Hybrid model. There are other distinctions, including programming,

operations, and marketing for developers to consider. Hybrid developers include both new center investors, where it is the preferred model, and modernizers of existing centers. Gary Smith of Brunswick skillfully walked the audience through the recent conversion of Timber Lanes in Traverse City, MI, a 40 lane traditional center, into a 33 lane Hybrid, renamed Lucky Jack's with 25 FEC lanes and 8 Boutique. The missing seven lanes were converted to expanded food and beverage, a state of the art redemption game room, Laser Tag, Laser Maze and Bumper Cars.

### Going to School

Much of the seminar content focused on the Hybrid as the go to business model. Hybrids can produce three to four times the revenue per lane, and support more lanes, than the typical traditional center. Bill Kratzenberg, the best bowling feasibility guy in the country today, explained the key considerations for site selection. As Hybrids are larger



The author conducts a seminar at the showcase.



and more diverse they pack the all important attraction power necessary to draw from a wider area than traditional centers, and a wider audience in terms of age and gender appeal. The Bowling FEC Hybrid has the ability to do business across many age groups and constituencies. We've long employed the FEC planning principle recognizing that the "Family" in FEC means, yes, the family together as a unit. But it also means the individual members of the family visiting separately with their peer groups. Bowling Hybrids are unparalleled in their ability to create that attraction power.

This article will be light on food and beverage reporting as Mike Auger, principal of Trifecta Management Group, was one of the speakers trapped by the blizzard. The audience was the poorer for it. I've seen enough of Mike and Trifecta's projects to know they are visionaries in the creation, planning and execution

of restaurant concepts. Trifecta was early to recognize the potential for upgraded food and beverage in Bowling Hybrids. It is a critical component, and in some centers is the highest grossing segment.

Other notable speakers included Bart Burger, longtime bowling executive and recently installed VP of Marketing for the BPAA. Bart filled the audience in on the many benefits of BPAA membership (disclosure: Redemption Plus just executed an Agreement designating us as a preferred vendor in BPAA's Smart Buy program). Bart also covered for Rick Heim of Cornerstone Consulting, who was stuck in an airport, and deftly tied together the many opportunities for success through marketing and operations. Rick Kruse of Brunswick blew the audience away with an amazingly well done presentation on Social Media, in general and specifically to the bowling center (picture a grandma in LA following her granddaughter

bowling in New York, frame by frame, courtesy of the Internet). Rick Barbera of Brunswick represented Brunswick Build a Bowl and took us through a set of critical steps in the design and construction process.

### Field Trips

The Modernization program included a field trip to Sunset Lanes in Beaverton,

Ore., and both groups visited the latest location of Big Al's, also in Beaverton (see the photo to above). This is the second location for the Kirkwood family and is bigger and even better than the first. Managing Partner Daniel Kirkwood generously shared his innovations with the group. The new location, along with the first for that matter, is one of the best executions of the Hybrid concept in the world today. ◆

*George McAuliffe is a 30-year family entertainment center operator and president of Pinnacle Entertainment Advisors by Redemption Plus. Pinnacle is an industry consulting firm (www.grouppinnacle.com) founded in 1996. George has operated public space entertainment centers from 2,000 to 150,000 square feet including a wide variety of entertainment components and related businesses such as bowling centers, restaurants, tourist attractions, ice skating, rides, and laser tag, to name a few. He has operated redemption and merchandise games since 1983, and serves as the Strategic Partner for Games and Family entertainment for Brunswick Bowling & Billiards. Pinnacle's consulting practice has served new and established family and location based entertainment operators, with clients as diverse as Wal-Mart, Disney, ESPN Zone, Brunswick, and many other independent facilities. George Blogs at www.familyentertainmenttoday.com and www.redemptionreview.com.*