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BOWLING INDUSTRY

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THE WORLD'S ONLY MAGAZINE DEVOTED EXCLUSIVELY TO THE BUSINESS OF BOWLING

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MEMBER AND/OR SUPPORTER OF:





■ By Fred Groh

It's steep when you're coming into bowling from movies.

When it comes to the prospects for bowling, Jeff Benson is as sunny as a summer sky in Texas, which happens to be his home state. "I think bowling is going to change our life," he says. "For the better."

When we chatted, Benson was just days away from breaking ground on a Texas-sized FEC—a whopping 90,000 square feet—in Odessa, about 330 miles west of Dallas. It will have 18 lanes when it opens in the fall of 2016. He was early in the work of adding to his FEC in Midland, 20 miles from Odessa, in order to install at least 12; he'd prefer 20 but that will depend on cost estimates. His third store, in Copperas Cove (Killeen/Ft. Hood), has no plans for bowling, but Benson is leaving the possibility open.

"With *American Sniper* and *50 Shades of Grey* and *Furious 7*, we had a hit every month so far this spring but that's not typical. You're super busy in the summer, you're super busy at the holidays and you're not as busy in the fall and spring. So the seasonality of the bowling business matches up almost perfectly with the seasonality of the movie business; they work opposites of each other.

"I think [bowling is] also going to help drive weekday attendance to us. We may do 3,000 people [movies] on a typical Saturday but a typical Monday is 500."

Films are on Benson's mind at all three of his locations because he's been in the exhibition business since 1998. A CPA by trade, he'd been engaged for a theater audit. He ended up quitting his CPA firm the day he returned from his honeymoon because he'd been approved for his first movie theater loan while he and his wife were away.

"It gets in your blood," he says about the entertainment business. "It's more fun than being a CPA doing books for some

client. I've always been very hands-on. I used to work on my car and I've remodeled rent houses, so owning a building and having equipment that breaks is more my cup of tea, even though I was a good CPA and I love numbers. I like my own numbers now rather than somebody else's."

Benson had an idea, fresh in the late '90s, of pairing movies with dining. Going to all-reserved seating, "fat seats"—trade lingo for recliners with a footrest—an extended menu including liquor, and waitstaff service in the auditorium, Benson developed a chain he called Movie Tavern. In seven years, including a partnership with Cinemark, the nation's third largest theater chain, Movie Tavern grew to 110 screens in 14 units in five states.

Benson sold out to his partner in 2008 and started all over. He calls the new and current concept Cinergy—pronounced the same as 'synergy,' which, he'll tell you, means making a whole that is more than all its parts. As in movies plus games plus laser tag plus climbing wall plus ropes course, and now bowling, all together adding up to something more than they are individually.

"There's a lot of synergy with our Cinergy concept," he says seriously. "You get a lot of moviegoers coming and some of them want to stay and play games and some of them want to bowl and some will run over and just have a beer. You put the bowling and the FEC component together with the theater and I think it really is a lot more than just the sum of the parts."

An accidental sum, in the beginning.

His Copperas Cove location was a 38,000-square-foot building the city had constructed on spec, standing empty for six years. Benson laid out the building for eight movie screens and wound up with a wing on each side of the lobby.

"I wasn't quite sure what to do with them when I put the contract on the building. I went to IAAPA that fall, 2008, and I landed on laser tag and video games. I put laser tag on the left side and video games on the right and unbeknownst to me, I [was] in the family entertainment center business. I've had to spend the last six years figuring out how [to] manage those operations," he says with an audible smile.



Bowling wasn't in the picture then, but Neil





The Bensons are proud of their accomplishments.

Hupfauer was. He was heading Main Event, a spectacularly successful FEC chain in the state, whose first link he had opened in 1998. The two met when Hupfauer signed on to do a Main Event in Frisco, TX, where a developer was trying to talk Benson into doing a Movie Tavern. Wanting to learn more about the area and Main Event, Benson called and they had lunch.

"We struck up a friendship from then," Hupfauer says.

When Benson opened his theater in Copperas Cove, with the laser tag and the video games, creating "a catastrophe," Hupfauer says, he was there for Benson.

"They shoehorned the laser tag arena in. They didn't run scheduled events. They didn't have their games maintained properly. They were doing what I would term virtually no business," Hupfauer reports. "But then, he learns quick. Smart as a whip."

