

Active Creativity

With both art projects and physical activities, Crayola Experience provides different types of fun for children and their families.



ENTERTAINMENT EXCELLENCE

Multi-site entertainment venues feed consumers' appetite for experiential fun.
But for FMs, they create fresh challenges and new opportunities.

BY MATT ALDERTON

America loves to play. In fact, nearly all Americans — 95.6% — engage in some sort of leisure activity on an average day, according to the U.S. Department of Labor, which says the typical person devotes more than five hours per day to leisure.

Often, that time is spent at home watching television, reading and exercising. Increasingly, however, it's spent at multi-site entertainment venues. In North America, for example, box-office revenue at movie theaters reached a record \$11.9 billion in 2018. Attendance at the world's top 10 theme parks, meanwhile, was 501.2 million in 2018, up 5.4% from 2017. Arcade and entertainment complexes also are booming, earning \$2 billion in the United States in 2019.

Then there are the new kids on the block: commercial climbing gyms, which grew 11.87% in 2018; escape rooms, the number of which has grown from just two dozen in 2014 to more than 2,350 in 2019; esports arenas, which are seeking a piece of the \$1.1 billion electronic sports market; and urban ax-throwing, whose viral popularity is



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spawning leagues and venues nationwide.

Indoor entertainment has never been more fun — or lucrative.

"It's a pretty dynamic time," said John LaSpina, President of Maple Family Centers, a family-owned chain of five bowling centers in New York and Florida. Although demand for traditional entertainment options like bowling has declined dramatically in recent decades, he said new opportunities abound in today's experiential economy. To take advantage, traditional bowling centers like his are ripping out lanes and installing arcades and other attractions.

"It's really a time of change," LaSpina added, who recalled a story about a well-known owner of a New York theater. "He would say to me, 'When a show closes, do we sell the theater, or do we get a new show?' That's where we are in the bowling



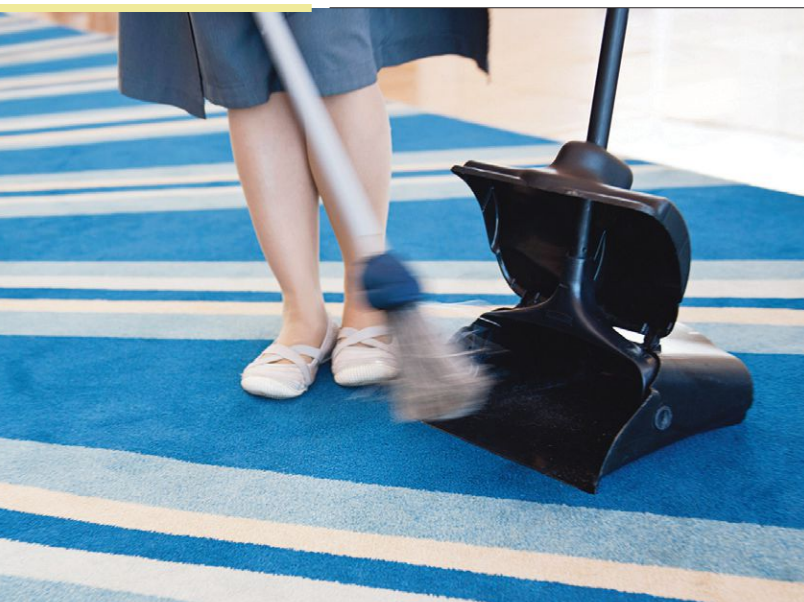
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—John LaSpina, President, Maple Family Centers

industry. We may not be able to fill 48 lanes, but we can fill 36 and do something new with the rest.”

From bowling and indoor sports to countless other spokes of the multi-site entertainment industry wheel, performance and growth are contingent not only upon Americans’ appetite for amusement, but also upon the quality of facilities. But owners and managers can’t do it alone: They need committed, experienced facility managers and suppliers who can drive the business behind this newfound fun.

