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accelerates

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WORLD'S TALLEST TILT COASTER 'IRON RATTLER'



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An Oasis of Growth

The expansion era in the Middle East accelerates

COVER: Overhead of the Louvre Abu Dhabi's central dome.

PHOTO: LOUVRE ABU DHABI

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MARCH/APRIL 2026
VOLUME XLII • ISSUE 2

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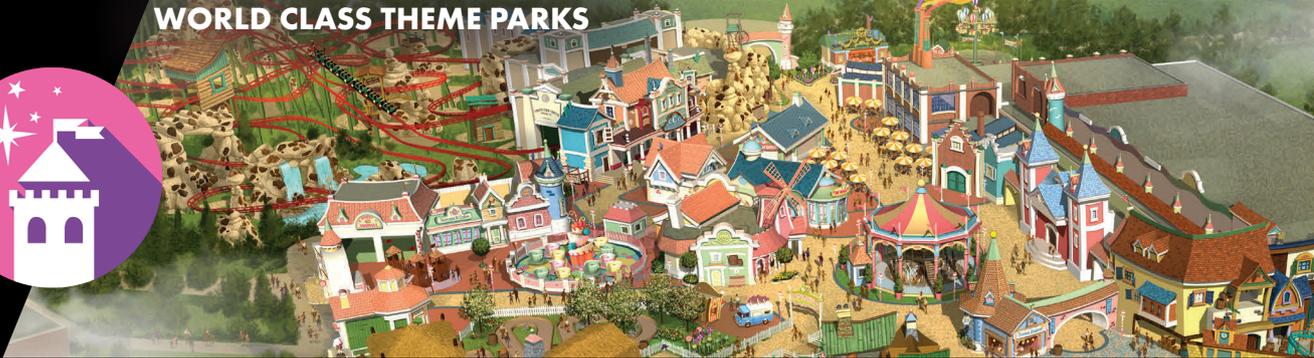


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WORLD CLASS THEME PARKS



AWARD-WINNING DARK RIDES



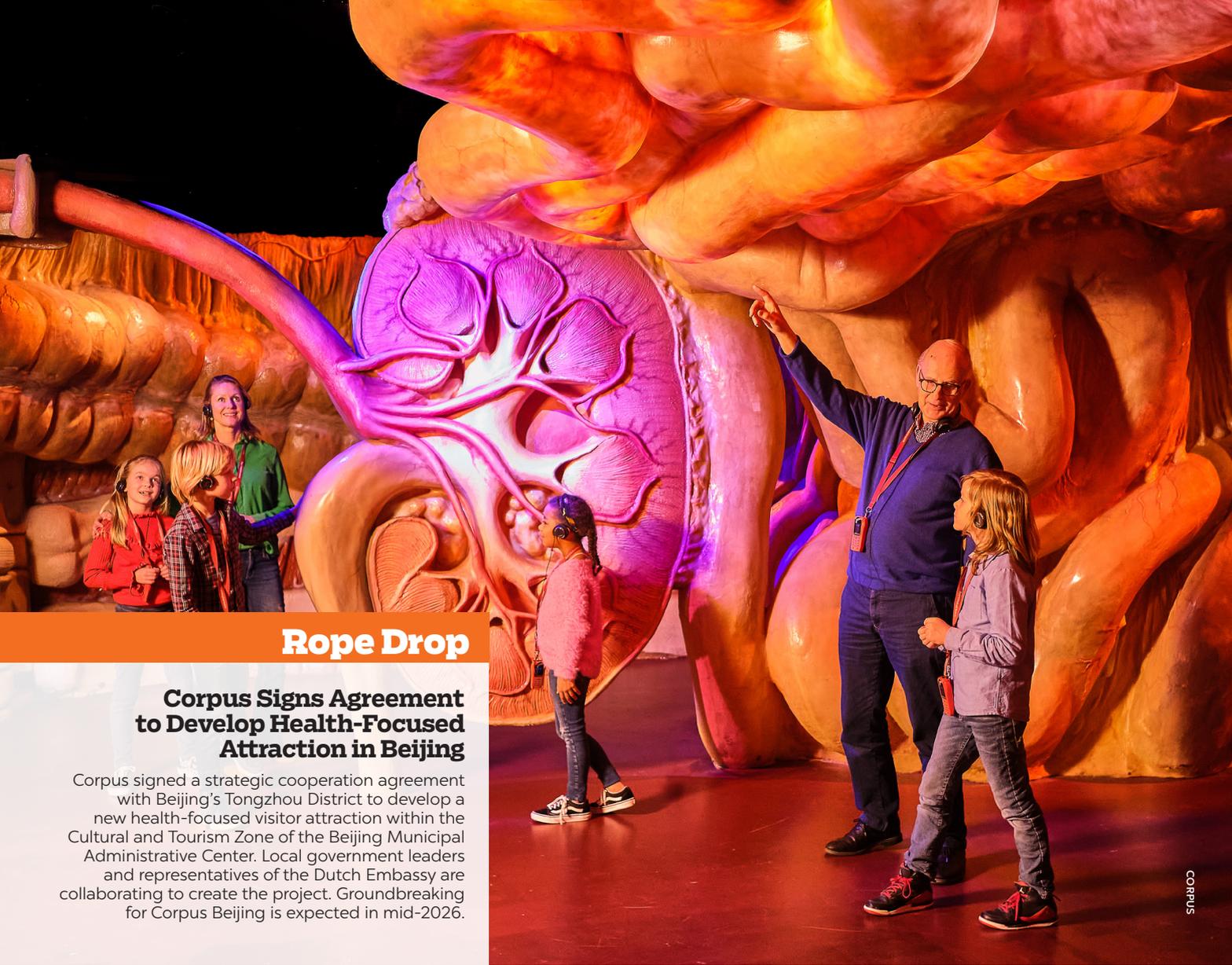
IMMERSIVE LANDS AND ATTRACTIONS



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CORPUS

Rope Drop

Corpus Signs Agreement to Develop Health-Focused Attraction in Beijing

Corpus signed a strategic cooperation agreement with Beijing's Tongzhou District to develop a new health-focused visitor attraction within the Cultural and Tourism Zone of the Beijing Municipal Administrative Center. Local government leaders and representatives of the Dutch Embassy are collaborating to create the project. Groundbreaking for Corpus Beijing is expected in mid-2026.

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Funworld (ISSN 08923752; mailed in Canada under IPM #0902179) is published bimonthly by IAAPA, 4155 West Taft Vineland Road, Orlando, FL 32837; phone: +1 321-319-7600. Periodicals postage paid at Orlando, FL, and additional offices.

The purpose, function, and nonprofit status of this organization have not changed during the preceding 12 months.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Funworld, 4155 West Taft Vineland Road, Orlando, FL 32837. ©2026 IAAPA. No material or part thereof may be reproduced or printed without the written consent of IAAPA. Ride-along may be enclosed.

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radatzmagic.com



Launch

IAAPA NEWS

kinezis (stylized with a lowercase k) promotes transformation as an attraction. The concept from KidZania welcomes adults and children to be active in a hybrid facility combining fitness, wellness, and entertainment elements. Together, the Mexico City attraction promotes physical fitness, nutrition, and fun. Pictured is KidZania CEO Xavier López Ancona (seated right) showing attendees of IAAPA Latin America Summit how kinezis' elevated bicycle attraction works leg muscles while having fun.



ATTRACTION EVOLUTION

Dawn of The Transformation Economy

Attractions face their next strategic shift, according to author, speaker, and management advisor B. Joseph Pine II

by Juliana Gilling

WHEN B. JOSEPH PINE II AND JAMES H. GILMORE published “The Experience Economy” in 1999, theme parks, museums, and attractions saw their business model reflected in print. The bestselling book articulated what the industry had long practiced—staging experiences to create value in people’s lives—and it reshaped how businesses far beyond attractions thought about experiences as a distinct economic offering.

Pine waited more than 25 years to write his new book. “The Transformation Economy” is not a sequel, but the natural culmination of a new way of thinking—one with direct implications for the attractions industry.

Pine contends that after commodities, goods, services, and experiences, the next frontier is transformation, where companies help people become who they want to be. “The desire for transformations will only increase over the next decade,” he says. “Great opportunities lie in guiding people to achieve their aspirations.”

This shift matters because experience alone no longer distinguishes attractions; they now compete with a growing array of experience-driven businesses. However, Pine says attractions can build on their experiential skills, dream-fulfilling abilities, and capacity to connect emotionally with audiences to make the leap into transformation possible.

In the transformation economy, experiences can become doorways through which people discover themselves. He recalls asking hundreds of museum professionals how many chose their careers because of a childhood visit to a museum. Roughly 40% raised their hands. Such moments, he argues, should not be left to chance.

“What are the possibilities if attractions deliberately designed transformations? It’s going to happen,” he says. “As Scott Trowbridge, senior creative executive at Walt Disney Imagineering, told me, ‘We foresee the day when attractions intentionally design experiences to be transformative.’”

Shifting from staging experiences to enabling transformation starts with a simple but crucial step, according to Pine. “It begins with asking, ‘Why?’ Why are guests coming to you? And then ask why again and again.” Attractions must dig deeper to uncover their audiences’ core aspirations. “You need to figure out how to cater to those aspirations in your operations,” Pine says. That insight will allow operators to design offerings that guide guests toward meaningful growth.

Pine invites companies to think differently about familiar offerings. Attractions host thousands of birthday parties each year, but most treat them as one-off events. Pine suggests starting with a conversation instead—what do parents hope their children will gain from the day? For some, it may be confidence or stronger social skills; for others, a lesson in gratitude or the chance to discover a new ability. Seen this way, a birthday party becomes less of a transaction and more the beginning of a relationship that unfolds year after year.

When it comes to attractions and games built around play and skill, “Many people aspire to become better and better,” he adds. “Helping them do so almost invariably means they will play more and spend more.”

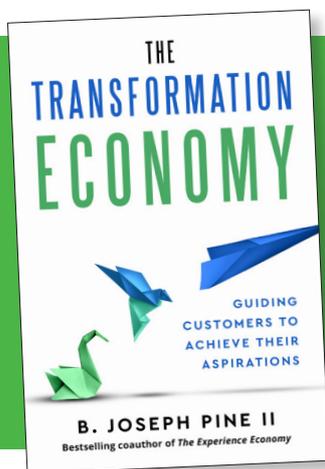


“Transformations must be sustained through time, which is what follow-through accomplishes.”