Benson returns the compliment. "Brilliant man. It was really his and Main Event's influence that made me realize we're missing a big attraction by not having bowling.

"Our theaters do phenomenal numbers, but I think we'd utilize the games and the laser tag and the ropes course and the FEC more if we had bowling, because bowling is there all day every day, we can schedule it, and I think we'll do a whole lot more parties because of that. A lot more company parties too. As much as laser tag and the ropes course are attractions, they are not really anchor attractions. The bowling alley is going to be [a] second big anchor attraction."

Benson was noting the difficulty of scheduling parties at a movie theater. The films change often, with differing run times, making it hard for parents to plan events for their children. No such problem with bowling parties.



From Hupfauer's 20 years in bowling and the success of Main Event—a model FEC by anyone's standard—Benson learned "facilities first. You've got to maintain your facility," he stresses. "You don't maintain your facility, the physical plant, the games, making sure you don't have bowling lanes down—if you let it get run down, if you're got obsolete equipment, you're just not going to get top dollar on revenue."

He took lessons from Hupfauer in floor planning, particularly at the Midland location. Hupfauer calls layout a matter of "extreme details" when it's done right, having to combine what managers require to run the place efficiently and what employees need to provide good customer service.

Benson also picked up on what he calls "the Disney effect." "You want to make sure that everything, even though behind the scenes it might be rough, you want everything for the customer to look like it's brand new, fresh, shiny. Really, a focus on operations."

Hupfauer nods.

"A lot of operational details are required in a family entertainment center that are not required in the movie business. Movies are fairly simple. You sell a ticket, you give them something to drink and then the customer disappears for 2½ hours. So as long as you've got control of the tickets, you're getting your cash, and then you just have to worry about the concession counter."

The customer-centric orientation an FEC requires was the steepest part of Benson's learning curve. He says the movie exhibition business has "no customer service.

"Come in, order a ticket from a pimple-faced teenager behind bullet-proof glass—there's customer service for you," he adds sarcastically, "wait for a long time at a concession stand to be served a soda pop and popcorn and maybe a hot dog, if they've got an extensive menu. Go to your movie, watch the movie, leave. You had virtually zero customer-service interaction with anybody."

Benson is still learning that part of the curve, "sucking up as much knowledge as we can get." He's built a training program, a lot of it by trial-and-error, spends an entire week at IAAPA every year with selected staff, joins "all the industry associations" and uses customer-

The Cinergy game room.



service specialists in bowling.

"You are going to be ordering, hopefully, a full meal when you get to the [theater] counter. We've got to have knowledgeable people about the menu. Hopefully you're going to play games and those games have to work. We've got a full-blown redemption room, so there's people in there to help you pick out your prizes. We've got people giving briefing and refereeing in the laser tag, attendants up on the ropes course to help you get through any of the difficult obstacles [and] make sure you're safe. It hasn't been easy. We've certainly gone through a lot of growth."



Benson and Hupfauer are both excited about the results so far. Cinergy is a distinctive concept in "marrying" movies and FEC, Hupfauer judges, and Benson "a

good all-around guy" to manage it. "Jeff went to one-price drinks [and] self-serve refills before anybody else ever thought about it. All-reservation seating. Serving meals to every theater. He's just not afraid to be at the forefront.

"There's a lot of areas where there is a movie theater located next to or across the street from a family entertainment center," Hupfauer observes. "There is some synergy there, but putting them under one roof, Jeff has taken on a big challenge because it's difficult, very difficult, to run a building that big with that many customers"—as many as 6,000 for the movies at any one Cinergy on a good day—"that many employees. But it's working exceptionally well in Midland and we think it's going to work great in Odessa."

Benson's "sweet spot" is a market with 150,000-250,000 "that doesn't have much" in the way of family entertainment facilities, preferably an older movie complex. He looks at average household income when he investigates a location, because he wants customers who can drop \$20 per person per visit, and he'd like customers younger than 40 in order to snag the kids, but otherwise Cinergy appeals across the age range. Who doesn't like movies?

He's not chained to Texas, though.

"After working on this concept really hard for the last four years or so, we feel comfortable that we can control this beast, which is kind of what it is to operate, from afar. I feel like we can add a couple of these entertainment centers a year, even though I prefer to stay local. It's a heck of a lot easier to operate if they're not horribly far away—outside of driving distance—but if it's the right opportunity, I'm not against going outside of the great state of Texas." ♦

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