



HOTEL & LEISURE ADVISORS

Trends in Social Entertainment Venues

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Over the past several years our consultancy has been asked to explore social entertainment options that enhance a patron's experience whether at a resort, restaurant, casino, or mixed-use development. The trends of what's hot and innovative always ignites the discussion. The evolution of social entertainment involves an innovative mix of activities, culinary, and entertainment value differentiation in a marketplace that is rapidly changing through the innovative use of technology.

Immersive Entertainment

A leading trend is the concept of immersive entertainment, which is built on a foundation of virtual reality (VR) technology. The cost of VR technology is relatively expensive, and the VR arcade concept was born to give the masses an opportunity to experience VR without having to invest in headsets, controllers, computer upgrades, etc. VR arcades deliver immersive entertainment experiences that are controlled by the user, content-rich, and can be manipulated into different realities. VR arcades have established themselves in Asia with more than 3,000 in China alone. Recent examples of VR arcades include EXA Global's SetiaWalk Outpost in Puchong, Malaysia, that opened in June 2017. This VR theme park offers a multiplayer free roaming VR experience in what EXA Global calls a "hyper-reality family entertainment center." In August 2017, a 14,200-square-foot urban VR theme park opened in Incheon, South Korea. Known as Monster VR, the theme park offers four zones of activities, including space travel, car racing, shooting, and bobsleigh. Zero Latency (North Melbourne, Victoria, Australia) opened in 2016 and is a 2,000-square-foot, multi-player, free-roam VR experience offering four games with a maximum of six to eight players.

In 2016, Canadian-based Ctrl V opened the first VR arcade in North America, with its flagship location in Waterloo, Ontario. Ctrl V has 11 arcades throughout Ontario, Alberta, and opened its first U.S. arcade in Howell, New Jersey, earlier this summer. This VR arcade offers more than 50 games, including a dozen multiplayer games. The arcade is a room-scale facility utilizing the HTC Vive headset with 16 rooms available for play. The words "room-scale" refer to a VR system that tracks the user's real-life motion within a space. This level of VR experience is a step up from a stationary VR experience in which the user controls their movements via an input device.

A step beyond room-scale VR experiences is full dive or total immersion VR experiences. These facilities provide another level of immersive experiences that achieve heart-pounding entertainment. THE VOID is a hyper-reality experience where the interactions between people and digital reality are physical. Physical stages are constructed and then enhanced with digital content. At its New York City location, guests can experience getting slimed with THE VOID *Ghostbusters: Dimension* experience at Madame Tussauds. This type of VR fully immersive experience uses technology that surpasses the headset and hand-controlled tethered operations of most VR arcades.

Whether a patron uses just a headset and controller, or a full bodysuit for whole body immersion, VR technology is advancing at a rapid pace. The VR experience can take place in a simple 10' x 10' room or within a complex stage set with walls, doors, and other physical sensory attributes like fans and odors. These playgrounds, when combined with gallery areas serving food and drink to guests while observing the participants, makes for an ideal evening of social entertainment.

More than just Bowling

The quintessential social gathering space for active patrons has been the sport of bowling. Spanning myriad decades, the evolution of the sport has raised its offerings to stay relevant with today's consumer. From the bowling alleys of the '50s to the larger bowling centers of the '80s and '90s to the boutique experiential bowling of today, the development of activity and technology within this social space has been exponential. Social entertainment venues such as Main Event Entertainment, Lucky Strike Social, Splitsville, and Punch Bowl Social have taken the activity of bowling and repackaged the experience with scratch-kitchen cuisine including craft cocktails and brews. Activities such as indoor karting, laser tag, and karaoke rooms are common additions to a bowling venue's entertainment offerings. This trend is not subsiding anytime soon, and we anticipate a continued expansion of entertainment offerings built on a foundation of the social bowling experience.

Tapping into Nostalgia

Retro arcade machines such as pinball and video cabinets are finding their way into mainstream culture once again. Popular in the late '70s and '80s, video arcades appealed to the Gen Xers as they were growing up. Now their children are rediscovering the excitement of blasting through asteroids, jousting on the backs of flying ostriches, or saving the world from space invaders. With money in their pockets, reliving their childhood experiences is a means of release and social entertainment. But the money is not for the games. With complimentary game play, the key revenue driver is serving themed cocktails and craft brews. The 16-Bit Bar + Arcades in Cleveland, Columbus, and Cincinnati cater to a wide range of patrons. With '80s imagery everywhere, you cannot help but feel nostalgic when stepping through the door. Similarly, its sister company, Pins Mechanical Company in Columbus, offers eight lanes of old-school duckpin bowling in addition to a wide selection of pinball. Foosball, ping pong, and giant Jenga round out social activities in this retro venue.