Human flourishing, where an individual thrives instead of just survives, is a recurring theme. Pine believes attractions already foster human flourishing effectively by creating memorable experiences where people feel they spent their time well. Transformation extends that impact further, offering what he calls “time well invested,” where the benefits continue long after the visit ends.

He hopes the attractions industry embraces encapsulation, which involves preparing guests before an experience, encouraging reflection afterward, and supporting their future actions. The aim is to guide people toward achievement and beyond. “Transformations must be sustained through time, which is what follow-through accomplishes,” Pine says. 

strategichorizons.com



Pine’s Key Takeaways

1. Design and deliver the strongest experience possible within budget. This will lead to guests feeling as if they received more value than they paid for.
2. Craft transformative experiences that guide guests along their personal journey of self-discovery.
3. Treat human growth as both a social responsibility and a business imperative. Owners and operators can do this by investing in employee development. This way, frontline team members can better support meaningful guest experiences.



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NATURE ATTRACTIONS



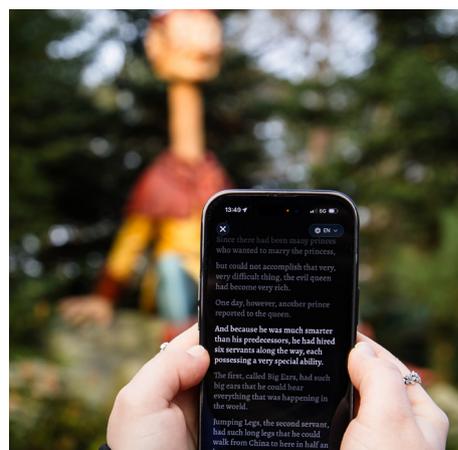
ATTRACTION FILMS

1 ACCESSIBILITY STORYTELLING FOR ALL

Now every guest can find themselves immersed in storytelling at **Efteling**, the admired theme park in Kaatsheuvel, Netherlands. The facility began offering subtitles for the majority of the narrated stories in the park. The Efteling app recognizes a guest's preferred language (English, French, German and Dutch) and provides text on the screen, allowing those who are deaf or hard of hearing to participate.

Efteling worked with organizations dedicated to accessibility and groups of people with lived experiences. Jolanda de Boer from Vlaardingen, who is hard of hearing, advised on aspects such as design and user-friendliness of potential solutions. As a result, she was one of the first to test the subtitles. "I took part in the research because I think it is important that everyone can visit a place and enjoy it just as much as anyone else," Jolanda explains.

efteling.com



EFTELING

2 RIBBON CUTTINGS

▶ RACING INTO MEXICO

3... 2... 1... ACTION! The new **Speedway Stunt Coaster at Six Flags Mexico** really puts the pedal to the metal by traveling forwards and backwards, simulating the world of car racing and stunt-scenes found on a movie set. The family boomerang coaster from Vekoma gives small thrillseekers their first big ride experience as the train navigates twists, turns, and smooth transitions.



SIX FLAGS

▶ ROCKING AUSTRALIA

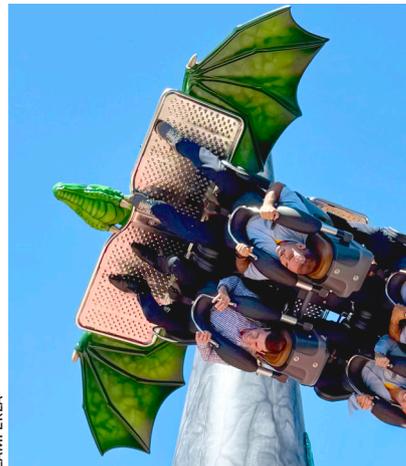
Built on the site of **Dreamland's** original pendulum ride, the new **King Claw** gyro swing features a 25-meter-long arm reaching 42 meters high at a 120-degree angle, providing moments of weightlessness. The **Intamin**-made ride also features a drive system designed to recover up to 40% of the energy needed to operate King Claw—leading to energy savings and reduced operating costs.



INTAMIN

▶ FLYING IN COSTA RICA

Dragonix first took flight over Latin America in February. **Parque Diversiones** in Costa Rica developed a custom theme for its new **Zamperla** Air Race model. As the story goes, riders fly alongside an alpha dragon and his thunder. "Our creative process starts by identifying a thematic north star and then ensuring every element consistently points back to that narrative," says Enrico Patechi with Zamperla.



ZAMPERLA

3 GUEST SERVICE CREATIVE COMMUNICATION

Ka-Pow! At **The Nemesis Club** escape room in Phoenix, even restroom signage stays in character. “Our bathrooms are found at the back of winding hallways, which gave us both a challenge and an opportunity,” says co-owner Kylee Smith. Her husband Dustin 3D printed the bathroom signs himself, with graphics creating a narrative of heroes vs. villains.



SCOTT FAIS

4 BRANDING SHOWERING BOYSENBERRIES

Mrs. Cordelia Knott never could have imagined this: shampoo based on the famed ingredient in her legendary boysenberry pies. The recently renovated **Knott’s Berry Farm Hotel** gives guests a delight in the shower: purple shampoo. The color of the gel resembles that of a boysenberry—and extends Knott’s brand when guests least expect it: naked.



SCOTT FAIS



HAVE A DISPATCH FROM THE FIELD?

Have a Dispatch from the field for Funworld in 2026? Sure you do! Share your successes, wins, and innovations with IAAPA News. Send news, photos, and advancements to SFais@IAAPA.org

▶ PLAYING IN ITALY

Silencing smartphones and putting down tablets to enhance human relationships is the focus of a new FEC in Vicenza, Italy. **Wonderwood Dino Camp** is designed for children ages 0-10. Slides, tunnels, ball pits, and secret passages join an innovative laboratory where children color dinosaurs and then animate them. “We call it ‘education,’ meaning learning through active play,” says facility founder Massimiliano Freddi.



WONDERWOOD

▶ FEC GLOW-UP MEXICO

Basking in its own glow—thanks to multiple dark lights—the new **Fly Extreme** FEC recently opened in Metepec, State of Mexico. Developed by **Grupo Dcrejart**, the park integrates trampolines, a rope course, climbing walls, arcades, bowling, a playground, and a sports bar all within 31,215 square feet. The All-in-One Experience model allows visitors to enjoy most of the attractions with a single admission fee.



ROBERTO BAEZ

▶ PLUNGING INTO TÜRKIYE

Nickelodeon Play in Istanbul, Türkiye, recently opened **SpongeBob’s Crazy Carnival Ride**. “It’s the ‘Goldilocks’ of dark rides: not too big, not too small, but just right in footprint, fun factor, and price point,” says John Wood of **Sally Dark Rides**. The ride’s compact layout is designed to strike a balance between scale, operational efficiency, and guest accessibility at family entertainment centers.



SALLY DARK RIDES



LEGO LAND MALAYSIA

Legoland Malaysia Resort Takes the Checkered Flag With Lego Ferrari Build & Race

Legoland Malaysia Resort has unveiled the first Lego Ferrari Build & Race attraction in Asia, blending motorsports heritage with hands-on Lego play. The experience, in the resort's Imagination Zone, invites guests of all ages to design, build, test, and race their own Lego Ferrari creations.

The attraction is anchored by the world's first life-size Lego Ferrari F50, assembled from 421,652 Lego bricks and weighing more than 1,600 kilograms. Five interactive zones guide visitors through the experience—Ferrari Garage, Build Zone, Test Zone, Virtual Race Zone, and a Duplo area for younger builders.

"We're proud to bring this world-class attraction to Malaysia, and to be the first in Asia to do so," shares C.S. Lim, vice president of Legoland Malaysia Resort. "This experience captures the essence of both Lego and Ferrari—creativity, innovation, and excitement—all brought to life in a way families can enjoy together."

The addition complements other recent Lego developments, including Miniland Singapore and the first Lego Flower Garden Miniland.

legoland.com.my

New Museum in China Wows With Early Peek

The Suzhou Museum of Contemporary Art (Suzhou MoCA) will welcome select visitors to experience an exhibition ahead of the cultural institution's official opening to the public later in 2026. Located along the Jinji Lake waterfront in Suzhou, China, the 60,000-square-meter museum was commissioned by Suzhou Harmony Development Group.

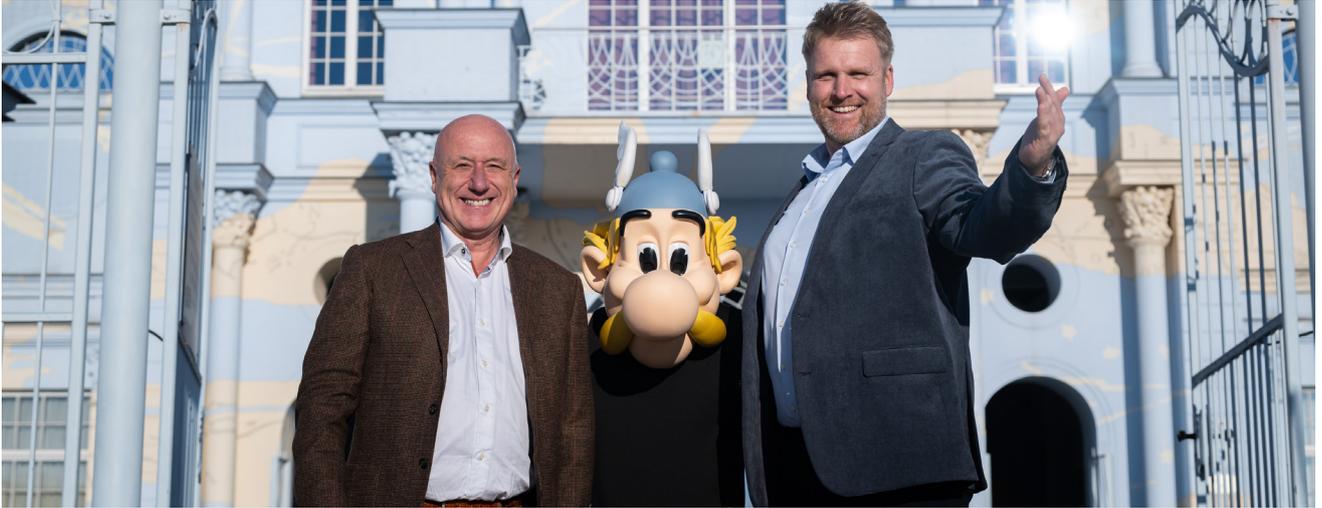
Designed by Bjarke Ingels Group (BIG) in collaboration with Arts Group and Front Inc., the museum is conceived as a village of pavilions beneath a continuous, ribbon-like roof. Bjarke Ingels, founder and creative director of BIG, says the design draws directly from Suzhou's garden tradition, creating what he describes as a garden of pavilions and courtyards that connects the city to the lake.

