

Statistics show that in aggregate, the number of full-time employees who took less than an entire week off has more than doubled since 1990. The percentage of all workers who took a full week off on any given week has declined by about a third since 1990.

According to labor economists, the trend toward shorter and more frequent vacations is more commonly found at white-collar jobs where workers have specific knowledge that cannot be easily duplicated by co-workers filling in. A Family and Work Institute 2004 survey of workers found that 43% of workers felt "overwhelmed" by everything they have to do when they get back to work. John A. Challenger, chief executive of Challenger, Gray & Christmas, an outplacement consultant, sees it this way: "If you go away for a week or two weeks, that might leave a hole and you might be blamed for something that goes wrong."

In fact, the consecutiveness that the Internet has brought to doing business is also destroying the sanctity of weekends, as you can stay connected 24/7. The division between work, leisure and home life has blurred.

The concept of time poverty, limited disposable free time for leisure, and shorter vacations is reinventing how we use our leisure time and is driving a trend toward multi-tasking leisure venues. Consumers are looking for one-stop leisure, a single place they can go for a meal and entertainment, versus going to one location for a meal, then taking time to drive to another for entertainment. And if you are talking about loading up the kids in the car to go from one location to another, you are not only talking about more time, but a lot of effort.

Examples of multitasking venues include bowling FECs, family buffet/entertainment centers, concepts

that combine pizza and games, theaters that offer dinner and a movie. There are even single venue combinations of cinema, restaurant, bar, games and bowling. These are all fulfilling consumers' needs for efficient use of their leisure time, which explains their growing popularity.

Society's changing perception about their leisure time is having—and will continue to have—an enormous impact on location-based entertainments such as bowling centers. No industry that succeeds by capturing dollars spent in leisure time will be immune. □

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by George McAuliffe



# Big boxes and Betty Crocker

What multi-tasking leisure means to three bowling owners.

**W**hat business are we in? I started managing mall-based game rooms in the late 1970s and '80s. When we opened one of the first FECs in the U.S. in 1989, we really had to confront that question. With FEC elements such as video and redemption games, midway games, amusement park rides, laser tag and mini golf, with a huge birthday and group sales business, it was helpful to ask the question as we managed the diversity.

As human beings, as business owners,

and as bowling proprietors it is often useful to step back and examine our approach to life in general and to our businesses in particular. "What business are we in?" It's a good question to start the process of self-examination.

Kurt Harz, vice president of sales for Brunswick, and his team see three models for today's cutting-edge bowling businesses.

■ **Family entertainment center.** The FEC model utilizes bowling as an anchor attraction which is complemented by

other forms of entertainment. Most include game rooms, the most successful of which feature a prominent role for redemption games driven by a significant merchandise selection. Other popular FEC elements are laser tag and miniature golf, which not only generate revenue in their own right but provide capacity for party and group sales, a major profit center.

In most FEC retail operations, the food business is "upgraded" as compared to a traditional bowling center, but is still pretty basic and straightforward. Regardless of the

food strategy, the beverage remains a strong component but also varies in size and scope depending upon the target audience(s).

The market segments for an FEC cross a wide spectrum, from casual family recreation and league bowling to birthday party, corporate party, group sales and

from those of the FEC model.

These facilities typically offer an enhanced food and beverage service featuring a deeper menu selection, superior food quality and a more sophisticated service model. While the breadth of product and service offering

can mirror that of an FEC, the boutique portion of the project and the

food and beverage operation will differ with an upgraded business model.

The hybrid model, with boutique bowling, tends to be more targeted to the adult segment, including appeal for corporate groups. Hybrid centers are currently the fastest growth segment for new center construction.

**Boutique bowling center.** This model can be defined as an entertainment

concept with significantly enhanced food and beverage operations and a smaller component of bowling as the primary form of entertainment. The bowling segment takes on a more sophisticated look and feel. Ancillary entertainment options such as game room, live music, billiards, virtual/cyber gaming, and even the game of bocce, provide additional revenue streams.

There are differing boutique models being developed and constructed across North America. Many of the initial boutique installations can best be described as bowling nightclubs, with a strong focus on the beverage business complemented by food and bowling. The evolving boutique models are incorporating a much stronger restaurant strategy. The new models attract a highly lucrative young adult and corporate market.

