

The Fall Calendar is Kind to FEC Marketing Plans

By **GEORGE MCAULIFFE**

It's early August as I write this, but fall is already in the air. In my FEC operating days, we had three areas of focus on our to-do lists. First was to anticipate the change in seasons and the effect on operations. In most FECs, business drops dramatically in the first few weeks after school is back in session. This has payroll and morale implications. We also wanted to ensure that we adjusted — in advance — quantity levels on consumable orders so as not to run up our inventory and to schedule necessary maintenance to recover from summer and prepare for the busier months ahead.

Our second initiative was to take stock against our sales and expense budget. Since we were entering the home stretch of our operating year, we wanted to review where we were against plan. This is a great time for the management team to have their first conversation about next year's budget and plans. The third initiative we undertook was to put specifics to our fall and winter marketing plan.

As the title of this article says, the calendar is kind to FEC marketing plans, extending through the winter. Why the calendar? The calendar provides ready-made themes

to build a marketing initiative around. Why is that important? One of the biggest challenges for FEC owners is to continually introduce change

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to their facility over time. In repeat visitation businesses, this is what keeps the audience coming back. Change can be introduced in various ways. At the expensive end are capital improvements: new attractions, new games and building additions. Redemption has helped with that. One of the reasons redemption works in the gameroom is because the merchandise provides the change factor. Reinvestment in new games is still necessary but much less of a factor than back in the days of video. Perhaps the most cost efficient way of all to introduce change, if approached properly, is through marketing.

I can't imagine that there is

an FEC today that does not have a marketing plan. Most cover the traditional areas: advertising, maybe a cable TV ad, rack brochures and the like.



Websites and email marketing have made their way to most FECs. But there is one FEC marketing opportunity that is often overlooked, and it is right under management's nose: internal marketing.

Facilities willing to spend big bucks on media advertising and great four-color marketing pieces don't always recognize the less sexy and low budget opportunity afforded by promoting to the customers they already have. Outside marketing campaigns, while necessary, often involve expensive media in order to put your message in front of a percentage of the market that will never take you up on the offer. Marketing experts love “quali-

fied” audiences — those people who are actually open to trying or using the product being advertised. Those who are in your facility, playing your games, redeeming your tickets, bowling your lanes, riding your rides and attending your parties certainly are (highly) qualified. Since you don't have to reach very far to promote to them, internal marketing is extremely efficient.

That brings us back to the calendar. It's a great tool to help develop an internal marketing plan. I have a friend whose motto is “Any excuse for a party!” For FECs looking to project change, and the image of newness and excitement that comes with it, the motto should be “Any excuse for an event!” Fall provides great opportunities to introduce new ideas and new reasons for your guests to come back. Take a cue from the retail world: baseball playoffs, college and pro football, back to school, Halloween and Christmas are tried-and-true internal opportunities. Integrating the various components of your facility into your calendar is key.

Billions of dollars have been spent in the attractions industry in the last generation on “hard” theming and design. Many FECs put a lot of initial investment in in search of that

wow factor. The problem with wow factors is that wow has a limited shelf life. For community-based attractions like FECs, it only lasts a few visits. A calendar-based internal marketing plan is an opportunity for “soft” theming. By creating an integrated internal marketing plan with multiple components, you in effect create a new, temporary, theme for yourself.

If you don’t have an internal marketing plan, or if you do but decide you need to expand what you have, it can often be done by creatively using budget dollars you already have. Let’s look at how a promo event might play out: Let’s call it “Halloween at the FEC.”

By hosting an event or two with a Halloween theme, you leverage your building expense putting more traffic through the building. Decorate the facility: use your office supply budget; advertising: you’re probably advertising that month anyway, so advertise your FEC as “Halloween HQ” all month with ads for specific events; your website: update it to promote

what’s going on. Staff: you’re already paying them, have them talk up the theme, wear buttons, Halloween costumes, etc.; Muzaq: reprogram with songs and content to support the theme. Signage: program to promote theme. Community outreach: come up with a hook to support your image as a positive presence in the community; for Halloween, it might be a safe place to have fun and enjoy the holiday. Your food and beverage service can add Halloween specials, other menu items and decorations to join in the fun.

An integrated plan for a typical FEC should also leverage your merchandise purchases and displays to support the theme. By decorating the redemption center, devoting a section of shelf space and wall to themed merchandise or doing a special redemption point bonus, the theme is promoted in this critical location in the FEC. Most holidays and themes can be supported by crane merchandise as well; cranes and merchandisers should be stocked accordingly. Finally, game pricing specials and high-score competitions, per-

haps with prizes supporting the theme (for Halloween, it might be a 36” tall ghost), add excitement. Special birthday, token or debit card packages can all be included to integrate the theme as widely as possible.

We’ve used Halloween as the example. It’s not the holiday that’s important, it is the concept of integration of theme and creative use of existing resources in support of that theme. Once one promotion is in the history books, the next theme can be introduced, perhaps monthly, maybe quarterly. Again, introducing change over time economically is a must for FEC longevity. Internal marketing is a great tool contributing to the long-term health of your business.

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.groupinnacle.com) founded in 1996. George has operated public space entertainment centers from 20,000 to 150,000 sq. ft., including a wide variety of entertainment components and related businesses such as bowling centers, restaurants, tourist attractions, ice skating, rides and lasertag, 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.



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