The first exhibition, titled *Materialism* and curated by BIG, explores the role of materials in architecture. Large-scale models and installations from 20 BIG projects will be presented across the galleries, with seating and interpretive elements crafted from the same materials on display.

suzhoumoca.com



SUZHOU MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART



BELANTIS

Germany's Belantis Amusement Park Begins Astérix Park Transformation

This spring, Belantis in Leipzig, Germany, will welcome a few special guests. French hero Astérix and his pals Obélix and Idéfix are the inspiration for a new family-friendly themed area named Idéfix Abenteuerland. The playful addition marks the start of a long-term plan to transform Belantis into the first Astérix park outside of France.

The news follows Park Asterix owner Compagnie des Alpes' acquisition of Belantis, an established German amusement park, in April 2025.

"The progressive transformation of Belantis into Astérix Park Germany perfectly reflects the group's ability to identify

and unlock the potential of the sites it acquires," says François Fassier, director of the theme parks division at Compagnie des Alpes. "Starting in 2026, several themed areas and attractions faithful to the fantastic universe of Astérix and Obélix will offer every visitor a unique experience."

The Belantis site offers proximity to Dresden and Berlin, along with more than 80 hectares of land—41 of which are reserved for future expansion. Astérix Park Germany's rebrand is expected to be finished by 2030 or 2031, with the group anticipating 1 million annual visitors.

belantis.de

Mellors Group's Big Dreams for Lightwater Valley in United Kingdom

The family-owned Mellors Group has a clear vision of what it wants to accomplish with Lightwater Valley Family Adventure Park after acquiring the English attraction at the start of 2026.

"Lightwater Valley is a park with real heart, history, personality, and potential, and it's a place our own family has loved since childhood," says James Mellors, managing director of Mellors Group. "We're incredibly proud to be taking on its future. Our goal is simple—to put the park back on the map as a major theme park by introducing new rides, injecting fresh energy, and creating something truly special for families for many years to come."



Mellors shares that visitors to the Ripon, North

Yorkshire, park can expect new attractions this year. "While Lightwater Valley will continue to be a haven for younger families, we're also widening the experience so that guests of all ages can enjoy the thrills, charm, and adventure together," he says.

Lightwater Valley joins the Mellors Group's growing portfolio of U.K. family attractions, which already includes Fantasy Island in Ingoldmells, Skegness Pier in Lincolnshire, and Urban Playground in Manchester, as well as a thriving events business.

lightwatervalley.co.uk



GRAND HYATT DUBAI WATERPARK

Grand Hyatt Dubai Elevates Experience with New Water Park

The Grand Hyatt Dubai has unveiled a vibrant water park, bringing surfing, slides, and family-friendly attractions to the heart of the city within its 37-acre urban resort.

The 20,000-square-meter water park is home to 16 signature attractions. Highlights include the Middle East's first FlowRider Triple surf simulator, a wave pool with a sand beach, a lazy river, and two slide towers with rides such as the Boomerango slide. There's a dedicated family zone and an expansive kids' area with temperature-controlled splash pools, soft-play structures, toddler-friendly slides, and four main children's attractions—Drop Loop, Aqua Twist, Funbolic, and Splash Planet—each offering interactive, age-appropriate adventures. The water park offers relaxation zones and 32 private luxury

cabanas (some with plunge pools).

This milestone development “elevates our leisure offerings and transforms the property into a truly unique destination, where large-scale events, exceptional hospitality, and unforgettable leisure experiences seamlessly come together,” says Fathi Khogaly, managing director, Grand Hyatt Dubai, and area vice president, Hyatt, Dubai. “We are very proud to unveil the Grand Hyatt Dubai Waterpark—enhancing our guests' experience in new and exciting ways.”

WhiteWater provided comprehensive design and attraction development, while Murphy's Waves Ltd added wave pool engineering and wave-generation technology.

grandhyattdubaiwaterpark.com

Doha Quest to Debut Sally Dark Rides' New 'Mini' Concept

An archaeological dig goes awry when the team finds a golden artifact in a secret chamber, accidentally awakening the undead guardians protecting it. That's the premise behind Guardians of the Hidden Chamber, a custom interactive dark ride coming to Doha Quest toward the end of 2026 through a partnership with Sally Dark Rides.

Announced at IAAPA Expo, the attraction marks the global debut of Sally Dark Rides' Mini Dark Ride. For brave families, the attraction mixes scares and thrills as riders escape the ancient army.

Doha Quest asked Sally Dark Rides to create a marquee attraction in a very small space, totaling 426 square meters. Guardians of the Hidden Chamber replaces the Gravity Wheel at the indoor theme park within Qatar's Doha Oasis destination.

Designed to deliver immersive entertainment within a compact footprint, the new ride blends dynamic trackless vehicles, animatronic characters, wraparound LED media screens, physical sets, special effects, and interactive gameplay. The story unfolds over 12 scenes, with two rotating turntable stages and adaptable scenery facilitating a tightly choreographed experience that lasts four minutes and 45 seconds.

According to Lauren Wood Weaver, Sally's VP of marketing and business development, the Doha Quest project shows how Sally Dark Rides can use the Mini to “deliver a true, story-driven dark ride experience at a smaller scale—opening the door for parks, FECs, museums, and emerging markets that may not have the space or budget for a full-size attraction.”

sallydarkrides.com | dohaquest.com



New Immersive Cultural Attraction Lands in Mexico City

Odisea México has added a major new attraction to Mexico City's cultural and tourism landscape. The immersive experience invites visitors to explore the country's diversity through a multisensory journey that blends culture, folklore, and technology under one roof.

The experience unfolds across 25 themed rooms and lasts approximately 90 minutes. By bringing together traditions and locations in one immersive setting, Odisea México is designed to inspire further travel across the country. Highlights include a monarch butterfly forest, a tequila hacienda, and a Yucatán jungle. Spanning 4,000 square meters of permanent exhibition space—with an additional 500 square meters dedicated to temporary exhibitions—the attraction can accommodate up to 4,000 visitors per day. The venue is fully accessible and offers tailored visits for schools and groups.

Beyond walkthrough environments, Odisea México incorporates ride-based attractions into its offering. These include the Mini Turibús—a dark ride inspired by Mexico City's iconic hop-on, hop-off bus—and Flying Theater, a recently opened

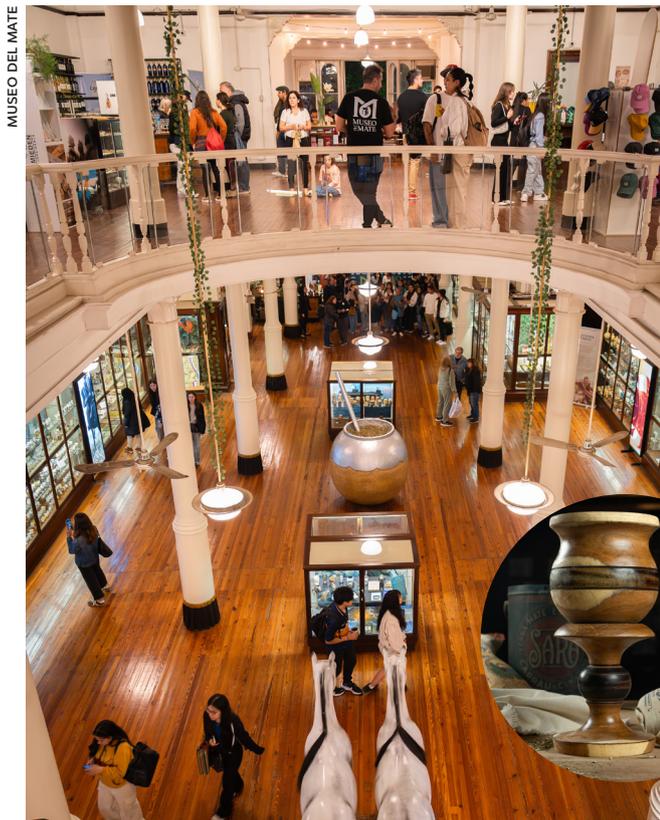


ODISEA MEXICO

aerial experience that simulates flying over some of the country's most iconic destinations.

odisea-mexico.com

Museo del Mate Opens Flagship Location in Argentina



MUSEO DEL MATE

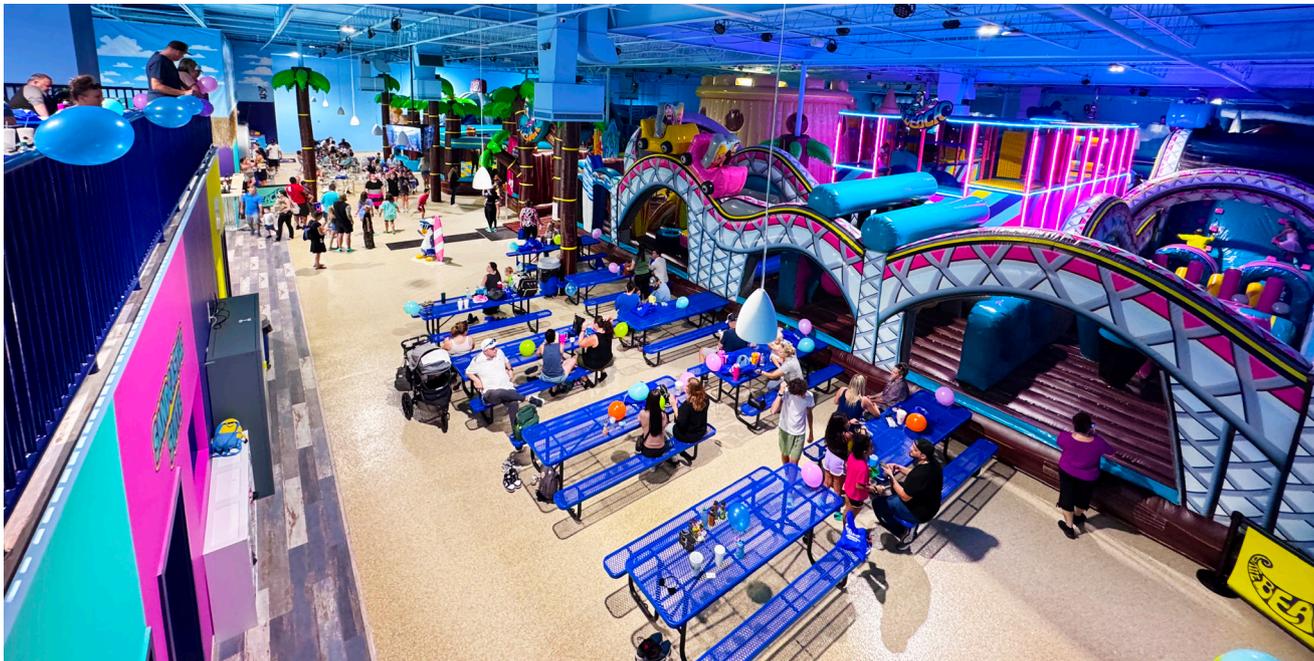
Museo del Mate has opened its new headquarters in the heart of Buenos Aires, strengthening the city's cultural offerings with a space dedicated to the yerba mate beverage, an energizing drink known as one of Argentina's most notable products. Located on Avenida de Mayo, a historic avenue, the museum invites local and international visitors to explore the history and rituals of mate.

