



GUEST SERVICES



Welcoming customers at Star Lanes Polaris. The center is managed by Lucky Strike.

NEWBIE'S BEST BUD

Just starting in bowling? Roll out quickly with a management partner.

By Robert Sax

The current renaissance of bowling has brought innovative concepts, fresh brands and new customers to the industry. It has also attracted would-be proprietors who have no experience running a bowling center. How can a neophyte get ahead of the learning curve and succeed in a complicated business? One effective approach is to team up with an experienced management company that will run the center for you.

That approach has worked well for Polaris Entertainment Partners, which owns Star Lanes Polaris, an FEC near Columbus, OH. The company is a family affair run by brothers Doug and Jeff Mechling and their father, Mike. Doug is an experienced retail contractor, Jeff is a 20-year veteran of the restaurant business, and Mike is a retired financial analyst, so they have a great deal of business savvy between them.

In early 2008, the Mechlings were inspired by the success of Lucky Strike Lanes and its boutique bowling concept. Doug knew it was

something that their home town of Columbus could really use. "In Columbus we had bowling alleys that were old and hadn't been renovated in quite some time. When I saw something that was leading a renaissance of bowling, it appealed to me," says Doug. "I knew it was something the Columbus market would embrace."

A few years later they found a promising location, a former Circuit City store on the perimeter of a suburban mall. The area offered a strong mix of corporate offices and apartment communities with a large pool of single young people. The Mechlings saw the potential for lots of corporate and young adult customers, and planned a center that would include dedicated rooms for business meetings and a private

OPERATIONS



The Mechling clan at Star Lanes Polaris: Jeff (left), Doug (third from left), and Mike (right), with consultant Jerry Merola of Amusement Entertainment Management.

bowling suite for special events.

At finance time, however, the banks were leery of the Mechlings' lack of experience in the bowling industry. "Lenders were asking us, 'What do you know about bowling?'," recalls Doug, and they were reluctant to finance the project. That's when their industry consultant, Jerry Merola of Amusement Entertainment Management,



Open-air feel at Mechling family's Star Lanes Polaris.



suggested a management company. "Jerry said, 'Bring in a seasoned operator, you work alongside them, and this will alleviate the fears of the lenders'," says Doug.

The Mechlings met with several potential providers, ultimately going with Lucky Strike Entertainment, owner and operator of the Lucky Strike chain of centers. They signed a management agreement with Lucky Strike and also licensed its "sister" brand, Star Lanes. The arrangement did the trick with the bank. "We had a very strong location, a strong format and a strong operator," says Doug. "It was what the landlord and the lender wanted to see, and that's what pushed us over the top."

It was Lucky Strike's first time as a management company, but with 20 of their own centers up and running, the company had lots of experience. "It's a fun business but it's a lot harder than it looks," says Steven Foster, CEO of Lucky Strike. "Polaris wanted expertise in all phases of running an FEC." While the Mechlings saw to the build-out of the site, Lucky Strike hired and trained staff, set up the operating systems and initiated the marketing program.

Foster still oversees the project, and two Lucky Strike executives, a regional director of operations and a national sales manager, are in regular contact with the Mechlings and their staff. "The relationship is strong," says Doug, but that's not to say that he leaves everything to Lucky Strike. "[We] try to play to the strengths of both sides. We complement each other well."

Polaris gives directives to Lucky Strike and is free to deviate from its programs. "We don't always go with the same sales promotions," says Doug, "and we also use a local firm for our marketing program."