Based on the uniqueness of both the product and service model, boutique centers are able to command higher per capita spending and overall revenues per square foot. As an example, these business models are reported to produce food and beverage revenue streams four or five times those of traditional retail bowling operations.

So, what business are these leading-edge facilities in?

To answer this question I interviewed three proprietors. Two are owners of traditional bowling centers who took the leap to one of the new models. The third has a background in bowling as a long-time bowling equipment sales manager who became a family entertainment operator, and has now brought the two together in a successful FEC anchored by bowling.

I started each of the interviews with this question: "On your way to work in the morning how do you think of yourself: as a bowling proprietor, a restaurant owner, an FEC operator, or something else?"

The answers were similar, but each added a twist or two worth thinking about.

Bill Reitzig is the former president of Leisure Complexes, owner of eight traditional bowling centers in Long Island, NY. In 1996 Leisure opened Sports Plus, a

**The beauty of our model was that we created crossover customers.**

**- Bill Reitzig**

planned-event business.

**"Hybrid center."** This is a split house with one venue for family entertainment; the other, boutique bowling (see below). Bowling is complemented by a multitude of entertainment venues, the size and scope of which will vary as noted in the FEC section above. The look and feel of the establishment, the product offering, and the service model may differentiate itself

*Six private lanes, seen through the glass wall of the games area at The Mine Shaft. Decor has a North Woods feel. "Chandelier" above the lanes is lighting carousel for glow bowling.*



150,000-square-foot complex which included 48 lanes of bowling, an Event Center with 50,000 square feet of family entertainment (150 games, 1,500-square-foot redemption center, rides, laser tag and birthday party rooms), and an ice rink. After a very successful 12-year run, the property was recently redeveloped for retail because of its prime location.

"With Sports Plus, I always thought of myself as in the entertainment business," Bill told me. "We were in the business of attracting and serving a lot of different people with different demands for entertainment.

"The beauty of our model was that we created crossover customers. Serious bowlers who came to us for leagues would come back on the weekends with their kids or grandkids for the FEC. Ice skaters would become open bowlers, and everyone would come to us for their birthday parties and events."

Bill added a twist. "Most days I thought of myself as a big-picture guy, operating an entertainment center in the broadest sense. But many days I was focused on one aspect, whether the party business, corporate groups sales, something specific to the bowling center, the FEC, or the restaurant. Obviously, as you diversify, you have to learn how to manage each of the elements, and, most important, develop a team with expertise in all of

the areas."

Derek Bradway recently closed Copper Bowl, a traditional center in Houghton, MI, a rural community on the shore of Lake Superior. At the same time in the same town, he opened The Mine Shaft, an FEC, and an adjoining restaurant, the Rock House.

The Mine Shaft is a state-of-the-art facility, 30,000 square feet with 12 lanes for open and league bowling, an additional six lanes for private and boutique use. A 3,200-square-foot game room, heavily redemption-oriented, features a MaxFlight simulator as its centerpiece attraction. The complex has 25 go-karts running on a quarter-mile track, 18 holes of mini golf, and a 3,000-square-foot patio. The Rock House Hardwood Grill is a full-service, 110-seat restaurant and bar.

"For 10 years, I've had this planned—before FEC became all the rage. Now I get to follow the trend," Derek said ironically. He thinks of his combined businesses as "the Wal-Mart approach to recreation. You go to your big-box stores and buy everything you need: one stop. It's convenient, correct? Why not do that with recreation?"

In evolving his operation from traditional center operator to the FEC model, Derek recognized the changing entertainment demands on a business today. He added another component: solutions for the complicated lives of the

consumer. He put it this way: "It's tough to make people fit your business model if it doesn't work for them. We decided to adapt our business model to fit the needs of our customers.

"Think about cakes," he suggested. "Grandma used to make cakes from scratch. Our mothers bought Betty Crocker mixes and added eggs and milk. Our wives—or often, us—are happy to go to the store and buy the cake. [Customers] will gratefully pay to simplify their lives."