The new venue builds on the legacy of the original Museo del Mate in Sierra de la Ventana, in the south of Buenos Aires Province. Founded in 1979, the institution is privately operated and owned by collector Alberto Plaza.

Designated as Kilometer Zero of Argentina's historic Yerba Mate Route, the museum houses what it describes as the world's largest collection of mate vessels. While the full collection exceeds 10,000 items, the Buenos Aires exhibition displays approximately 3,000 pieces, ranging from early Indigenous and historical mates—the traditional cup used for drinking yerba mate—to contemporary designs.

Beyond exhibitions, the new Museo del Mate offers guided tours, mate tastings, educational workshops, a museum shop, and a dedicated mate bar. Multilingual services are available for international visitors.

museodelmate.com.ar



DO THE BEACH

New Inflatable Adventure Park Bounces Into Florida

The first Do The Beach Inflatable Adventure Park is now open in North Port, Florida. The 21,000-square-foot park brings the fun of the beach inside with 14 interactive attractions, including the 20-foot inflatable Giant Sandcastle Slide, Plunge Slide, and a free-fall experience. The indoor attraction also features party rooms, a multisport air court, a dedicated toddler zone, and a food trailer serving up pizza, wings, and “beachside” drinks.

“With Do The Beach, we’ve created originality in a familiar framework; taking the existing successful adventure park model but creating a highly unique and immersive environment,” says Mike Whincup, COO of Do The Beach Franchising. The Whincup family’s Galaxy Multi Rides, a supplier of adventure-based equipment, provided many of the attractions found inside the facility.

dothebeach.com

Silver Dollar City Uses Coaster Retirement as Momentum for Future Projects

Missouri’s Ozark Mountains are abuzz with activity, as Silver Dollar City in Branson proceeds with its \$500 million expansion plans.

On Feb. 16, the park announced the retirement of the Thunderation mine train at the conclusion of the 2026 season. The Arrow Dynamics roller coaster has carried more than 27 million riders since its opening in 1993. For many park guests, Thunderation’s 42-inch height requirement marked their first significant coaster experience.

The 2026 season will offer commemorative merchandise, special events, and special moments celebrating Thunderation’s legacy before its final dispatch on Jan. 2, 2027. Brad Thomas, president of Silver Dollar City Parks and Resorts, teases a new ride is in the works. “Thunderation’s retirement will launch new and exciting chapters in Silver Dollar City’s future,” Thomas says. “In this case, the end is really an exciting beginning.”

silverdollarcity.com



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1980

WhiteWater Waterslide Park opens in Penticton, BC, Canada.



1982

WhiteWater begins supplying local water



1987

Merger with Barr and Wray North America to add first-of-its-kind wave equipment to portfolio.



1993

WhiteWater now offers multi-level aquatic play and interactives.



2006

WhiteWater opens Dubai office, growing to a full-service MENA office



2011

Shanghai office opens to serve APAC





2020

Endless Surf debuts with its patented waves on demand surf park technology

2018

WhiteWater launches Vantage and enters exclusive distribution agreement with Life Floor



2013

Barcelona is home to WhiteWater's first European office (now Munich)



2012

WhiteWater adds FlowRider and water rides to its portfolio



2024

WhiteWater achieves ISO 14001 certification.



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INFINITY PLANET

Australia's Moreton Bay Proposes \$2.6 Billion Entertainment City

Developers of Infinity Planet—a proposed \$2.6 billion integrated entertainment city—submitted plans to Moreton Bay Regional Council, signaling a potential new leisure development for Queensland. The 68-hectare Elimbah site would bring together indoor and outdoor theme parks, cultural pavilions, a 9,000-seat City Hall venue, resort accommodation, and an internationally themed retail and dining precinct. Planners estimate up to 1.2 million annual visitors to the theme parks and approximately 1.8 million diners and shoppers each year.

CEO and Founder Ramin Ahmadi describes Infinity Planet as “Australia’s largest purpose-built integrated entertainment city,” adding, “This combination of entertainment, education and celebration of culture is a concept that has been successful in many locations across the world, particularly in the Middle East, but this is the first time it will be delivered in Australia. Infinity Planet will be so much more than a revolutionary tourism and leisure destination.”

Rainbow's End Theme Park in New Zealand Welcomes Back Iconic Pirate Ship

Rainbow's End in Auckland, New Zealand, unveiled its new pirate ship ride, Pacifica, bringing back one of the park's most beloved attractions after an eight-year absence. The Pirate Ship first delighted visitors in 1983 and was retired in 2017 following the limited availability of replacement parts. Following strong guest demand and years of planning, design, and construction, the new version is now in operation.

“We're thrilled to have Pacifica swinging once again at Rainbow's End,” says Susan Mudie, CEO of Rainbow's End.

Built by German ride manufacturer Huss Park Attractions, Pacifica features upgraded theming and enhanced guest comfort. The 13-meter-long ship swings 75 degrees to either side and can seat up to 50 passengers per ride, the largest capacity of any attraction at the park. The new attraction also introduces new storytelling elements by reimagining the original figurehead character, Captain Esmerelda, as she returns to Rainbow's End aboard her new ship.

rainbowsend.co.nz/



RAINBOW'S END

Gina Claassen Promoted at Herschend

Citing her longstanding leadership across safety, operations, and guest experience, **Herschend** has promoted **Gina Claassen** to vice president of operations. With more than two decades in the attractions industry, Claassen has played a key role in advancing operational standards, fostering strong safety cultures, and supporting frontline teams across complex, multi-site environments. In her new role, she will oversee operational strategy and execution across Herschend’s portfolio of destinations.



HERSCHEND

Gina Claassen

Déborah Attal Appointed at Atelier Emocio

Strategic advisory, design, and production collective, **Atelier Emocio**, has appointed **Déborah Attal** as vice president of sales as the group expands its immersive experiences and activation portfolio. In her new role, Attal is responsible for structuring and deploying Atelier Emocio’s commercial strategy across its integrated portfolio of AAB Theming, Emocio, and L’Usine à 5 Pattes. Attal brings several years of experience developing immersive projects across Europe and the Middle East.



ATELIER EMOCIO

Déborah Attal

Center Parcs Announces Senior Marketing Hires

Bolstering its senior marketing leadership team, **Center Parcs** recently made three appointments across its United Kingdom and Ireland holiday villages.

Sarah Vickery is the new director of e-commerce and customer experience, bringing extensive digital and customer-journey expertise from her previous roles at Merlin Entertainments U.K. and Europe. **Stuart O’Neill** joins as executive creative director, charged with shaping creative direction across marketing and communications, while **Gillian Blair** will lead as head of marketing planning, integrating media planning, insights and research.



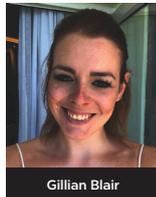
CENTER PARCS

Sarah Vickery



CENTER PARCS

Stuart O’Neill



CENTER PARCS

Gillian Blair

Jim Bennington Appointed at Fun Factory

Fun Factory has appointed **Jim Bennington** as chief of operations, United States. Bennington brings more than 27 years of industry experience, having most recently led operations at No Cash Value LLC, a boutique consultancy focused on integrating skill-based amusement operations to drive revenue.



FUN FACTORY

Jim Bennington

Steve Tatham Joins MDSX

Orlando-based design, production, and creative agency **MDSX** has appointed **Steve Tatham** as chief creative officer, strengthening the immersive design studio’s creative leadership as it continues to expand its global portfolio of experience-driven projects. Tatham brings more than three decades of experience, most recently serving as executive creative director for Universal’s Epic Universe, overseeing creative elements across attractions and themed lands within the new theme park development.



MDSX

Steve Tatham

Brian Bacica Leads Legoland Florida

Legoland Florida Resort has appointed **Brian Bacica** as park president, overseeing operations, guest experience, and future expansion across the theme park, water park, Sea Life Florida Aquarium, and hotel properties. Bacica comes to the Winter Haven, Florida, attraction after more than three decades of executive leadership experience, serving in senior roles at Disneyland Resort, Universal Parks & Resorts, Busch Gardens Tampa Bay, Adventure Island, and Six Flags Great Adventure.



LEGOLAND FLORIDA RESORT

Brian Bacica

Greg Senner Joins Huitt-Zollars

Architectural and engineering design services firm, **Huitt-Zollars**, has appointed **Greg Senner** as vice president in the firm’s Orlando office. Senner brings more than three decades of experience in architecture, experiential design, and project leadership, with a focus on large-scale entertainment and hospitality developments. In his new role, he will support Huitt-Zollars’ growing portfolio of complex projects across Central Florida, working closely with clients and multidisciplinary teams.



HUITT-ZOLLARS

Greg Senner

Brad Loxley Advances at Parques Reunidos

Madrid-based **Parques Reunidos** has appointed **Brad Loxley** as chief operating officer, reporting to CEO Pascal Ferracci. In his new role, Loxley will lead global operations strategy, with responsibility for performance, safety, guest experience, and efficiency at Parques Reunidos’ theme parks, water parks, animal parks, and indoor entertainment destinations. Loxley joined Parques Reunidos in 2024, most recently serving as group operations director. He brings more than 25 years of international experience spanning Europe, Australia, Asia, and North America.



