

A Perfect Match: Bumper Cars and Bowling

By Michael Sadowski

The days of going to a bowling alley just to bowl are over. When families or friends go to a bowling center, they might not be looking to bowl at all. From video games to laser tag, bowling centers provide one-stop family entertainment and adult fun.

And one of the biggest new trends in bowling centers to attract a new clientele is indoor bumper cars, a family-friendly activity that brings in a group of people that may never have gone to a bowling alley before.

"For us, it was an ideal fit," said Rich Sheldon, co-owner of Saratoga Strike Zone in Saratoga Springs, N.Y. "It hits on every demographic we try to attract. It shows people we have other options than just bowling. The people that are coming in to use the bumper cars, those are people that would have never come in before."

Frederick Richardson, General Manager of the Brunswick Zone XL in Brooklyn Park, Minn., said that after owning bumper cars for over nine years he's had an almost perfect relationship at his facility.

"The bumper cars are wildly popular at the center, and it doesn't take much convincing to get people interested in them. Just turn them on, and when people hear that sound, they just flock to them," Richardson said. "They come running. We tell our employees, if you're going to go help out on the bumper cars, make sure you check out for the next hour because you're going to be riding the cars for at least that long."

Indoor operators have found that keeping the nearby area clean around the cars is needed to



A view of the bumper cars at Saratoga Strike Zone in Saratoga Springs, N.Y. "...The people that are coming in to use the bumper cars, are people that would have never have come before," said the attraction's co-owner.

reduce the black carbon particles that settle during operation.

Nonetheless, Richardson said, "The cars are something unique and special, and at the end of the day, I'm happy they're here."

The bumper car phenomenon, and all of the other amenities now at bowling centers, were started by game play franchises like Dave and Busters and Jillian's, said Bob Short, general manager at Brunswick Zone XL in Gilbert, Ariz. Now, he said bowling alleys are bringing these add-on experiences to their facilities to attract those other than avid bowlers.

Laser tag, miniature golf, arcades and sports bars are now becoming commonplace at bowling

centers and those things are measurably increasing repeat visitations at the centers.

"Bumper cars are very sustainable," Short said. "They don't lose their attractiveness. They appeal to a younger audience, and we always want to get the most efficient use of all our attractions."

One of the chief ways bumper cars have aided bowling alleys is with birthday parties.

"It's on all of our birthday party flyers," said Don Fazio, a co-owner and the managing partner at Triad Lanes in Greensboro, N.C., a bowling center that installed bumper cars in the fall. "We knew it would be a good fit to complement our bowling and other activities. It's another form of activity that brings people in."

"Since bumper cars are still somewhat rare in bowling centers across the country, it's an immediate publicity hit when they arrive," said Marc Wiese, general manager at Airways Lanes in Portage, Mich., after his center installed the bumper cars and saw quick returns.

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A child enjoys a bumper car at Airways Lanes in Portage, Mich. The general manager has been successful in marketing the bumper cars with other attractions at the center.

The advertisement features a large oval logo at the top with the words "LAZER FRENZY" in a colorful, bubbly font, surrounded by a black border. Below the logo is a photograph of a young girl in a yellow shirt and blue pants playing in a laser maze. A black box with the text "All Ages" is overlaid on the image. The main text in the center reads "AMERICA'S BEST LASER MAZE" in large, bold, green and red letters, with "FINANCING AVAILABLE" in smaller text below it. Another black box with the text "Great ROI" is overlaid on the image. At the bottom, a large star-shaped graphic contains the text "CALL 1-877-843-6348 WE DO IT ALL". Below that is a white box with the website "THEWOWEFFECT.com" and the text "by Creative Works".

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"When we installed them in 2003, they were the talk of the town," he said. "They were a huge hit. We were just trying to do a new attraction, but it's also been a sustaining attraction. Every year since we've had them, they've been just as popular as the first year."

One thing center managers advised, however, is to insure there is a technician available to maintain the cars and keep them running at all times. The loss of one car means the loss of that car's revenue.

"They're a great attraction, but like all operational equipment they need preventive maintenance," Richardson said. "It doesn't do any good to have them not working. We have seven bumper cars



Bumper cars can be part of a package deal of activities at Airways Lanes. The attraction sold hundreds of special combo offers this spring.

and we've had good success with keeping them running."

In the end, experienced general managers who have installed bumper cars at their bowling centers repeatedly say the capital investment and profits in relation to the small amount of space needed is a great ROI and well worth the money.

"The investment pays off in a short period of time," Short said. "They're not gas-powered, they're electric, so you're not paying for gas. They don't take up a whole lot of space. You just need to grease them up, and keep the area clean. It's a good attraction. It's a win-win situation, it really is." ☐

(All of the centers interviewed for this story are customers of Ride Development Company (RDC) in Independence, Ore. The company can be reached by calling 503-606-4438, emailing sales@bumpercar.com or visiting www.bumpercar.com.)



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Spreading the Word: Strategies to Promote Bumper Cars

When it comes to promoting bumper cars in bowling alleys, Don Fazio said it's pretty easy.

"When people walk in, they see them, and that's all that's needed," the co-owner of Triad Lanes in Greensboro, N.C., said. "It's part of the package. We put it on all of our birthday package flyers and it's highlighted on our website."

Marc Wiese, the general manager at Airways Lanes in Portage, Mich., said he's been successful in marketing the bumper cars in conjunction with other attractions at his bowling center with a \$16 promotional offer. In March, Wiese said the center sold between 800 and 900 packages from the promotion.

"When you give people the option to do different things, they'll respond," he said. "Think of it as a one-stop shopping for fun."



A child enjoys a bumper car ride at Airways Lanes.

The center's general manager said it has been successful selling promotional packages that include bumper cars and other activities.

Frederick Richardson, the general manager at Brunswick Zone XL in Brooklyn Park, Minn., said the promotion of the bumper cars is all about the ambiance and sound at the bowling center. And a little word of mouth doesn't hurt either.

"You can just go over to a handful of kids and ask them if they want to ride the bumper cars," he said. "Then you start them up on a busy Saturday afternoon, and watch them all come running."