

Bumper Car Feature

A Strategy to Bump up Profits

Bumper Cars Are a Winning Attraction for FECs

Wow, have bumper cars come a long way. While you may still be able to ride in bumper cars that have long poles leading to an electric ceiling at some classic theme parks, the latest and greatest bumper cars don't even have a steering wheel.

These trendy, state-of-the-art bumper cars are bright, colorful, round, futuristic-looking vehicles operated by two joysticks, and the high banks and gigantic inner-tube-like bumpers make crashing into each other more fun than ever.

And while bumper cars certainly remain a staple at amusement parks around the globe, the latest trend is to find them indoors at family entertainment centers.

Richard O'Neal, owner of Space Tag in Ellisville, Miss., installed a new bumper car arena in May from Ride Development Company (RDC), an Oregon-based bumper car manufacturer and supplier for decades that has its products in 44 states and 26 countries.

"They are super cool cars," O'Neal said. "We are the only ones in the state with bumper cars from them. And they have been a big hit. People's – and especially kids' – eyes light up when they see them."

The Funky Monkey Fun Park in Surrey, B.C.,

installed bumper cars in September when the new FEC opened, also purchasing them from RDC.

"It just seemed like a perfect fit for us, and it has been great so far," said owner **Glen Vilio**, whose center also features a jungle-themed indoor

playground, laser tag, a Monkey Hopper ride, pirate ship and arcade. "I have been in the business for more than 20 years, so when I decided to open a new center, bumper cars just made a lot of sense. We are in Vancouver, and people are always looking for cool things to do indoors. I saw them before at different shows and I was just looking for something different that I haven't done before. And going with Ride Development just made perfect sense because they have been around for a long, long time. That was a huge factor to me. They have been doing it for so long they must be doing something right."



Amber Williamson, a staff member at Space Tag Entertainment Center in Ellisville, Miss. The owner installed a new bumper car arena in May from Ride Development Company (RDC).

Space Tag and Funky Monkey Fun Park patrons are riding in Mark VIII electric-powered cars that are energized by brushes on the bottom of the cars reacting to a low-voltage floor. They feature dual joystick controls on each side of the car to allow riders to go forward, backward and spin 360 degrees.

"I remember going to the local fair and riding

BY SCOTT CRONICK

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those bumper cars that had electricity on the ceiling to make them work and the sparks were flying,” O’Neal said. “Now, they are designed so much better. The floor is energized and gives power to the cars from the bottom. So that means the top is open, which creates a far less claustrophobic feeling.”

For Vilio, the most important thing to him was that they had to pass the “kid test.”

“I took my kids to Washington, about an hour and a half south of us, and had my kids ride them at this center there. They tested them



*The Space Tag Entertainment Center staff.
The attraction’s bumper car system and construction cost
over \$80,000, and the owner said it was money well spent.*

and they had a blast. They are easy to steer and very easy to operate. The fact that they can spin 360 degrees really appeals to kids. You just pull those dual joysticks and they are so much fun.”

The new fiberglass cars are certainly brighter and better than bumper cars of old. The cars are painted with bright, metallic-speckled neon paint and are lined with LED lights.

“The lights really add the whole aesthetic to it,” O’Neal said. “When they get going, the lights dim and they look really cool when they are bumping around. It creates a lot of excitement in our center.”

“They really look fantastic,” Vilio added. “They are all different colors and bright and the lights are flashing. As soon as people see them, they have to try them.”

O’Neal and Vilio even added more lights to their arenas.

“We have LED lights all around the floor and we have some on the rails,” he said. “So there’s all of these lights that just attract so much attention. We even put up mirrors on the wall, so all of these LED

A Question and Answer Interview with Tami Dean, general manager, Ride Development Company (RDC)

Tourist Attractions & Parks: What are current equipment trends in the bumper car industry?

Tami Dean: Over the years, there has been a marked trend toward tube system bumper cars rather than the traditional dodgem electric cars. The tube cars are simply more durable and easier to maintain. Recently, some owners and operators are asking for additional options such as illuminated cars that incorporate lights. RDC only offers an LED option. We have found LED lights are more durable, modern and appealing and can withstand the constant bumping more so than conventional bulb lights. Naturally, notwithstanding all the bells and whistles, our customers want, first and foremost, many years of reliability in their investment. That's where RDC excels.

TAP: What is your top tip for promoting bumper cars?