PARQUES REUNIDOS

Brad Loxley

Sphere Entertainment Appoints Felicia Yue

Strengthening its leadership as the company advances immersive entertainment and venue technology, **Sphere Entertainment Co.** has appointed **Felicia Yue** as executive vice president and chief

technology officer. Yue will oversee the technology powering Sphere's immersive experiences and lead development of proprietary systems supporting content creation and multisensory experiences. Yue brings extensive experience across sports, media, and live entertainment, with prior leadership roles at Infinite Athlete, Amazon Prime Video, ESPN, and Sportvision.



SPHERE ENTERTAINMENT CO.

Felicia Yue

RWS Global Makes Strategic Appointments

Supporting the company's next phase of growth, RWS Global has expanded its governance structure with several senior appointments.

Joining the board are **Ariel Granoff**, with experience in investment banking and strategic advisory, and **Janshaaz Khan**, vice president at Bluestone Equity Partners with expertise in sports, media, and entertainment. **Rema Awad** has joined the advisory board as legal advisor, while investor **Jack Ross** transitions from the board to the advisory board.



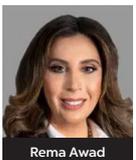
RWS

Ariel Granoff



RWS

Janshaaz Khan



RWS

Rema Awad



RWS

Jack Ross

Johnson Architecture Elevates Three Leaders to Partner

Johnson Architecture has appointed **Emily Haire**, **Heather Overton**, and **Kelly Reynolds** as partners, expanding the firm's leadership team. Haire, a project manager and designer with nearly 15 years at the firm, has delivered projects noted for creativity and technical precision. Overton, director of administration for 16 years, oversees business operations, human resources, and systems optimization. Reynolds, an interior designer and registered interior designer, has contributed to bespoke interior projects and the firm's new corporate office.



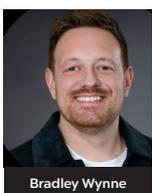
L to R: Emily Haire, Heather Overton, Kelly Reynolds

JOHNSON ARCHITECTURE

Universal Creative Expands UK Team with Appointments

Universal Creative has strengthened its U.K.-based team with multiple appointments that will support the development of Universal's new project in Bedfordshire, England.

Universal's creative unit appointed **Bradley Wynne** creative director for the U.K. project. He will support the development of Universal's new venture in Bedfordshire, England.



UNIVERSAL CREATIVE

Bradley Wynne

Electrosonic Promotes Alexander Hann

A provider of audiovisual and technology, **Electrosonic**, has promoted **Alexander Hann** to director, digital marketing, supporting the company's North American operations. Previously senior manager, digital marketing, Hann led multichannel campaigns, demand generation, and marketing operations to strengthen Electrosonic's brand and online presence. "I'm especially grateful for the trust and support that made this next step possible," Hann says. "I'm energized to keep building, learning, and making 2026 one for the books."



ELECTROSONIC

Alexander Hann

Patrick Flynn Advances Entertainment at Beto Carrero World

Beto Carrero World, one of Brazil's largest theme parks, has appointed **Patrick Flynn** entertainment director. In his new role, Flynn will oversee creative direction and delivery of live entertainment, shows, and guest experience programming, along with a team of 300 artists, technicians, producers, and support staff. He brings decades of experience across entertainment, production, and live events.



BETO CARRERO WORLD

Patrick Flynn

Rolf Benirschke Continues Service to San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance

Former NFL player **Rolf Benirschke** has a new role: chairman of the board of trustees for the **San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance**. He succeeds Steven S. Simpson. Benirschke has a longstanding connection to the organization, including founding Kicks for Critters and supporting conservation fundraising efforts. As chairman, he will help guide strategy supporting the San Diego Zoo, Safari Park, and global conservation hubs.



SAN DIEGO ZOO WILDLIFE ALLIANCE

Rolf Benirschke

Claudio Di Capua Joins Team Park Project

Attraction designer and developer **Team Park Project** has hired **Claudio Di Capua** as its senior business advisor for the entertainment industry. Di Capua brings experience in operations and consulting, with prior roles at Dream Island, Merlin Entertainments, and Zoomarine. In his new role, he will support strategic development and delivery of entertainment projects as the firm plans an international expansion.



TEAM PARK PROJECT

Claudio Di Capua

Phil Royle Joins Play Social Inc.

Location-based attraction **Play Social Inc.**—billing itself as a "social game experience"—has appointed **Phil Royle** as chief executive officer. Royle brings more than 25 years of international attractions experience, including senior leadership roles at Merlin Entertainments and work on multiple Legoland destinations. Former CEO Jennifer Worthington will transition to a board role.



PLAY SOCIAL INC.

Phil Royle

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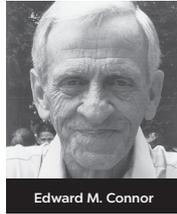
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Edward M. Connor

Edward M. Connor, 85, passed away on Oct. 8, 2025. He began his career in the industry in the early 1960s at Riverside Park in Agawam, Massachusetts, as director of games and merchandise and worked as a souvenir manager at the Eastern States Exposition (The Big E) in West Springfield, Massachusetts. A longtime volunteer for the New England Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions (NEAAPA, now the Northeast's Entertainment Association), Connor served as secretary from 1994 to 2000 and was inducted into the NEAAPA Hall of Fame in 2006. Predeceased by his wife Rosanne, Connor is survived by three children and their families.



Edward M. Connor

NEAAPA

Lisa B. Rau

Longtime Silver Dollar City Director of Publicity and Public Relations Lisa Rau passed away on Dec. 11, 2025, at the age of 64. Born in Michigan, Rau began a career in journalism following her graduation from Stephens College in Columbia, Missouri. In 1989, she secured what she called her dream job for Silver Dollar City and Herschend as the company began its transformation from a regional attraction operator to the world's largest family-held themed attractions company. Well-respected inside and outside the industry for her creativity, tenacity, and passion, Rau departed from Silver Dollar City in 2023 and worked as director of communications for the city of Branson, Missouri, before starting her own firm in 2024.

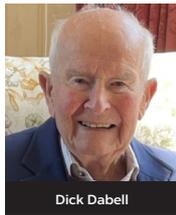


Lisa Rau

HERSCHEND

Dick Dabell

Francis Richmond (Dick) Dabell, fourth-generation owner of Blackgang Chine, the United Kingdom's oldest theme park, passed away at the age of 101. He began working at the park at age 16 before serving in World War II. Beginning in 1947, Dabell led the park for almost 70 years. Inspired by American theme parks, Dabell transformed Blackgang Chine from a curiosity park into an imaginative theme park—adding attractions such as Cowboy Town, the Model Village, the Fairy Castle, and Restricted Area 5, featuring some of the U.K.'s largest animatronic dinosaurs.



Dick Dabell

DABELL FAMILY

Eddie Sotto

Born in Hollywood, California, Eddie Sotto grew up obsessed with Knott's Berry Farm and Disneyland and began casually creating theme park concepts while working in retail. After stints in design at Knott's Berry Farm and Landmark Entertainment Group, Sotto was hired by Walt Disney Imagineering in 1986. He eventually rose to the role of senior vice president, concept design. His most notable project was the creation of Main Street, U.S.A. at Disneyland Paris. After leaving Imagineering in 1999, Sotto established SottoStudios.



Eddie Sotto

SOTTO FAMILY

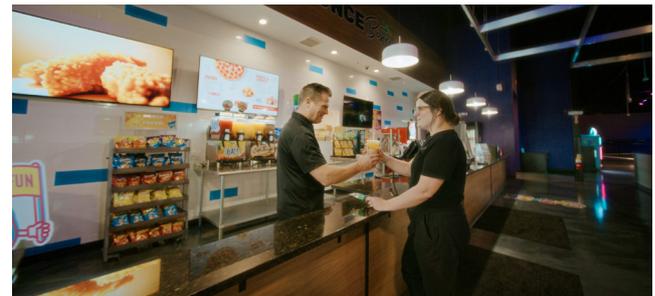


CAROUSEL & CO.

HB Leisure to Launch Midway-Inspired Social Entertainment Venue in Malaysia

Global skill-games specialist **HB Leisure** has introduced **Carousel & Co.**, Malaysia's first Midway-inspired social entertainment venue, at Avenue K in Kuala Lumpur. The concept combines large-format skill games, food and beverage, and digital scoring in a rooftop setting. "Malaysia's social scene is evolving beyond dining and nightlife. Carousel & Co. brings the next phase—an experience that celebrates connection, creativity and competition," says Greg Pearn, head of new concepts at HB Leisure. Designed as a scalable model, Carousel & Co. marks HB Leisure's entry into Malaysia's lifestyle entertainment market, with regional franchise expansion planned across Southeast Asia.

carouselandco.com | hbleisure.com



SAMSUNG

Samsung Deploys Digital Signage Ecosystem at Altitude Trampoline Park Locations

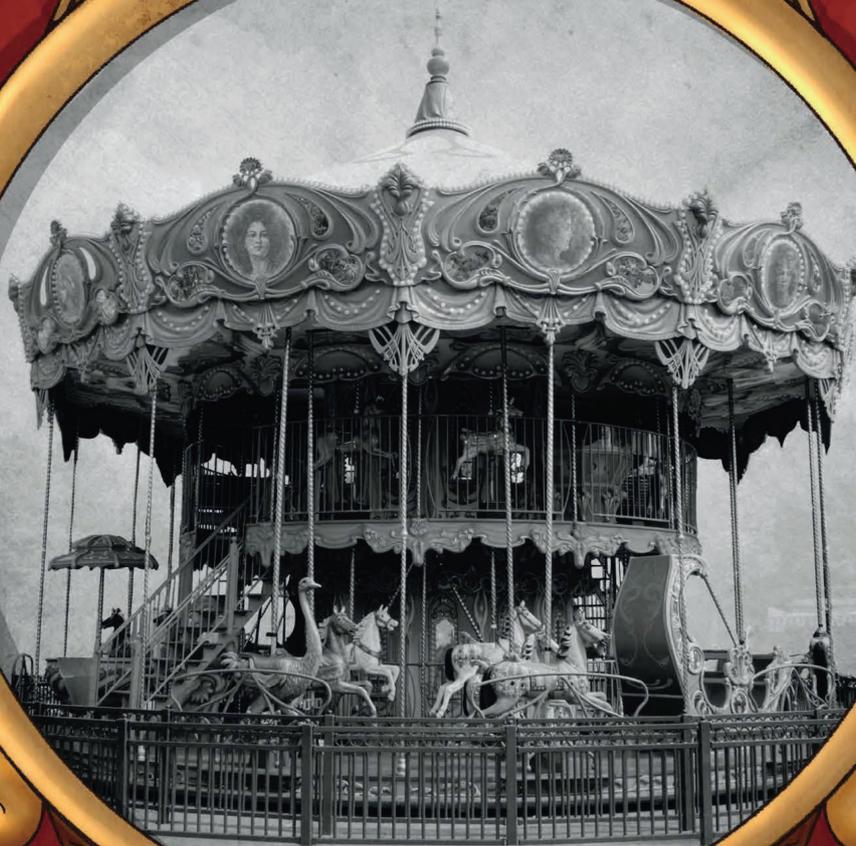
Samsung Electronics America has deployed a tech-forward digital signage ecosystem across multiple **Altitude Trampoline Park** locations, supporting guest communications, safety messaging, and in-venue operations. The rollout features Samsung 4K UHD displays and the company's cloud-native VTX content management platform to connect touchpoints throughout the guest journey.

