

Vending Times

Official Reprint

WEINER DISTRIBUTING Keeping Up With Latest Merchandiser Trends

By HANK SCHLESINGER

Operators have honed their prize management expertise since skill cranes gained popularity over 20 years ago. Considering how merchandise and games have evolved over the years, this is no small feat, and there is no substitute for experience. Chuck Weiner, Weiner Distributing Co. (Baltimore, MD), has been there from the start. A factory distributor and operator serving amusement parks, FECs and resort locations, Weiner has consistently and aggressively pushed the envelope on game merchandise nearly from the very start. “The first merchandisers we used were cranes; we believe in cranes,” said Weiner. “The crane experience relates to merchandisers. It is merchandise that drives the play.”

From the very start, Weiner was focused on the prizes, as well as the games themselves. A decade or more ago when Innovative Concepts in Entertainment rolled out its Cyclone redemption unit, he special-or-

dered a version that eliminated tickets altogether in favor of a single, highly coveted prize. “We had ICE take away the tickets, so there was just a jackpot play,” he explained. “Tamagotchis had come out and people had to have them. So that’s what we gave away with the Cyclone. We put a display inside the game with the Tamagotchis.”

Weiner’s success with the little electronic pets was only the beginning when it came to innovative prize offerings. “One of the gurus of the industry used to say, ‘You can-

not and will not put a prize worth more than \$10 in a machine.’ I looked at him and said, ‘Why the hell not?’”

Why the hell not, indeed. Prizes with high-perceived value attracted customers to the machines and prompted repeat plays. At times it seemed that operators’ creativity with merchandise was even outstripping the manufacturers’ creativity for creating games. However, sometimes they were in perfect sync. Such was the case with Sammy’s Sports Arena.

“With Sports Arena, the timing could not have been any better,” Weiner explained. “The piece came out while Beanie Babies were hot, while music was in its heyday with CDs, and Pokémon cards were hot. Between those couple of items and a handful of others, the merchandise was driving the market. As a result, the collections on Sports Arena were just phenomenal. That’s



THE GOODS: Chuck Weiner credits Stacker as one of the first merchandisers to use high-value prizes to drive players to the machines.

the piece that really catapulted everything, Sports Arena.”

The selection of items Weiner rattles off is not random. Sports Arena was capable of offering a wide variety of items with significant “gotta have it” appeal to a wide demographic, from pre-teens to adults. They were all items that fit perfectly into the unit. It was very much the “perfect storm” of a delivery system and trendy high-perceived value prizes.

Other games Weiner views as landmarks in the merchandiser segment are LAI’s Lighthouse and Stacker units. According to Weiner, one of the hottest pieces of merchandise he offered in the Lighthouse unit was a \$250 handheld videogame. “That experience told me that if you put the right prize in there, they’re going to stop and play,” he said.

Weiner credits the Stacker and Lighthouse with allowing for prizes with higher values. “It was the Stacker and the Lighthouse that allowed you to break from the mold,” he explained. “It allowed you to be more flexible with the prizes and make the leap to the \$300 prize. People say, ‘Wow, can I really win that?’ The Stacker and Light House gave you that ‘wow factor.’”

A newer merchandiser Weiner likes is Bay Tek’s Road Trip. A greatly scaled-down version of the company’s Big Bass Wheel and Big Bass Wheel Pro, the compact Road Trip features the same kind of skill wheel with a traveling theme that takes players through Chicago, Denver and Hollywood. “It’s a good piece and people like playing it,” he said “They like the play action of it. And the machine has a large, medium and small prize capability, where the Stacker just has the small and large. So, Road Trip gives you even more flexibility with prizes.”

DOLLAR VALUE, PERCEIVED VALUE

However, it isn’t dollar value alone that drives sales, Weiner is quick to point out. High-priced GPS units were a disappointing draw when he placed them in his machines. Conversely, during the introduction of Microsoft’s Xbox home videogame system, when the units were difficult to find, one of his operator customers got one for the sole purpose of offering it as a prize. “He put one in. You couldn’t get the thing in the store, but he had one in the machine,” Weiner recalled. “He went on eBay and paid twice as much as retail, just to have it in the machine.”

Today, as Weiner noted, prizes aren’t limited to young adult items targeted to the tween and teen demographic. The prizes have evolved in such a way that they attract increasingly sophisticated or older players. Over the years he’s offered iPods, UGG boots and even Coach handbags along with concert tickets, sports tickets, guitars, drum sets and the recently released Beatles: Rock Band home videogame. Of course, those items that don’t fit in the machine get a hang tag. “We have an art department that does hang tags for us. The winners can call an 800 number and arrange

for pick-up or we’ll have it shipped,” he said. “We ship prizes out to people via UPS.”

This merchandise expertise is a point of pride for Weiner. Not only does he see it as valuable when stocking machines in his own locations, but as an added value for his operator customers whom he regularly advises on merchandise selections.

So, how high can the dollar value of prizes go? Weiner likes to keep them below \$450. “If you have a hot item, you put it in the machine and percentage it correctly, then that’s what they’re going to play for,” he said. “It’s not just the price tag ... it’s the value to the customer. People like to play to win, but just putting things out there to win doesn’t make sense unless people want it.”