Good, Clean Fun

Anyone who’s ever eaten at a dirty restaurant or frolicked on a dirty beach knows it’s impossible to enjoy oneself amid garbage and grime. After all, you can’t have fun if you’re not comfortable, and you can’t be comfortable if things aren’t clean.

That’s why LaSpina is obsessed with cleanliness. “At the end of the day, we’re fighting for discretionary dollars. People aren’t going to spend their money with us if our facility isn’t right,” he said. “Look at Disneyland. When you drop a candy wrapper, they have sweepers right there to sweep it up. People notice that.”

But cleaning entertainment venues is no easy task. Not only are new messes constantly appearing, but cleaning is difficult to do without interrupting the guest experience. Maintenance staff must therefore be trained to use the right tools at the right times.

“Traffic creates challenges,” LaSpina said. “Instead of pulling out the vacuum cleaner midday, we’ll just use the carpet sweeper right under people’s toes.”

Traffic also poses a cleaning challenge at Fore Kicks, a Massachusetts-based chain of indoor and outdoor sports complexes whose three locations include indoor turf fields, basketball/futsal courts, outdoor lighted turf sport fields, meeting rooms, weight rooms, arcades, concessions and golf courses. “We have between 500 and 800 people an hour coming through our facilities,” said President Tom Teager. “They miss trash cans. They throw up in the aisles. They do all kinds of weird things that you have to keep up with. So we have a very aggressive cleaning program to make sure we quickly address any issue when it happens.”

To keep up, Fore Kicks relies on a mix of internal and external resources. Internally, maintenance staff have a daily checklist to complete to ensure the facility remains in good working order. Because facilities can get extremely busy, they’re trained to do cleaning and maintenance during off-peak hours. Externally, contractors provide exterior maintenance, as well as overnight cleaning services.

The best contractors aren’t always the cheapest, Teager stressed. Instead, they’re the ones who consistently do a quality job and who add value by recommending new products and equipment that can help the business maintain facilities better, faster and at a lower cost.

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“Using suppliers to keep up with the latest products and innovations is important to us because it helps us improve our efficiency and productivity,” explained Teager, who cited cutting-edge coagulants for cleaning vomit from turf when athletes get sick. “Those are the kinds of things we learn about from our suppliers that make our job a lot easier.”

Cleanliness is especially important in facilities that cater to kids, where germs can be particularly prolific. Just ask handicraft company Crayola, which immerses kids in its brand at five Crayola Experience attractions across the country, each of which comprises up to 25 hands-on experiences.

“Cleanliness is one of our mantras,” said Dan Aylward, Crayola Experience Director of Operations, who added cleaning demands often are greater for entertainment facilities than for typical retail operations because customers don’t just look; they also touch. “We have hand sanitizers everywhere, and we spend a lot of time cleaning computer screens and other surfaces guests are constantly touching.”

Having the right people is as important as having the right procedures, said Dan Krones, Operations Manager at KidZania USA, the U.S. division of KidZania, an international chain of indoor family edutainment centers whose 24 locations comprise indoor cities where kids learn life skills and financial literacy by way of interactive role-playing. Because it offers several restaurants, foodservice experience was an important qualification when the company was staffing its first U.S. park: KidZania Dallas, which opened in November 2019 in Frisco, Texas.

“If you interviewed every person on the management team, all of us at some point has worked in a restaurant or something to do with foodservice because food safety is such an important concern,” Krones said.

Technology also can be helpful. Maple Family Centers, for example, recently installed a new lane management system it codeveloped with its software supplier for lane cleaning. “For the last 50-odd years we had to personally inspect the lanes to make sure they were ready,” LaSpina added. “Now you can easily see which lanes need to be cleaned.”

Functioning Fun

As anyone who’s encountered an “out of order” sign can attest, it’s just as fundamental to keep entertainment venues functioning as it is to keep them clean.

The turf fields at Fore Kicks, for example, feature plastic blades of grass with crumb rubber infill. Without proper upkeep, the grass can become matted and the rubber infill can harbor bacterial infections. It’s critical to have the necessary knowledge and equipment — chlorine-based sanitizer and a turf groomer — to keep the fields maintained.

