

## SCORING SUCCESS

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and Frank Seninsky



# Big Thrill Factory lives up to its name

On March 1, Big Thrill Factory (BTF) in Minnetonka, Minn., celebrated its second anniversary and had plenty to be excited about. In two short years, BTF has become a top destination for families, teens, and adults in the surrounding Minneapolis metropolitan area.

In *Play Meter's* November 2013 issue we covered the history and initial opening months with Barry Zelickson, President and Owner. What we want to know is: What's new? What's been successful? What have been the challenges?

### OPENING DAY 2013

BTF opened its doors March 1, 2013, and was hailed as one of the

best family entertainment centers (FECs) in the Americas. The 45,000-square-foot former K-Mart was an instant hit.

"BTF hosts parties, school events, field trips, and themed events, as well as a variety of ongoing promotions," said Barry. "We support the community and engage in charity work. We have been embraced by the community. It is my understanding that typically after the first year business drops, but we have seen sustained growth."

When the harsh Minnesota winter began to fade, BTF had a second grand opening, this time for the 14,000 square feet of outdoor attractions. In terms of revenue, during the summer

months miniature golf is the #1 attraction; during the fall and winter months laser tag is the #1 attraction.

### CONTINUING TO UPGRADE

With the continuing success of BTF through the first year, Barry felt the need to upgrade to keep the momentum going. "The games paid for themselves in less than one year," he said.

The first step Barry took was adding several of the hottest games that recently came into the market. With the help of Alpha-Omega Sales, which continued to review monthly game earnings, redemption/merchandise payout, redemption center payout, and overall function of the game room,



BTF and Alpha created a plan to trade in some of the lower earning games.

Some key additions were added, such as Harpoon Lagoon, Down the

Clown, and Whack N Win from ICE; Ticket Monster and Sink It Shootout two-player from Bay Tek Games; Monster Drop X-treme from Benchmark

Games; KC Cobra from Family Fun Companies; and Dead Storm Pirates Deluxe from Bandai Namco.

Striving to stay on top of the industry trends, BTF was far from done upgrading. The initial layout of the room left one under-utilized space: the entire area under the 18-foot-high ropes course. After extensive research Barry decided to add two new attractions: X-Rider Motion Theater from Simuline and Room Escape Adventures, themed as “Trapped in a Room with a Zombie.”

Both attractions were an instant success. X-Rider provided a rush for thrill seekers and “Trapped in a Room with a Zombie” allowed families, friends, and corporate crowds to have a bonding experience they would not soon forget. There are 12 “Trapped” shows per week and they are booked one month in advance, mostly online. Additional events were added, including date night, dinner shows, and painting classes with wine.

Barry said, “It’s not all about adding new attractions but rather keeping the customers entertained. We are always

## Big Thrill Factory Facts

Size: 45,000 square feet indoors and 14,000 square feet outdoors

Cost: \$4.2 Million

Seating: 75 inside, 120 outside

Food/Beverage: Gourmet dining with beer and wine

Dinner Shows

Painting classes with wine

### Indoor Attractions

Regulation Bowling: 8 lanes, QubicaAMF

Laser Tag: 30-player multilevel, Zone Nexus

Ballicity: 3 levels, PrimePlay

Blacklight Ropes Course: 7 poles, Ropes Courses Inc.

Bumper Cars: 8 units, Amusement Products

Time Freak: Art Attack

Arcade Games (70): Alpha-Omega Amusements & Sales

Trapped in a Room with a Zombie: Room Escape Adventures

X-Rider Motion Theater: Simuline

### Outdoor Attractions

18-Hole Miniature Golf: Cost of Wisconsin

Trampolines: Somersault

Climbing Wall: 3-story, Extreme Engineering

Spider Climb: 25 feet with Giant Slide, Extreme Engineering

Feasibility Study/Project Development/Set-Up/Training: Amusement Entertainment Management

Debit Card System: Embed



# History

looking for ways to bring in new people and engage the community. We don't just do it through attractions but through upgrading menu items and other package deals to give people more reasons to come back."

When it comes to marketing, the process is continuous. There is something going on every day. Daily deals are used to keep up weekday business. One deal that has worked well is unlimited bowling, laser tag, and one other event for \$15 from 8 pm to closing time.

Another is receiving a \$5 game card for each game of bowling purchased during certain hours. There are a series of events planned for every month. Halloween, for example, features a haunted walkway, trick or treating, and a costume contest. Very little is spent on print or television ads. Billboard advertising has worked well. Social media is a main priority.

## MOVING FORWARD

Barry is always focused on putting processes (systems) in place once they have been tried and make sense. Keeping the staff engaged is a key part.

The biggest struggle is the ebb and flow of the business (busy weekends and a slower week)," said Barry. "Keeping everyone excited is my most important job responsibility." His positive demeanor has helped create a positive culture. Barry has watched his team transition from eyes wide open to eyes focused and having fun.

In early 2010, Barry Zelickson had an idea to open an outdoor 18-hole miniature golf course and began visiting local entertainment sites. He saw other attractions that also piqued his interest and his vision started to grow.

Having a background in entertainment, as a former owner/operator of Spooky World, Barry understood he had to continue his research and education. According to Barry, Foundations Entertainment University (FEU) was a pivotal turning point.

"Although I had experience in an area of entertainment, I was not in the family entertainment center (FEC) business and the knowledge the presenters provided was invaluable," said Barry. "If I knew back when we first started visiting other entertainment centers what we learned after listening to the presenters, we would have looked at the centers in a much different way."

After attending FEU, Barry decided he was going to need an expert in the amusement industry to proceed with his vision. Barry retained Jerry Merola, Managing Partner of Amusement Entertainment Management (AEM), to complete a market feasibility study. "As a result, we were able to raise \$1.5 million in private capital and \$2.7 million in bank financing," said Barry. "The study also provided the foundation necessary to obtain backing by the Small Business Administration (SBA)."

Barry continued his partnership with AEM and had the company complete a Development Services Program, which took the project from concept to completion, through opening and beyond. It also included assistance in negotiating the lease, equipment procurement, design, integration, and development of the early stage marketing plan. The entire process took three years. Remember that financing was difficult to obtain during that time. It took nine months to find a lender and close the deal.

Barry continued, "There was a high learning curve. The team has done a great job adapting and finding the balance of running a business but making it a good time for the customer base."

Because of the family oriented way BTF management runs the facility, there has been relatively little turnover. "Only in the team member ranks has there been turnover," said Barry.

We are open seven days a week and it's a challenging business. There are a lot of great people on the staff and the staff more often grows than loses people. The last challenge has been finding a full time events person; we have

someone training right now. That is the last piece."

What does the future hold for BTF? Upgraded attractions, more new games, additional expansion?

Barry's first thought is to add additional "sound" zones now that he knows exactly where customers congregate most. An attraction rotation will most likely happen before year four. BTF has shown the willingness to stay on top of the industry and make the community a more fun place to live in.

"I'm continually impressed with Barry's ability to constantly reinvent the experience for guests, while expanding awareness of the brand throughout greater Minneapolis. He's a natural operator with an acute passion for the business and a clear sense of what needs to be done to achieve success," commented Jerry Merola of Amusement Entertainment Management (AEM).

In the end, Barry summed up the reason behind BTF's success: "We are in the business of fun and we make sure our guests are having fun." With a mission statement like that, BTF will surely continue to rank high on the scoring success ladder. For more information, visit ([www.bigthrillfactory.com](http://www.bigthrillfactory.com)). ▲



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