Technology Hybrids

You can do crazy things with a microchip – say, for instance, putting it into a golf ball. Topgolf “bridges the gap between the traditional driving range and a favorite neighborhood hangout.” Topgolf (established in 2000) has 32 locations in the United States and United Kingdom with 16 in the pipeline. Their tag line – “The Ultimate in Golf, Games, Food and Fun” – fulfills the brand promise with its focus on social interaction. A typical Topgolf facility offers 102 all-weather, driving range bays in a 65,000-square-foot building. The complex allows patrons to hone their golf skills while enjoying upscale food and beverages through multiple bars, a full-service restaurant, rooftop terrace, and private meeting and event space. Computerized golf games are played with dartboard-like targets scattered throughout the 240-yard field. The bays hold up to six players. Additional social games such as billiards and shuffleboard throughout the facility help reinforce the neighborhood hangout aspect of the venue. Competition for the Topgolf concept is growing. The first 85-suite Drive Shack is scheduled to open in early 2018 in Orlando, Florida. In May 2017, Drive Shack announced plans for its second location in Richmond, Virginia.

Golf simulators have been around for more than four decades. They started out as practice swing facilities. Now the technology is being used in a social environment. Like Topgolf, golf simulators are opening the game of golf to a new demographic, who have neither the time nor the money to play 18 holes on a Saturday morning. In addition, simulators allow golfers to play top courses throughout the world. Earlier this year, a golf entertainment concept with long-game simulators and short-game live putting opened in Santa Ana, California called NextLinks by REALiTEE Golf. The next evolution of this concept is REALiTEE Golf that combines the best of both worlds, with both simulators and live play areas for shots up to 40 yards. You can play an 18-hole round in about 90 minutes, regardless of the weather, and you don't have to worry about someone playing through. A tee shot is driven from a TruGolf simulator, then the golfer finishes the hole with live play from the designated drive location (laser identified of course), all under one roof. The first REALiTEE Golf is scheduled to open late 2017 at the Lummi Nation's Silver Reef Casino in Ferndale, Washington. This concept reinforces the hybrid nature of golf entertainment as a social activity combining technology and active participation.

Reinvention of Old Standards

First to the industry, well-known brands require the necessary rethinking to remain relevant in today's market. For example, the sun is setting on the days of the animatronic Chuck-E-Cheese band. That amazing robotic sound and light show with song and dance that entertained generations of young kids since 1977 is being retired. CEC Entertainment recently unveiled its new family entertainment center renovation concept in Stone Oak, Texas. While still kid-focused, the brand is appealing to parents through a new display kitchen and revised menu, elevating its food offerings in a more contemporary restaurant setting. Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) wristband technologies have replaced game tokens. But not to worry, you can still catch Chuck E Cheese engaging kids on the hour partying on a newly designed lighted dance floor.

CEC Entertainment is not the only company evolving its concept. In 2014 Dave & Buster's launched its trademark "Eat, Drink, Play & Watch Sports" to shift its brand proposition beyond the restaurant-arcade concept. By incorporating D&B Sports, the goal is to brand Dave and Buster's as "the best place to watch sports" and the "only place to watch the games and play the games." The company understands its primary patrons are men between 21 and 39 and has continued to reinvent its brand to meet the demands of its consumer demographic.

Initially opened in 2003, Kings Bowl America (now with 10 locations in Massachusetts, Tennessee, North Carolina, Illinois and Florida) recently announced the chain's rebranding toward more of an adult playground. Kings' mission is to provide the premier social gaming and entertainment experience in a fun, clean, and safe environment. Kings has raised its culinary offerings to a from-scratch menu, added live music venues, private screening studios, karaoke suites, and social table games to several of its facilities. Seaport Kings, opening in October 2017, will profile the new logo, look, and feel of the Kings entertainment venues, which will include a barcade, air hockey, pinball, Draft Room sports bar, and private King Pin bowling room.

Changing expectations

A key theme that runs through these trend-setting social experiences is next-level food and beverage. The days of a hot dog served from a roller grill and watered down draft beer is gone. Consumer expectations for these venues are high. Unique, from-scratch, epicurean

cuisine paired with hand-crafted or artisan beverages is now the norm. In addition, social entertainment owners are more forward thinking in terms of revenue streams. Complimentary game play (shuffleboard, cornhole, giant Jenga, video games, etc.) keeps patrons engaged and returning, all while increasing per capita food and beverage and other activity spends.

As hospitality consultants, analyzing trends in how consumers are spending their entertainment dollars affords H&LA the opportunity to be connected to a wide range of industry concepts and attractions. We understand not all concepts are viable for every venue, and some outperform others. Whatever your vision, H&LA can assist in determining the correct mix of innovative and trending social entertainment activities for your development project.

Author

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