Attractions at Crayola Experience are even more unique. There’s the “Crayon Factory Show,” for example,

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Great Experiences

Entertainment venues like Fore Kicks and KidZania are appealing to consumers' growing interest in experiential activities.



which features actual crayon-making equipment from a Crayola factory; a "Drip Art" station whose centerpiece is a machine that melts crayons and drips the wax onto paper to create spiral art; and

a "Melt & Mold" activity where children load crayons into a machine that melts them, then molds them into keepsakes.

"Each of those machines is purpose-built," Aylward said. "They're not

coming off an assembly line ... so the maintenance and management of the equipment requires a certain level of sophistication."

That sophistication means Crayola must hire maintenance professionals with a strong mechanical background. "We have a building full of guests, so we don't have the luxury of calling a specialist if a machine goes down. Our crews have to be prepared to get their hands dirty to get the equipment back up and running as quickly as possible," Aylward continued. Maintenance professionals with soft skills are prized, because many machines have computerized components that require communication and collaboration with IT staff.

KidZania experiences similar challenges. Because the parks are miniature cities, they have real urban amenities like an aircraft fuselage where kids can work as pilots and flight attendants, a tour bus aboard which kids can tour the city and a TV station with working TV cameras.

"There are a lot of specialized activities that require special training to keep our park up and running," said Lisa Monnig, KidZania USA Procurement Manager. "We have a fire department, for example, where kids get dressed up in fire gear and go

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"The product we're selling is a safe, clean environment and an environment where people feel comfortable."

—Tom Teager, President, Fore Kicks

through firefighting training. At some point the alarm goes off and they get into our fire truck and drive to a burning building. Even though it's fake fire, it's real water coming from the hoses. If those hoses go down, the team has to know how to fix them."

Suppliers have been an invaluable resource, according to Kronos. The company that supplied the fire truck hosted him for a special training where he learned how to fix common maintenance issues. "I've sat through multiple training classes to learn about specific pieces of equipment we have in the park because [the manufacturers] won't be able to come out at a moment's notice if something goes south," he said.

Protected Play

With high-volume traffic entering and exiting entertainment venues every day, facilities professionals need to be on guard and ready to tackle a variety of security and safety issues.

Fore Kicks discusses security scenarios and crisis response during monthly staff meetings, hosts local police departments for periodic alertness training, has installed security cameras that provide staff constant visibility throughout facilities, provides first-aid training to employees several times a year, equips all personnel with two-way radios so they can easily communicate and call for help if a situation arises, and designs its facilities with a single point of entry and exit for easy monitoring of individuals who come and go.

"The product we're selling is a safe, clean environment and an environment where people feel comfortable," Teager said. "I don't limit the amount

of money we need to spend to accomplish any of those objectives."

KidZania USA has also baked security into its core operations: When guests arrive, they enter through KidZania's "airport," where they go through airport security screening — including X-ray screening — and receive an RFID tracking bracelet that allows parents and educators to track children's whereabouts while ensuring only authorized visitors are in the facility.

"Safety is our top concern," Monnig said, "so we ensure everyone in our facility is trained properly to handle all scenarios."

Service with a Smile

There's at least one more thing that's critical in entertainment venues: customer service.

Although maintenance staff in many facilities can operate under the radar, in entertainment spaces they are often front and center, which means they must be as ready and willing to interface with guests as they are to clean up a spill or repair a piece of equipment.

"The person sweeping the streets at Disneyland probably gets more questions per day than anyone else who works there," Aylward said. "In our operations, custodians are the No. 1 source of information about our facilities. They're the embodiment of our brand image."

Whereas speed, cost and convenience are major business drivers in retail, what matters most in entertainment is the guest experience. Aylward concluded, "It's our job not only to attract people to our sites, but to make sure they have a good time and that they're smiling when they leave." ✕



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