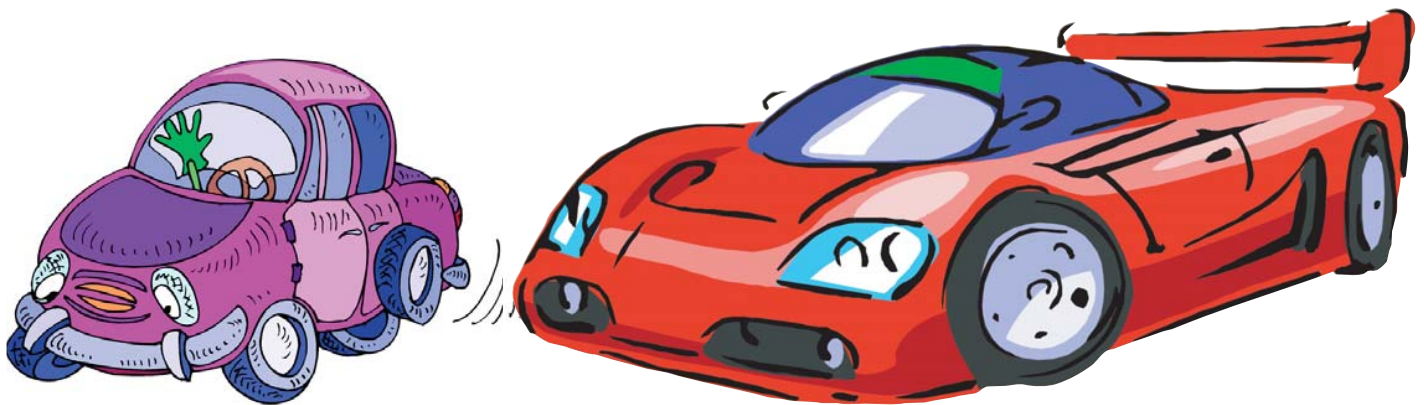


Why are many FEC attractions so mediocre?

Reader discretion advised: The contents of this article will most definitely ruffle a few feathers.



Those who know me realize that I am very passionate about our industry and especially the attractions side of the business.

The number one problem I see with our industry is that we continue to allow mediocre attractions to exist. What's most disturbing is that mediocre attractions far exceed the number of great ones. The large number of mediocre attractions adversely affects our entire industry.

If the vast majority of customers are having mediocre attraction experiences, then every center is affected negatively. It even hurts the centers that strive to develop and maintain the best attractions.

Our attractions should be generating the vast majority of our centers' profits, but far too often they are the weakest link. Having multiple weak links (mediocre attractions) does not make for a stronger chain (a stronger entertainment center).

Why are mediocre attractions so plentiful and great attractions so rare?

Mediocre attractions are so abundant because we all conspire as an industry to make our attractions as mediocre as possible.

Yes, that's right; it's everyone's fault and I am not excluding myself from this ongoing conspiracy. However, I am attempting to expose the depths of the problem.

Here are some of the many reasons why so many mediocre attractions are created in the first place:

Size of my piggy bank

This is probably the number one reason most attractions are designed to be mediocre or even worse than mediocre. Trying to build a great attraction based on the size of our piggy bank is like trying to build or buy a Ferrari for \$20,000.

It isn't going to happen and you end up owning a Ford Focus. It's still a car, but sitting next to a Ferrari there is no comparison. The difference between a mediocre attraction and a great attraction produces the same lopsided effect.

What we all have to remember is that we are renting our attractions to our customers. We can either provide them with a ride in a Ford Focus or a Ferrari. Which attraction will attract a lot more people as well as give us the ability to charge a much higher price?

The answer is obvious, but why do we keep building attractions that we call a Ferrari, but we provide our customers with a Ford Focus experience?

If our piggy bank isn't big enough, then we have to do whatever it takes to make sure we secure the resources required to build a great attraction that our customers will enthusiastically tell their friends about.

We don't want our competitors (or friends) to have bigger or better attractions than ours.

This isn't what we actually say, but it is one of the reasons why we try to convince other operators to not go bigger and/or better. Nobody wants to have an attraction that is smaller than the average, but we also don't want the new center or our friends in the indus-

try to have a bigger and/or better one than ours.

Unfortunately, we all knowingly or unknowingly conspire to make all of our attractions average (i.e. mediocre). In fact, most will tell you smaller or less is good enough, but they will almost never tell you, “You should build yours bigger and better than mine.”

If everyone is telling you to do the average and the average is (x), then add 50, 100, or even 200 percent to the size and/or coolness of the attraction and you will be a lot more successful than the average operator. Good enough never is, and never will be, able to compete with the best.

Average is safe.

We think we are making a good business decision when we copy the averages of an industry. That’s like a NFL football team looking for an average quarterback and expecting to build a winning team.