"What excites us most is how our digital signage ecosystem connects the entire guest journey and helps us deliver the energy, safety, and fun that define our brand," says Jessica McDonald, vice president of marketing at Altitude Trampoline Park.

samsung.com | altitude trampolinepark.com

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Industry Insights



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Smooth Operator

Ketan Sardeshmukh shares how he balances operations, satisfaction, and engagement

In August 2025, Ketan Sardeshmukh stepped into one of the most crucial leadership roles at Walt Disney World: vice president of Disney’s Animal Kingdom. With more than two decades at the resort, Sardeshmukh brings a deep operational understanding of Disney’s priorities at a time when the park navigates growth, change, and evolving guest expectations. Currently, wide expanses of Disney’s Animal Kingdom are under construction as the new Tropical Americas realm will add an Encanto-themed attraction and an Indiana Jones ride.

In a conversation with Funworld, Sardeshmukh reflects on his role, his vision for cast members, and the overall guest experience.

How does it feel stepping into this role?

To get to be at the helm of one of our theme parks, let alone Disney’s Animal Kingdom, just means a ton. My family loves this park, I love this park and I’m very excited.

What is your vision for the park and for cast members?

Let’s start with the cast members first. Overarchingly, we want to thank, inform, celebrate, and develop our cast members. We did our third shift breakfast—celebrating all the folks that make magic overnight—whether it’s from a horticulture perspective, engineering, or park operations, to get us ready and to just take a moment to thank folks for the hard work they do. It’s fun to be part of and it’s the right thing to do for our cast members as well. Our cast were amongst the last to see It’s Tough to Be a Bug before it closed and they got to do previews first for new offerings.

That spirit of appreciation and growth

extends beyond daily moments of recognition. We’ve got thousands of graduates and thousands who have moved into leadership roles. I started as an intern and have had an opportunity to come up.

How are you addressing staffing and retention challenges?

We’re seeing retention rates north of 80%. And I think investing in our cast is a huge contributor to that. And even if it wasn’t, it’s the right thing to do for our people. That is one key thing that’s helping us differentiate ourselves from the rest of the industry.

What enables Walt Disney World to excel at frontline guest engagement?

We know that treating our cast just as well as our guests is important to us and in turn, I think our cast members see that, and that empowers them to make magic happen for the guests. We have a strategy moving forward these next few years of investing in costumes that not only fit better but offer greater inclusivity.

How do you balance cast member and guest satisfaction during periods of construction and expansion?

I think one key thing that we’re doing to balance it is we’re letting people know what’s coming. We’ve been very vocal with our cast members. We’ve also been very informative, trying to share with them why we’re doing it. We know that it’s exciting for us to grow and to be able to draw folks in to tell compelling stories. It’s also a great way for us to celebrate how times evolve and how we’re able to put in products that appeal to broad audiences, especially our young families, and connect with our cast.

How do you gather cast feedback?

We ask. Leaders check in daily, and formal surveys measure training, resources, and tools. We try to listen to them and then try to build effective plans. Our cast satisfaction scores continue to do really, really well. 

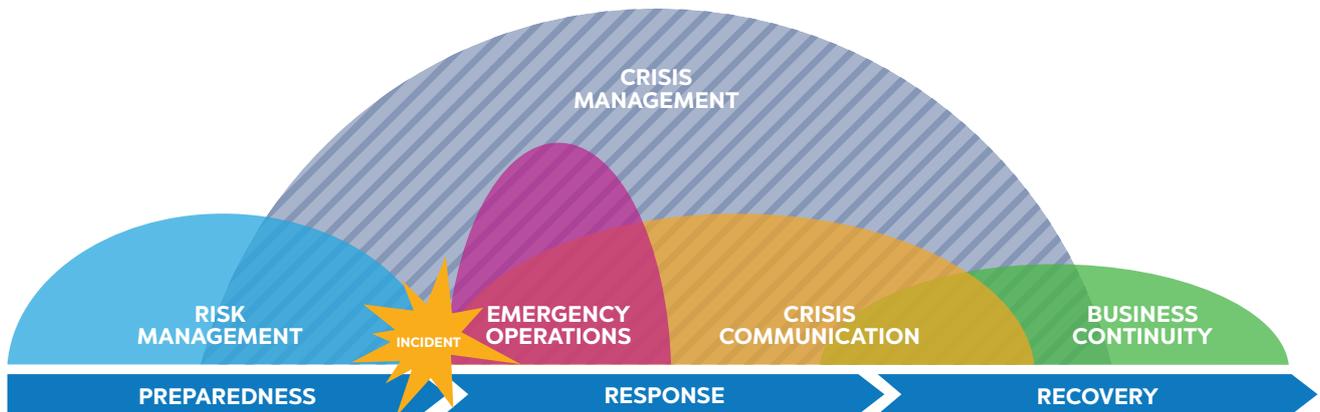


Michael Costello is the managing editor of Funworld at IAAPA. With 20 years working in the attractions industry, he has also volunteered in his free time with the National Amusement Park Historical Association. Connect with him on [LinkedIn](#)





Being Prepared: The Price of Admission



As I begin my first year as Chair of the IAAPA Global Safety and Security Committee, I have had the opportunity to reflect on where our industry excels—and where we still need to strengthen our collective preparedness. The attractions industry is, by any objective measure, a safe one—we operate under robust technical standards, invest in training, and work hard to foster strong safety cultures. At the same time, as the safety and security landscape keeps moving, we must move along with it.

One consistent theme I’ve seen across my professional experience, research, and conversations with operators is that many organizations feel confident in some areas of crisis management but less prepared in others. We often focus more on crisis communications than on the operational response that happens when an incident first unfolds. I refer to this as the “first X minutes”—the critical early moments when decisions made by frontline teams and operational leaders shape long-term outcomes for guests, team members, and the facility itself.

This is not a criticism of operators. Attractions are complex, guest-focused environments, not emergency services organizations or disaster management agencies. Yet, in those early moments,

One of the most important findings from my research is that preparedness is not about predicting every possible scenario. Yes, you need a plan, but there is a direct relationship between the length of a document and how many people will actually use it.

operators are the first responders. Actions taken before agencies arrive—establishing command, protecting people, stabilizing the situation—define whether an incident is controlled or chaotic.

One of the most important findings from my research is that preparedness is not about predicting every possible scenario. Yes, you need a plan, but there is a direct relationship between the length of a document and how many people will actually use it. The goal is not volume; it’s decision-making capability. Operators that invest in structured planning, realistic training, and joint exercises with emergency services are far better positioned to manage the incidents effectively. Preparation doesn’t eliminate risk, but it dramatically reduces confusion when something goes wrong.

As a former IAAPA Safety and Security Committee chair reminded me, quoting Winston Churchill, “Never waste a crisis.” Every incident contains lessons—not just for one operator, but for our entire industry. Strong industries share those lessons, learn from them, and use the findings to raise standards for everyone. 

IAAPA’s Crisis Communications Plan is an excellent resource and an essential part of any operator’s toolkit, which can be accessed here:



To continue the conversation, ask questions, or contribute to safety and security in the attractions industry, please reach out to Dwyer on [LinkedIn](#).



Readers can also reach out via email at neil.dwyer@qiddiya.com or contact IAAPA Global Director of Health & Safety and Security Linda Freeman at [Safety@IAAPA.org](#)



Developing Inclusive and Accessible Attractions

Experts in parks, design, and accessibility discuss how innovation meets inclusion

Build for every brain, and everyone wins. That’s the way of thinking that top attractions experts continue to emphasize. Ensuring everyone feels welcome at attractions can boost a guest’s joy, foster happier memories, and drive business success.

How Brains Can Inform Design

Genein Letford, CEO of Caffe Strategies, urges attractions professionals to rethink the guest experience. She is on a mission to develop “brain capital”—the brain skills and brain health people need to work, create, and innovate together.

Business leaders must understand the importance of creativity to the brain, Letford believes. She describes the brain as “an experiential organ” that evolves continuously. Every ride, exhibit, and show shapes a guest’s experience.

Letford adds that we don’t see with our eyes; we see with the brain. “You and I can see the same artwork and have completely different experiences,” she says. Ensuring diverse voices are present at the decision-making table is key, she believes.

Understanding Visitors

Understanding and listening to visitors is essential, according to Ned Diestelkamp, vice president of PGAV Destinations. PGAV’s Voice of the Visitor study has introduced questions about guests who are neurodivergent, have a disability, are people of color, identify as LGBTQ+, and have a larger body size to gain a deeper understanding of their motivations and experiences.

“Thirty percent of visitors reported visiting with someone who was neurodivergent or has a disability,” he explains. “In other words, 30% of our visitors are personally affected by the level of empathy attractions employ in accessibility choices.”

Diestelkamp highlights some troublesome results. “Voice of the Visitor shows that 34% of people with a disability experienced discrimination or had a negative experience due to that disability. Thirty percent of parties with a neurodivergent member reported a negative experience. And though LGBTQ+ and people of color parties reported significantly fewer negative experiences, with 9% and 8%, respectively, our industry knows that there is no excuse for any of

those numbers to be above zero.”

