

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER THE WOW

HOW NEW ATTRACTIONS AFFECT THE WHOLE CENTER

By Brandon Willey

A new experience can look exciting on a trade show floor or at a competitor's venue across town and still feel completely disconnected once it is dropped into your location.

Most of us agree that social entertainment attractions, from augmented darts and sports simulators to karaoke pods and immersive arenas can extend dwell time, support food and beverage sales, and broaden a center's appeal.

But one of the bigger questions when considering a new attraction is how it fits into the experience already around it. Each addition needs a purpose within the larger guest journey and a role that makes sense with traffic flow, food and beverage, customer mix, and the center's overall identity. Those are the things that matter long after the trade show excitement wears off.

WHAT SHOULD IT DO?

It is easy to see a popular new concept and immediately start thinking about where it could fit. A better starting point is the guest behavior you want to create. The goal may be to keep bowling guests another hour, give groups something to do while waiting for lanes, increase adult evening traffic, or add bookable inventory for corporate outings and slower bowling periods.

DIFFERENT ATTRACTIONS SERVE THOSE GOALS DIFFERENTLY.

- **A sports simulator can work as a longer-duration, reservable experience for small groups.**
- **Augmented darts or shuffleboard may work better as casual entertainment near the bar.**
- **Karaoke pods can create a separate reason to visit and reach guests who might not otherwise spend an evening at a bowling center.**

What matters when choosing an attraction is whether it creates the kind of guest behavior you're looking for.

Existing guest mix, busy and slow dayparts, and gaps in the current entertainment mix provide a more useful filter than what happens to be drawing a crowd at an industry show. The question is whether the concept fits the way guests already use the center or creates a specific new reason for them to visit.

Looking at when the center has excess capacity can also clarify whether the attraction is meant to solve a daypart problem, add a new audience, or simply give current guests another reason to stay.

WHERE WILL PEOPLE GO?

Once an attraction makes sense strategically, placement becomes the next important decision.

Social entertainment naturally draws more than the people playing. Friends gather around, spectators stop to watch, drinks collect on nearby tables, and groups linger before and after their turn. Put all of that activity directly in a major traffic path and it can quickly become an operational problem on a busy Saturday night.

Servers carrying trays should not have to weave through spectators, and guests heading to the restroom should not have to cross a simulator waiting area. Waiting groups need somewhere to stand without blocking the attraction or the path around it. These details become more noticeable when several activities are busy at once.

At the same time, visibility can help sell the experience.

Someone watching a group play augmented darts or compete in an immersive arena may decide to try it next. The challenge is giving the attraction enough exposure to create interest without allowing the crowd around it to interfere with the rest of the center. If spectators help sell the attraction, that sightline has value too.

WILL IT DRIVE ANOTHER SALE?

Can guests comfortably eat or drink while they play? Can servers reach them without disrupting the activity? Is there a natural place for drinks or shared plates? Those details help determine whether an attraction can generate spending beyond its own price of admission.



Darts and shuffleboard naturally leave room for conversation and ordering between turns. A more immersive attraction may hold guests for 30 or 45 minutes without another purchase. In that case, the attraction may need to carry more of the revenue burden itself. The difference matters when comparing two concepts that may look equally busy on the surface.

Offering packages between attractions can connect the pieces. Darts and drinks, simulator time and appetizers, or bowling paired with social games and food can turn separate purchases into a longer visit and make the attraction part of the broader experience.

DOES IT FEEL LIKE YOU?

The attraction also has to fit the center around it. An adult-oriented concept with a strong cocktail program may integrate karaoke pods naturally, while the same product could feel disconnected in a traditional family center. A large immersive arena may suit a technology-forward destination but overwhelm a smaller local venue.

Lighting, furniture, graphics, music, technology, service style, and the surrounding environment all affect whether the new experience feels like it belongs. Guests may never analyze those details, but they notice when something feels like it fits and when it looks like it was simply dropped into an available space. That makes integration more than a design question. The attraction is also making a statement about who the center is trying to attract and what kind of visit it wants to create.

WHAT WILL IT TAKE TO RUN?

Even relatively simple experiences can add staffing, training, cleaning, reset time, maintenance, reservation management, POS integration, guest instruction, and, in some cases, alcohol supervision or additional safety procedures. Those requirements matter before the first dollar of attraction revenue is counted because they affect how easily the experience can operate during a busy shift.

Axe throwing may require trained employees, safety briefings, lane monitoring, equipment inspections, target maintenance and clear alcohol policies. Technology-driven attractions bring different demands, including projectors, tracking systems, sensors, computers, and specialized software that can create additional maintenance and downtime.

Throughput deserves the same scrutiny.

A high-ticket attraction can look attractive based on its hourly price, but limited capacity or significant reset time may reduce revenue per square foot. A lower-priced attraction with higher utilization can sometimes produce stronger results.

Keep in mind that vendor capacity numbers are a starting point; real-world utilization, staffing, maintenance, and demand by daypart belong in the financial model.

That makes throughput less about the posted hourly price and more about how many paying groups can actually move through the space during a normal shift. Reset time, instruction, reservations, and downtime all change the math.

DOES IT ALL WORK TOGETHER?

Social entertainment can broaden a bowling center's appeal when the pieces support one another. Each addition works harder when it supports the audience the center wants, fits the traffic flow and food and beverage program, and feels consistent with the rest of the business.

The strongest mix lets bowling, social games, food, beverages, arcade play, and gathering spaces each serve a clear purpose during the same visit. When those pieces connect, guests can move easily from one experience to the next and have more reasons to stay longer.



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