

IS BOWLING'S PAST GOLF'S FUTURE?



By Lorin Anderson, *Founder*

Fifty years ago there were 12,000 bowling alleys in the United States. Their business was all about leagues, consisting of players who signed up to participate at least once a week—for up to 30 weeks a year. It's not that way anymore. League play used to represent 70 percent of overall bowling participation—today it's down around

40 percent. Meanwhile the number of bowling centers has decreased to 5,500. The United States Bowling Congress reports that over the past 20 years the number of bowlers in leagues dropped 36 percent, from 4.1 to 2.6 million participants.

Demographics and shifts in usage patterns have been dramatic. Those league regulars were generally serious, committed bowlers who worked blue-collar jobs. Today the clientele is mostly occasional bowlers. They are typically white-collar and show up for an entertainment experience more than for competition. Twenty-five percent of all current bowlers come from households with more than \$100,000 in income. Nearly half of them (46 percent) are girls and women.

What has this meant to the operators of bowling alleys and what, perhaps, should those of us in the golf industry learn from bowling's recent history, as golf moves forward?

First, it's telling that the sport has seen a split (no pun intended) in how bowling centers target their customers. There is the fast-dying old-style bowling alley and there's the new, contemporary-design center. The latter includes more and better food-and-beverage options and it caters to open-play customers such as families and teen groups.

Indications are that bowling is gaining in popularity once again. This is a case of an industry adapting to change: Centers re-tooled to match the expectations of the clientele that's currently most interested in the game.

The most successful centers take F&B very seriously and usually have additional activities besides bowling. Some offer a destination restaurant that is popular even with non-bowlers. What this tells us is that demand for bowling is elastic, based upon the style and quality of the atmosphere.

A great example of adjusting to new consumer demand came years ago in Kansas City when a suburban bowling alley burned down. A consultant brought in to assist with the rebuild conducted research. It showed that the "blue-collar, beer-drinking male regulars" whom the owner considered his core market were outnumbered—by a group that was white-collar and 51 percent female. His redesign reflected this discovery: Art Deco decor, cocktail seating, large windows and an upscale menu saw business double after reopening. Sales of food and drink quadrupled and the center was able to charge a 35 percent premium for bowling over its competition.

What does all this mean for golf facilities? Golf has an elastic demand too. When we match the changing demographics and higher entertainment expectations to what golf has to offer, a rebirth of interest in the game can be seen.

It's all about matching your product to your audience—give people what they want and they'll be back for more. Topgolf and others have shown us the possibilities of matching golf to the entertainment and social wants of today's user, even as ball-hitting toward targets remains the centerpiece of the experience.

Those in golf who think like the owners of old-style bowling alleys will soon be dinosaurs. Those who match their offerings to the shifting market – as the new bowling centers have successfully done – will find new success. **PG**

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