

Go-Karts can be your Silver Lining!

By Peter F. Olesen, P.E.

For more than 34 years I've been visiting existing go-kart tracks throughout the country. In talking to countless operators, track staff, kart riders and spectators it is surprising how few people, other than operators, recognize the overall benefits concession go-karting brings to the individual facility. For more than 50 years, go-kart tracks have demonstrated the ability to draw people from further away than any other family entertainment center attraction. They have successfully evolved from early limited and poorly maintained facilities into modern, well equipped and maintained family oriented attractions.

Credit an industry that took control of its destiny by banding together and establishing safety criteria for both kart and track design. For the past 25 plus years I've had the opportunity to be an active participant along with other designers and go-kart manufacturers in the karting industry's reinventing itself by creating a much safer environment for its guests, establishing standards for the design and manufacture of safer go-karts, as well as the design and construction of go-kart tracks and related facilities (ASTM). This has resulted in the industry's becoming the safe, entertaining and very family oriented industry it is today. Credit should go to the owners and operators of the facilities that accepted and insisted on these new standards. Credit also should go to those forward thinking States that also adopted these new standards.

The quality and safety of modern go-karts coupled with greatly improved track geometrics and safety barrier systems have made them family and adult favorites. The fact that they draw people from much further distances (bringing guests that will also utilize the other attractions and amenities of the facility becomes the "frosting on the cake.")

Go-kart popularity spans the country from coast to coast, Frost Belt and Sun Belt locations alike. It has also moved across the globe and continues to grow in popularity.

Take a close look at the overall family entertainment industry, almost every venue requires major upgrades, changes in concept and often complete replacement in order to remain current and viable over time. In some instances this can occur after only a few years or less.

The major component of go-karting is the initial cost of construction of the track itself. Properly designed, constructed and maintained, the physical plant can remain viable for 30 to 40 years without requiring replacement. Karts can wear out over time, even with good maintenance, but their cost relative to return on investment is low.

With the broad age demographic, those facilities that capitalize by creative marketing are seeing expanding revenues and growing numbers of return guests. Others, failing to fully capitalize on the potential, fail to reap the rewards.

We see more and more indoor facilities adding go-karting to their attraction line-up because of the market realities. Go-karts are a participatory attraction in that the guests control their vehicle and make their own decisions. This has a great appeal to the young and old alike.

A lot of time and effort has and continues to be, to incorporate socialization into the mix, creating ways to modify many recreational attractions into a more casual and secondary element of the entertainment experience. Bowling in particular is morphing into a social environment with the bowling becoming secondary to food, drink and social interaction.

The current socialization movement in the entertainment industry is definitely targeted to the adult market, centering on expanding the food and beverage sales. This results in more of toleration, and in some cases elimination of the other family elements rather than celebrating them. This makes economic sense for those that see adults as their primary market. These facilities are adult entertainment centers. Go-karts have proven to be successful components in these facilities as well.

The family market is alive and real and in many areas the only market that is actually way under served. Keep in mind the fact that most family entertainment dollars are still targeted toward the children and teenagers, in one form or another. The attendance and revenue volumes realized by theme parks and countless family entertainment centers, demonstrate this very well.

Go-karting addresses that segment of the market that is seeking to express their individuality rather than satisfy their palate and social conscience. It is a form of participatory entertainment that spans a very large demographic from middle school students to senior citizens.

Some markets can definitely support facilities that address both the adult and family segments. The challenge is in the actual configuration of the physical plant and the specific elements to be included. Some current operations that address both elements have been very successful, while others continue to stumble in establishing a mix that works.

The challenges are different. Should you determine you want to create a dual target market, make certain you select your design team carefully thoroughly, Your design team needs a solid background in all elements to be included, to avoid creating a one-sided product that cannot deliver the results you seek.

Can go-karts fall on their face, yes! This can happen when the facility is placed in an already over served market, when more attention is given to cost than to addressing the greater expectations of the target market, when staff is not trained to be guest friendly and the equipment and facility are poorly maintained. This can happen when the people that create, design, construct and operate go-kart venues fail to recognize the fact that guest expectations are higher than ever. "Build it and the will come" worked in "Field of Dreams" because it was written into the script. Today's go-kart fans want more than a leisurely ride around a boring track.

Making certain that you properly design, build, market and operate your facility will result in your guests wanting to come again and again. Your entire process should be targeted to building an attraction that generates an entertaining and exciting experience. The process should also include the creation of an overall appealing site environment and a feeling of being a guest, not a customer. Success takes planning and effort, but the rewards justify it.

Future success cannot be based solely on yesterday's designs and guest experiences. It will not happen with lack luster, boring rides, and bad customer relations. The experience begins with the arrival at the facility, the physical condition of the parking lot, building, staff attitude, condition of the equipment and continues with the actual driving experience on the track.

Take the time to be certain you will be building dreams not constructing nightmares. Recognize the fact that not every design or track designer is equal. The finished product determines your ultimate success or mediocrity. Remember, Architects are not track designers and design-build firms often have their own profit oriented motivations with respect to methods of construction and specific construction materials, not always to the benefit of the finished product.

The potential for great success is high, if you do it correctly. The investment in the track is not a small one, but it has a long potential life span, greatly reducing its impact at any single moment of time. Conversely, failing to use sound design and construction methods can result in less than desirable revenues, increased maintenance costs or possible premature replacement.

Consider your options carefully. Is there a potential for increased attendance and resulting revenues at your specific site. Existing quality completion can alter the decision. This will take a serious evaluation, not a quick reaction. When in doubt it may be wise to seek input from others more experienced in the industry.

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