We also think we are making a better decision if we go slightly above average. From the customer’s perspective, slightly better than average is still average.

Playing it safe is very dangerous, because it will do nothing to set our business apart from all the other existing entertainment centers. More importantly, an average attraction will not help us increase the number of people we attract from other competitive out-of-home options like movie theaters.

Give your customers something to talk about by building the best of the best. Nobody tells his or her friends and family about an attraction that is average or mediocre. After buying a new Ford Focus, would anyone race over to a friend’s house to show off his or her new Ford Focus when the friend has a new BMW, Mercedes, or Corvette sitting in the driveway?

Space limitations

Can I squeeze this attraction into this space? If you can’t do it right, then you shouldn’t be doing it at all. Good is not good enough; it’s called MEDIOCRE!

How many of us want to go out and pay for a mediocre dinner, have a mediocre vacation, watch a mediocre movie, or have a mediocre life?

If you don’t have the space, then figure out how to create enough space or add a new addition, but don’t do it unless you can create a great attraction.

Better to have more attractions than only a few.

This one just kills me because it is a totally false and stupid assumption. It is much more important to build just one or two attractions that are the best of the best, than to have five or even 10 mediocre attractions.

When we build the best, our customers will spread the word to their friends and family. They will help us grow our business, but they won’t if we give them a bunch of mediocre experiences.

“The opportunity to generate significantly better returns comes from building much better attractions.”

Here are two examples:

■ You can buy a round bungee style trampoline with a harness and it can generate \$20,000 in annual sales from 4,000 participants annually at \$5 per person or you can build an indoor trampoline park that generates \$2,000,000+ in annual revenue from 150,000 participants annually. Both are similar types of attractions, but one is 10 times cooler and bigger and generates 10 times the revenue.

■ You can build a 2,500-square-foot single level laser tag arena that can hold 16 players and generate between \$75,000 and \$100,000 in revenue per year or build a 7,500-square-foot multi-level laser tag arena that can hold 42 players and generate between \$750,000 and \$1,000,000 in revenue per year. Again, both are similar types of attractions, but one is 10 times cooler and three times bigger, but it generates 10 times the revenue.

The above numbers are NOT imaginary. They are REAL numbers and very DOABLE! By the way, a 2,500-square-foot single level arena is not an example of mediocre. Mediocre is a 4,000-square-foot multi-level arena that can hold 26 players and generates \$300,000 in revenue.

I’m not trying to upset anyone. What I am trying to do is to get all of us to understand that the opportunity to generate significantly better returns comes from building much better attractions.

Right sizing is NOT smart; it’s stupid!

Building a smaller and/or cheaper attraction because of the size of the space we have available, or because the market size is smaller, will not make our attractions more likely to succeed.

In fact, we will successfully make it more likely that we will fail. If the size of our space or the market area is not big enough to support a great attraction, then we shouldn’t be doing it in the first place.

Right sizing an attraction by making it smaller because of the demographics is like McDonald’s deciding to downsize its quarter-pounder with cheese to a one-eighth-pounder with a half slice of cheese and still calling it a quarter-pounder with cheese and charging the full price. McDonald’s customers would feel cheated and so would the customers of an entertainment center that experiences a downsized attraction.

Unless our demographic is made up of mini-people, don’t build a downsized attraction and assume it will produce full sized revenue.

It’s mainly for the kids and not the adults.

If we DO NOT want to DRAMATI-

CALLY REDUCE the sales potential of an attraction, then we should NOT design it to appeal to kids in the first place.

Instead, we must focus on making our attractions cool for adults. If we make our attractions cool for adults, we will still get the kids and even more teens.

If our center's target market is exclusively kids, then it's OK to design our attractions for kids. Just don't expect to get the adults and don't waste your time trying. Instead, focus your time and money on promoting to kids and growing that specific market segment.

“Playing it safe is very dangerous, because it will do nothing to set our business apart.”

Adults know what cool is and they also know when something was designed for kids and not them. If we want to get the adults, we have to design our attractions so the adults want to have their birthday parties at our facility.

If we want our attractions to attract a significant percentage of adults, we have to make sure we have the following in place: a very cool looking center (inside and out), comfortable seating, an atmosphere that promotes socialization, good food, and most importantly a full bar.

What we convince ourselves of is true.

Saying, “I know that my new center will be good enough” does not make it so. We have to recognize that we do not control the marketplace's perception of mediocre. The people who live in our market area make the final decision.

If we do not build the best attractions, then we leave the door wide open for a new competitor to do it right the second time, which could easily put us out of business very quickly.

Being first with a mediocre attraction does not protect us from a competitor being second with great attractions. At best, we have only educated the market on what is possible and a new competitor with bigger and better attractions can enter our market and quickly steal our customers.