TD: Our number one promotional "tip" is to encourage potential customers to call our current clients and ask about RDC's quality, reliability, reputation and follow up. We have found our current clients are our best salespeople.

TAP: What are the top locations for bumper cars?

TD: RDC sells its bumper cars to a variety of owners and operators who want our product in high-traffic areas. We sell to theme parks, FECs, bowling establishments, skating rinks, waterparks and resorts. RDC has served clients in over 28 countries and that number is increasing every year.

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lights are flashing in the mirrors. It makes for a really terrific event for people to come to. And they want to do it over and over again."

Only one operator is required since the cars operate on an adjustable timer with an override emergency stop switch. And since the cars can spin in circles, operators don't have to unscramble jammed cars.

"They are super easy to operate," said Vilio, who names his attraction "Super-Sonic Bumper Cars." "They are all timed and there is minimal maintenance. And Ride Development was great about how they trained us if something happens. Plus the install was easy. It only took about a day and a half."

The emergency switch is just the start of how much safer today's bumper cars are. They feature high backs so riders' necks can't be jarred too much. Restraints are not only easy to put on, but they hold riders more firmly than bumper cars of old since they go around the chest. And the inner tubes are so large around the

cars that riders receive much softer bumps without losing the fun.

"They really don't move a whole lot because of the great restraints, but they get just enough tug – a foot maybe – to get those big smiles on their faces," O'Neal said. "Customers don't even notice the safety stuff. They just have a good old time."

Vilio said the bumper cars easily met all standards of the British Columbia Safety Authority.

"The giant inner tube really is a great safety thing," he said. "And speed is also regulated, but they go pretty fast. One thing we do to make the experience even safer is that we don't let kids and adults ride together. They have separate sessions."

Space Tag spent about \$56,000 on the bumper car system and about another \$25,000 for construction. But O'Neal said it was \$80,000 well spent.

"It is a great investment," said O'Neal, whose center also offers two-story laser tag and an indoor go-kart



Angie O'Neal and Amber Williamson, staff members at Space Tag Entertainment Center. The facility's RDC bumper cars feature dual joystick controls that allow riders to go forward, backward and even spin 360 degrees.

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track. "We opened in May, and probably had about 18,000 people go through the bumper cars, which means 18,000 smiles. The bumper cars are just another part of what we do here. We want people to come in and have fun and when they leave, we want to hear 'We will be back.' And when they are here, we want to hear 'Hold on, I have to go get another token.' "

Vilio spent about \$65,000, including the arena, to begin offering bumper cars.

"I think it's a very good value considering our playground cost \$400,000," he said. "And the response to them has been terrific. We will make our money back very quickly on them. I think it's probably the number one attraction for kids. They don't get to drive cars so this is like go-karts for kids but they are allowed to go inside them."

Aside from straight revenue from bumper cars, both FEC owners said packages are essential to success and include bumper cars.

"We have had quite a bit of birthday parties now centered around the bumper cars," O'Neal said. "The smaller kids like them the most. They get in there and you hear the squeals and screams. The community has really responded to it."

Vilio said packaging bumper cars has been a huge success so far.

"I would say packaging probably represents about 95 percent of our admissions," he said. "We call it a Funky Monkey Value Deal, and the bumper cars are part of that package bundled together."

Reaching the community, according to O'Neal and Vilio, is not that hard when you offer something new and exciting.

"We did a marketing campaign to let people know we added them," O'Neal said. "We sent cards to every church in our eight-county area. We did a little TV and local newspaper advertising. But the biggest seller is word of mouth. People come in for a birthday party and see what we offer and start asking questions and before you know it, they have a party here, too. So the birthday packages include so many rides on the bumper cars, the party room and a T-shirt. And since we are indoors, it's never too hot or cold. They can always come play. I love when people see them for the first time and say, 'Oh, you have bumper cars indoors!' It's not what people expect. And that alone makes it an attraction."

"When you open up a new amusement center, kids find out pretty quickly," Vilio said. "We have a great, visible location. Nothing is as easy as it sounds, but if you build a center correctly and have an attraction like bumper cars, people will come. There's a huge amount of plotting to make sure it's done correctly, but if it is, you will have success."

Vilio said bumper cars are now part of his business philosophy.

"I would, and will, absolutely do it at other locations," he said. "It's a big attraction." 🐘

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