



Do Your Pancakes Have Ears?

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The phone rang one recent Saturday morning and suddenly my wife and I, our son, daughter-in-law and grandson were off to meet our niece, nephew and their three kids for breakfast. They picked the diner. It seemed a little out of the way

but, grateful for the invitation, off we went. Once assembled we totaled two grandparents, four parents, and four kids aged 2-8 years.

Upon our arrival we got a cheerful greeting from staff who hustled to put together our table of ten. We were quickly drinking coffee, the kids got their juice, crayons and coloring placemats. Nice place, I thought as I looked around. I understood why my niece liked it but, still, we passed five other places on the way to this one.

Then the pancakes came. Take a look at the picture on this page. When these pancakes hit the table the dopamine level shot up in the brains of the kids and adults alike. Smiles and Wows(!) were shared all around. We were happy and having fun to begin with, but the whole fun

factor for our table shot up noticeably. And it didn't cost the diner owner a nickel.

I've always thought restaurants were a good model for family entertainment centers. What makes a great restaurant? It's the ability of management to weave atmosphere, product (food) quality, and service into a terrific guest experience. Restaurants have to motivate people to leave home; so do FECs. Just as



people can cook their own meals, they can stay home to entertain themselves. Most restaurants are community based. People are only going to drive so far, so often, for the experience. It's the same for FECs; both need to attract the same patrons on a regular basis to survive and prosper.

We all talk about "guest experience." Most often it is discussed in a kind of checklist-checkoff type fashion: "get the food out," "deliver the bowling shoes," "make sure the games work." I visit between 30-50 FECs in a year, and have for many years. I'm

sorry to report that it is only in a minority of facilities where the "pancakes have ears."

How do those facilities do it? How do they set themselves apart?

FECs are fairly complicated businesses to run. They have a lot of moving parts. It pays to simplify the approach and to divide and conquer by organizing the management objectives into smaller subsets. We use four headings: People

(staff & customers), Equipment (games & attractions), Merchandising, and Atmosphere. Everything important can fit under one of these umbrellas.

It often amazes me how many owners gladly write multiple \$10,000

checks for new games but don't even think about investing, really investing, in the guest experience. I recently attended a conference with a speaker advocating more investment in payroll, more in training, and generally more in the FEC staff, as the area with the highest return on investment potential. The payoff comes in lower cost of turnover and better delivery of guest experience.

A little thought will yield a ton of potential "ears" for your FEC's "pancakes." Look at #2 of our four umbrellas, Equipment: games and attrac-

tions. Certainly the fundamentals count. Clean games that work well, redemption games that pay out when targets are scored, fair pricing. But how many of us leverage games into the guest experience beyond just being there? For example it's March Madness time as I write this. Every game room in America has basketball games in their arcade; is there a tournament going on? The game has been purchased, our staff is already on the clock, the customers are already in the door. All we need now is a little creativity to come up with the ideas to take our guest experience to the next level.

When you consider the concept, the ideas naturally flow. The redemption counter or room is a great area of potential. Think about how retailers do that every day, creating excitement around holidays, seasons, new item introductions, and sales. I'm sure an hour with your staff will yield a lot more.

The payoff is real. If your FEC depends on people in your community for the strength of your sales, then repeat visitation is the name of the game. I can assure you that our family will continue to drive past five other diners to get to "ours" for breakfast, and all because after building and equipping a nice place, the owner hired good people, set the tone, and gave them the freedom to put ears on the pancakes.