Derek left me with a note of caution. "If we are marketing ourselves as a way to simplify our customer's life, we have to deliver on that promise. If we screw up their birthday party, not only did we not simplify, but we added a complication. We have to be prepared to execute."

Neil Farren owns Strikz Bowling and Family Entertainment Center in Frisco, TX, a Dallas suburb. Neil served many years on the Brunswick sales team before changing to the FEC industry as a laser tag center owner and executive for a laser tag manufacturer.

Neil answered the question, "I think of myself as being in the entertainment business. I recognize that bowling is the locomotive that drives our facility but I don't consider myself a bowling proprietor in the classic sense of traditional bowling. Much of my time and thought process is spent on corporate and group sales," Neil said, "where the traditional bowling

*Mine Shaft's custom mask for the 12 public lanes is four lanes wide.*

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This prohibition applies only to e-mail lists which are compiled using a website or other online service. Lists which are compiled by other means—that is, with a pen and paper or by a business card drop—are not covered by the Act and may be used without regard to it. However, if false or misleading information is used to compile non-electronic lists, other civil or criminal laws may be implicated.

Portions of the CAN-SPAM Act

and complicated, their essence can be summed up fairly succinctly. When sending out mass commercial e-mail, don't falsify who you are or what you are writing about. Tell your readers that you are advertising your business, where that business is located, and that if they wish, they can be removed from your mailing list.

Finally, you are free to compile your e-mailing lists through several different means. They include purchasing lists—but

*There seems to be a loophole if you e-mail to the right number of computers. There isn't.*

explicitly apply only to commercial e-mail messages sent to *multiple* "protected computers," those being basically all computers in the United States. The key term is 'multiple,' and it is defined in the Act. It means more than 100 recipients in a 24-hour period, 1,000 recipients in a 30-day period, or 10,000 recipients in a year.

These portions of the Act deal with false or misleading identifying information in the sender and subject lines. But the way in which the term 'multiple' is defined in the Act seems to create a loophole. It appears that a sender could use false identifying information so long as the messages are sent to a number of people small enough to avoid the threshold set out by the term's definition, for example, to fewer than 100 recipients in a 24-hour period.

The "loophole" is misleading. In a later section of the same Act, Congress closed it by prohibiting *any and all use* of false identifying information in a message used to promote a trade or business, regardless of the number of messages sent.

The portions of the Act which require that certain information be included "clearly and conspicuously" in the text of the message, as well as a physical postal address, applies unambiguously to all commercial e-mail messages.

While the CAN-SPAM Act, its requirements and prohibitions are long

not lists that were compiled by a misleading promise to people who gave their information that the list would not be sold or given away or compiled by you.

While the use of e-mail lists and mass e-mailing is a potential source of civil or even criminal liability, the demands of a competitive marketplace require business owners to integrate them into their business model. This is true even for businesses far removed from the Internet and virtual reality, businesses like bowling centers which at least for now exist squarely in the real world.

Even when making use of electronic advertising, the same basic principles apply that are essential in older forms of advertising, those being honesty and transparency. Letting people know who you are, what you have to offer and why you are engaging them is not only the best way to conform to the law, it's also good business. □

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proprietor has historically been focused on leagues, which is an important but smaller percentage of our business at Strikz."

Neil continued, "In the run-up to opening, I thought of myself as a family entertainment center operator. I quickly realized that we are even broader-based than that. On Saturday morning we're competing with Chuck E. Cheese's, and on Saturday late night with Dave and Buster's."

In terms of the business model Neil noted, "We are currently focused on increasing our appeal to the older customer, 21-to-45 set, who combine bowling with a few drinks on a night out. This customer is not as price-conscious as families with kids, whose discretionary budgets are challenged in this economy."

Neil is also a big fan of the game room, laser tag, and food and beverage components. "Once we fill up our lanes," he said, "we can watch revenues in the other profit centers rise."

I have learned over the years that change is constant, that if we don't evolve we become extinct, and that successful entertainment entrepreneurs, to paraphrase Derek Bradway, give the audience what they want.

Bowling proprietors know the bowling component, Neil Farren's "locomotive" that drives all else. The mix and execution of the other elements, each part important to the success of the whole, is both the big challenge and the big opportunity for the future. □

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