Inclusive Innovations Across the Industry

Diestelkamp highlighted positive developments around inclusion, from the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower Lanyards scheme born at Gatwick Airport in London—which gives individuals a subtle way to signal that they may need extra time, understanding, or help in public spaces—to the sensory-friendly Calming Corner at the St. Louis Aquarium. The Sesame Place Philadelphia and Sesame Place San Diego parks have also partnered with the International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards (IBCCES) to become Certified Autism Centers.

Design That Benefits Everyone

IBCCES president Meredith Tekin brings attention to the curb-cut effect. Although originally designed to improve accessibility for wheelchair users, curb cuts also benefit parents with strollers, travelers with luggage, delivery workers, and cyclists. Similarly, designing for people with sensory sensitivities can help those with anxiety or PTSD. By creating attractions that are easy to access and have amenities that encourage visitors to stay longer, everyone benefits.

“Information is accessibility,” Tekin says. Empower guests by providing pre-visit planning resources all in one place—not just ride policies, but social stories, menus, changing facilities, program schedules, and contacts if people have questions.

Regular employee training matters, too. “Statistically, your staff is neurodivergent as well,” she adds. Organizations could offer low-sensory spaces for both staff and guests.

Executing on Inclusive Values

Compassion can transform experiences and have a lasting impact. Tekin recalls feedback from one family whose autistic child had a meltdown in a Legoland retail space. The staff simply said, “You don’t have to leave,” bringing tears to the parents’ eyes. “In a world where people are often met with misunderstanding or judgment, they offered acceptance and joy. This will be a lifelong visitor to Legoland,” Tekin says. 

IAAPA GUIDE

Published in September 2024, an IAAPA Whitepaper titled: A Practical Guide to Improve Accessibility in the Attractions Industry, provides actionable guidance to help attractions professionals strengthen policies, communications, and ride design for guests with disabilities. View the document here:



Juliana Gilling. Funworld’s contributing editor, began covering the global attractions industry in 1994. She reports on innovative people, projects, and additions for Funworld and the IAAPA News Hub. Juliana lives in the U.K., where she is a freelance writer. Connect with her on [LinkedIn](#):





Avoiding Busted Budgets: Why Theme Park Ideas Need Numbers Early

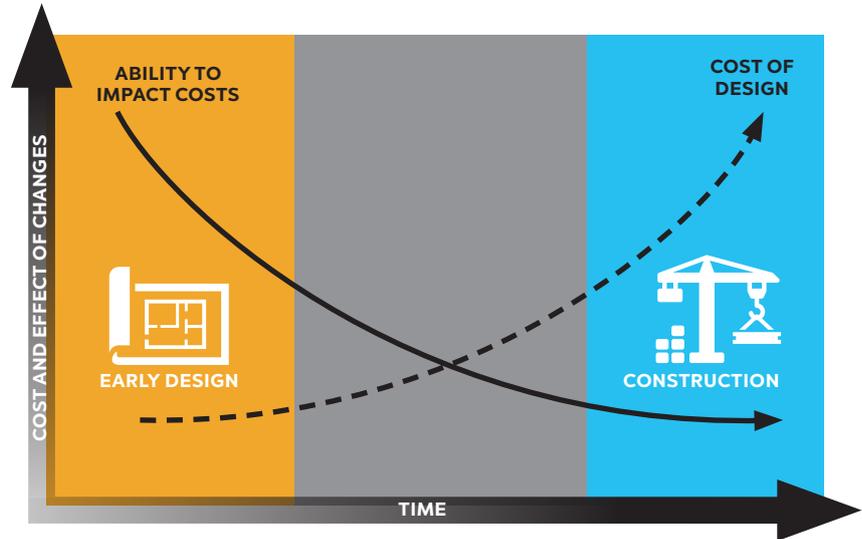
A successful themed entertainment project is not defined only by creativity, ambition, or the guest experience—it's defined by the owner's ability to align those aspirations within a realistic, well-built budget. There are increasingly higher customer expectations for creative and immersive experiences across the globe. Owners must be vigilant in meeting or exceeding these expectations while simultaneously balancing the costs of constructing these user experiences.

There are six vital cost factors when constructing a theme park: budget; time to market; levels of theming and immersion; location; management of design and creative; and management of changes.

It's important that owners start by establishing a realistic budget. The most difficult projects are those where the owner has set an unrealistically low budget, expecting contractors and vendors to adhere to a nearly impossible financial plan. This often creates a domino effect, causing delays in benchmarks downstream.

Without the establishment of a practical budget, owners may run into lengthy and expensive design alterations, increasing change orders and scope cuts. When the original budget is honest and tied to real quantities, unit costs, and market conditions, they're less likely to end up with last-minute value engineering, scope deletions, or a long list of contentious change orders during construction.

Cost and schedule are intertwined within every project. A pragmatic budget reflects the true demands of delivery, including phased construction, night work, limited site access, multiple mobilizations, and the premiums those conditions require. When timelines are compressed, costs rise—not only from accelerated labor and logistics, but from the increased risk of errors that come with rushing execution. In the attractions industry, large-scale



Without the establishment of a practical budget, owners may run into lengthy and expensive design alterations, increasing change orders and scope cuts.

theme park developments typically span five to seven years from announcement to opening. Universal's Epic Universe, for example, was publicly announced in 2019 and welcomed its first guests in May 2025.

Each theming level will also increase costs, which can range from simple painted walls to realistic 3D structures. These elements and their associated costs must be conceptualized in the master plan and align with the initial budget.

Location can also cause property values and local labor to differ in price, often fluctuating between 10–20%. It is important to research market factors that have direct and indirect impacts on the budget.

The management of designers and the creative team goes hand in hand with financial planning. Establishing clear cost parameters helps align stakeholders, set expectations, and reduce conflict later due to cost fluctuations or change orders. Additionally, a well-defined financial framework supports stronger procurement strategies, including early bird packages, prequalification factors, and alternative delivery solutions.

Bringing a big idea to life takes more than imagination—it takes a budget grounded in reality. When owners understand the six core cost factors and commit to honest expectations early, projects stay aligned, risks stay manageable, and creative vision stays intact. Realistic budgets don't limit great experiences—they enable them. 



Drew Horn serves as COO at KMI International and has over 30 years of experience in cost estimating, project management, and project controls. He is also the company's themed entertainment practice lead, specializing in delivering innovative solutions for complex projects in the theme park, hospitality, and aerospace industries. Connect with him on [LinkedIn](#).





Finding the New Unknown: Trends for the Haunt Industry

“Only the unknown frightens men. But once a man has faced the unknown, that terror becomes the known.”
—Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

The haunted attractions industry is built on a simple challenge: an audience cannot be scared twice in the same way. As a result, the industry—particularly within the theme park space—must constantly reinvent itself. Below are several trends now emerging, returning, or finally becoming standard practice as haunts look toward the future.

Enhanced Storytelling

Storytelling is no longer a differentiator; it's the bare minimum. Guests are no longer interested in disconnected startle scares that lack context or continuity. Instead, haunted houses, mazes, and full-event realms are increasingly designed around cohesive narratives. These stories give purpose to scares, emotional weight to characters, and lasting memories to the experience. A weak story makes an attraction forgettable; a strong one lets the fear linger long after the scream.

Expanding into Multiple Demographics

The industry continues to move away from the “something for everyone” fall festival model, which often satisfies no one particularly well. Successful operators are instead creating distinct experiences for defined audiences—often using the same physical assets in different ways. Family-friendly trick-or-treat events can operate during daytime hours, while evenings transform into high-intensity experiences for teens and adults. Some parks are even experimenting with 18+ or 21+ events. The takeaway is simple: define your audience, and if you want to reach multiple audiences, design multiple events.



A scare actor creates an immersive guest experience.

The largest Haunting Grounds yet is set to debut at IAAPA Expo 2026 in Orlando. Learn more about the 2026 event at IAAPA.org/IAAPAExpo

SCOTT SWENSON

Party Elements

Haunted attractions are no longer only about fear; they are also about social connection. Dance zones, themed bars, DJ areas, and club-style environments continue to grow in popularity. These provide relief from intensity, extend length of stay, and encourage sharing—both in-person and on social media. Party elements also increase food, beverage, and merchandise revenue while broadening appeal. Make the haunt an experience guests want to linger in, not just escape from.



Scott Swenson, ICAE, has spent more than 30 years bringing stories to life as a writer, director, producer, educator, and performer. In 2014, after working 21 years with Busch Gardens Tampa Bay, Scott formed Scott Swenson Creative Development. Since then, he has created impactful experiences for clients around the world. Connect with him on [LinkedIn](https://www.linkedin.com/in/scottswenson).

Offseason Engagement

Fear has expanded far beyond the Halloween season. Operators now extend haunted experiences through year-round attractions and limited-run holiday overlays. Valentine's Day events, Friday the 13th activations, and intellectual-property-driven horror events continue to prove viable. Guests show a strong appetite for high-quality scares throughout the year.

Artificial Intelligence

Artificial intelligence is increasingly present behind the scenes. In the haunt space, AI can help optimize scare timing, improve crowd flow, and inform early-stage creative development. Understanding that AI supports creativity is the key distinction. When used correctly, AI allows creative teams and operators to make faster, better-informed decisions. Incorporate AI strategically and let human imagination do the final shaping. 





Cautious Confidence: What the IAAPA Q4 2025 Outlook Reveals About Early-Year Priorities

WITH 2026 UNDERWAY, global attractions leaders are balancing steady optimism with persistent caution. Results from IAAPA's Q4 2025 Quarterly Outlook Survey suggest the industry has entered the new year focused less on recovery and more on refinement—adjusting investment strategies, monitoring economic conditions, and prioritizing innovation amid ongoing uncertainty. While concerns around inflation, labor, and geopolitics remain, many operators and suppliers report expectations of revenue growth and continued investment across key regions. Find the full report at [IAAPA.org/research/quarterly-outlook](https://iaapa.org/research/quarterly-outlook).