We must not convince ourselves that what we are going to offer is good enough, especially when a much better experience can be provided.

The arcade is how I'll make my money.

If we build great attractions we will make more money from our attractions

and more money from our arcade. Inversely, if we provide our customers with mediocre attractions we will make less money from our attractions and arcade.

Great attractions attract a lot more people. The more people our attractions draw into our centers, the more money they will spend in our arcade.

Food and beverage is how I'll make my money.

Again, if we build great attractions we will make more money from our attractions and more money from our food and beverage service.

Great attractions that draw large numbers of people to our center produce a compounding effect for all the profit centers in our facility.

Consultants, designers, manufacturers, and suppliers all smiled and agreed with “almost” everything that came out of my mouth.

Why would a consultant, designer, manufacturer, or supplier tell us we are spending too little, building it too small, or designing it the wrong way?

They may tell us what could be better, what others have done or what the averages are, but at the end of the day

they want to sell us something even if they know it won't give us what we really need.

If the consultants, designers, manufacturers, or suppliers are telling us our project is fantastic, good enough, or meets the averages in our industry, understand that they are not providing us information on what the best of the best is and why we need it.

After all, if they already know how big our piggy bank is, they are going to sell us on what we can afford even if it is mediocre or worse. We must all learn to dig deeper and figure out a way to build a great attraction.

Referral clicks

We can't believe anything anyone tells us. Instead, we have to do a lot of research and explore all the different options that are possible and then we have to learn to trust our gut.

There are several networks that try to refer prospects to other members within their group. Without us knowing it, our center becomes a hodgepodge of mediocrity to fit all the pieces that make up the services and products provided by the network.

We must rigorously seek out conflicts of interest. Find viewpoints that are contradictory to the norm. Once we have done a lot of homework, we have to ask even more questions and focus in on what makes sense to our gut.

We must make sure that we seek out and find the best operators who are operating the best attractions that generate the highest revenues and profits. We will learn more from the very best operators than any other source.

Once again, we must make sure we don't let our piggy bank and all the other things mentioned above influence our final decision. We have to let our true gut make the final decision. Even if it means not doing the attraction if we can't figure out a way to do it right.

Mini-attractions are NOT attractions.

Sales and marketing tactics confuse and distort the whole idea of what a true attraction is meant to achieve for

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If an attraction that is being promoted can only handle one or even a small number of people at one time, then it is not an attraction that is capable of driving large numbers of people to visit a center.

In other words, a true attraction is one that attracts tens of thousands of people to our center on an annual basis.

There are many smaller attractions that are great additions to the arcade or overall fun center, but an attraction is not a traffic generator unless it can drive a substantial number of people to our centers.

I don't have any competition.

Not yet! It is 10 times harder to react to a new competitor when our center is already open than it is to plan for a potential competitor before we open.

During the planning stages of a new center, we must always look at our proposed entertainment center's strengths and weaknesses as if it already existed. Then we must mentally shift our perspective to one in which we are the new competitor coming into town.

We have to ask ourselves, "How would I destroy my proposed entertainment center if I had the resources to do it even better a second time?"

If we don't have the money to do it right today, then we have to use today to find the resources we need. Otherwise, we have to fully understand that our business could be quickly destroyed if someone else enters the market with the resources to do it right.

I'm better than my competitor down the street.

Who cares how much better we are than our competitor down the street? What we have to fear is what the best

competitor in the world is doing.

If an entertainment center exists that is better than our center, then that is the benchmark we have to be concerned about and not our competitor down the street. The best of what exists and could exist is what we all must fear and prepare for on a daily basis.

How do we start figuring out how to develop and build the best attractions?

We have to search for and experience the best indoor and outdoor attractions in the world. We have to find the ones that generate revenues and profits that are five to 10 times the norm.

We have to study all the best in class attractions we can find and ask lots of questions. We have to try to discover and understand what enables the best attractions to generate the highest revenues and profits in the industry.

We have to talk to the owners of these centers as well as the consultants, designers, manufacturers, and suppliers who helped put them together. We have to dig deep and use our gut to figure out what the most important variables are to creating each attraction's success.

If we take the time to constantly learn and discover why the best attractions work. . .

If we secure the resources required to create the best attractions and successfully execute all the steps required to create them. . .

If we implement the best management and operational systems to run them, then we will enjoy all the benefits of owning the very best and most profitable attractions. ▲



Jim Kessler is the Founder/CEO of LASERTRON's BLOCK PARTY Entertainment Center, celebrating its 25th year of creating great attraction experiences. For more information, visit (www.lasertron.us); for LASERTRON Mfg., visit (www.laser-tron.com); for Cyper Sport Mfg., visit (www.cybersport.us); e-mail (jkessler@lasertron.us).