Economic Sentiment

(Score out of 10)

Global economy outlook

Attraction Facilities



Manufacturers, suppliers & consultants



Local economy outlook

Attraction Facilities



Manufacturers, suppliers & consultants



Top Business Concerns

(Next Six Months)

Attraction Facilities

Concerned about economic uncertainty



Concerned about price inflation



Concerned about attendance



Manufacturers, Suppliers, and Consultants (MSC)

Concerned about economic uncertainty



Concerned about price inflation



Concerned about geopolitical tensions



Business Performance Expectations

Attraction Facilities



55%

Expect total revenue to increase



51%

Expect per-capita spending to increase



47%

Expect attendance to increase

MSC



51%

Expect total revenue to increase



24%

Expect a decrease in total revenue

Perceived Regional Growth & Investment (MSC)

Middle East 46%

Expect total revenue to increase

APAC 40%

Expect increased investment

Europe 34%

Expect increased investment

North America 71%

Expect increased investment

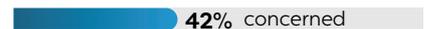
Tariffs: A Rising Pressure Point

Respondents expect unfavorable business impacts from new or changing U.S. tariffs



Concern Levels

Attraction Facilities:



MSC:




Development & Investment Trends to Watch

Attraction Facilities

- Immersive and themed experiences
- Inclusive and value-oriented attractions

MSC

- Technology-driven experiences
- Sustainability integration
- Operational efficiency and refurbishment



Kelly Repass serves as IAAPA's vice president of global research. Her interest areas include strategic assessment, primary and secondary research, data analytics, and actionable insights to drive business performance and growth. Connect with her on [LinkedIn](#):



Elaine Mathis, Ph.D. is IAAPA's manager of global research, where she helps IAAPA members leverage research to improve their businesses and explore consumer personalization through co-creation and the experience economy. Connect with her on [LinkedIn](#):





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IAAPA FEC
SUMMIT
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Fore! IAAPA FEC Summit 2026 Immerses Attendees in Education, Connections, and Sunshine

Set among cacti and golf courses, IAAPA FEC Summit 2026 brought FEC owners, operators, and vendors together for three days of networking, thought leadership, and tours.

“FEC Summit provided me and my facility with connections that we would normally not have,” says Kristine VanHorn, general manager of Bananas Fun Park in Grand Junction Colorado.

Hosted by the historic Wigwam, built by the Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company in 1918 as an executive retreat in Glendale, Arizona, attendees found insight—and sunshine. The IAAPA Connections event has gained the reputation where FEC professionals begin their year by sharing best practices and discovering new trends.

“I was excited to learn and take back information on marketing, sales, and how

to grow our employees,” says Monique Robles with Mesa Golfland in Mesa, Arizona.

Expert-led workshops, panel discussions, and seminars provided FEC operators with insight they could take back to their own facility.

EDUTours to three leading operators in the southwest U.S. provided attendees with first-person learning experiences.

The vast KTR (Kids That Rip) rolled out the welcome mat where founder Geoff Eaton shared how his business model evolved. The facility blends the physicality of ninja courses with self-esteem development in after-school sessions Monday-Thursday. On weekends, the facility operates as a traditional attraction.

FatCats Entertainment Queens Creek shared how the facility blends a traditional cinema experience with bowling,

arcade games, indoor miniature golf, and dining.

While the posh Pecan Lake Entertainment delighted attendees with its outdoor, modern farm house-like setting home to well-landscaped mini-golf, an expansive aerial climbing course, terrain hugging go-karts, a surf simulator, and an expansive indoor arcade.

“The value of IAAPA FEC Summit is in the connections that are made—not only amongst attendees and their ideation—but also in the relationships that are made between the suppliers and facility operators. There’s a lot of communication that happens between these two entities that really chart the course for innovation and improvement in the future,” says Todd Andrus, vice president and executive director of IAAPA North America. 



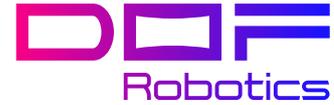
IAAPA FEC Summit 2027 will take place in Atlanta, in early 2027. Peruse all current IAAPA Events at [IAAPA.org/Calendar](https://iaapa.org/Calendar)



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Industry Luminaries Shine at IAAPA LEGENDS: A Hall of Fame Celebratory Affair



Members of the IAAPA Hall of Fame join the 2025 inductees on stage for a group photo.

Under the golden spotlights of the Orange County Convention Center theater, IAAPA LEGENDS returned for its second year on Nov. 17, 2025—transforming Monday evening of IAAPA Expo in Orlando into a space for reflection, recognition, and shared pride across the global attractions industry. The ticketed event honored the 2025 IAAPA Hall of Fame inductees—Keith James, the late Gerardo Arteaga Oehninger, Dolly Parton, Gary Wachs, and Su Zhigang—whose careers and contributions have helped shape the industry’s evolution across regions and generations.

IAAPA LEGENDS blended formal recognition with personal storytelling. Attendees from Asia Pacific; Europe, the Middle East, and Africa; Latin America and the Caribbean; and North America gathered to celebrate leaders whose impact extends beyond individual companies to the broader industry community. The evening honored the legacy of **Gerardo Arteaga Oehninger**, a respected attractions executive whose career left a lasting mark on the global industry, and recognized **Gary Wachs**, whose influence continues to shape strategic thinking across attractions, even though he was unable to attend in person.

Keith James, chairman, destination design at RWS Global, reflected on a career defined by relationships—even more than professional accomplishments. “The memories I have are going to be [about] the people, not so much the work,” James says. “The work is great, and a lot of people can do the work, but my memories will always be the people.” His remarks outline a recurring theme of the evening—that long-term success in the attractions industry is built on collaboration, mentorship, and shared purpose.

Su Zhigang, chairman and founder of Chimelong Group, echoes a future-first perspective, emphasizing confidence in the

industry’s continued growth. “I am very optimistic and have lots of hope for the future, and I am very happy in this industry,” Su says, highlighting both resilience and opportunity within the global attractions industry.

Dolly Parton—entertainer, philanthropist, and namesake of Dollywood Parks & Resorts—shared an award acceptance video where she reflects on the origins of Dollywood and its deep community roots. She recalls dreaming of a place in the

Great Smoky Mountains “where families come and laugh and play and have fun—and make memories together.” She also acknowledges the significance of the honor, noting that her induction coincides with Dollywood’s 40th anniversary season.

Beyond the celebration, IAAPA LEGENDS supported the IAAPA Foundation through live and silent auctions, reinforcing the industry’s commitment to investing in future leaders. As the evening concluded, the winners, their close colleagues, and their loved ones reinforced the idea that the industry’s next chapter is shaped by the same values—people, optimism, and purpose—that defined its past. **FW**



Keith James



Su Zhigang

Celebrate Inspiration at IAAPA Honors 2026



XCARET

IAAPA Honors 2026 brings the global attractions community to Hotel Xcaret Mexico in Playa del Carmen May 12–14 for an immersive experience that blends professional insight with meaningful celebration. Set against one of the world’s most visually striking destinations, the event brings together industry leaders, innovators, and award-winning teams to explore what excellence looks like in every corner of the attraction industry.

IAAPA Honors is rooted in learning directly from those shaping the industry’s future. Through thought-provoking keynotes and winner-led speeches, attendees will gain insight into standout achievements in live entertainment, human resources, food and beverage, marketing, sustainability, games and merchandise, family entertainment centers, and location-based entertainment. These sessions go beyond recognition, offering actionable advice and real-world perspectives on topics such as creative execution, operational strategy, workforce development, guest engagement, and responsible growth.

Award presentations and finalist spotlights anchor the experience, giving participants the opportunity to hear firsthand how leading organizations brought award-winning concepts to life. From sustainability initiatives and innovative retail strategies to breakthrough entertainment experiences and people-first workplace cultures, the conversations highlight practical takeaways alongside big-picture thinking. Dedicated “meet the winners” moments further encourage peer-to-peer exchange, allowing attendees to dig deeper into what made these projects successful.

Learning continues beyond the stage through exclusive EDUTours at world-class attractions within the Xcaret portfolio. These curated experiences provide behind-the-scenes access and contextual learning, reinforcing how storytelling, operations, and guest experience intersect in a destination-driven environment.

The event culminates with the IAAPA Honors Gala at Xcaret Park—an evening designed to celebrate achievement on a grand scale. Surrounded by natural beauty and cultural expression, attendees gather to recognize IAAPA’s Regional Individual Achievement Award winners and connect with peers in a setting that reflects the creativity and passion of the global attractions industry.

IAAPA Honors 2026 is set to bring reflection, inspiration, and connection for attractions professionals. For those looking to exchange ideas, celebrate excellence, and return home with fresh perspective, Xcaret offers an experience that is both professionally rewarding and memorable. 

Join IAAPA in the celebration by registering for IAAPA Honors:



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IAAPA Expands Cruise Industry Resources Through 2026 Partnership with Informa

IAAPA has formed a new strategic partnership with Informa, organizers of the Seatrade Cruise events held annually in the United States, Europe, and Asia. The alliance continues IAAPA's expansion into the cruise sector, broadening opportunities for members and exhibitors to engage with key decision-makers shaping entertainment at sea.

The collaboration aims to create added value for IAAPA members through shared research, cross-promotional initiatives, and enhanced access to Seatrade's extensive network within the cruise industry. IAAPA members can look forward to a wider range of opportunities for cruise-related live content sessions, networking receptions, sustainability initiatives, and a presence on both the Seatrade Cruise and IAAPA Expo show floors.

"The agreement will involve several departments and includes cross-promotion for the Expos, attendee discounts, research and data sharing, networking receptions, live content sessions, digital content, and Expo floor presence, among other initiatives," explains Alice Mathu, IAAPA's vice president of business development and partnerships.

Emma Bond, Seatrade Cruises' senior manager, also relays the value the partnership is set to bring to both member bases. "Seatrade Cruise is delighted to establish this exciting partnership with IAAPA ... we anticipate it will drive meaningful business development and operational excellence for members across both organizations, strengthening the entire travel and leisure ecosystem."

IAAPA members can expect to receive a 10% discount on passes to Seatrade Cruise events and access to curated networking opportunities that will connect attractions suppliers with cruise industry leaders. Seatrade attendees, in turn, will be invited to IAAPA Expos around the world. 

For more information on the partnership, contact AMathu@IAAPA.org



Build Valuable Relationships with IAAPA Communities

Across the attractions industry, professionals often say their greatest takeaway from IAAPA events isn't what they learn, it's who they meet. The debut of IAAPA Communities, a new digital hub, represents the next step in IAAPA's mission to connect, educate, and inspire the members of the global attractions industry. No matter the role or geographic location, a community is available—and it's only a click away.

IAAPA Communities bring the power of connection to members year-round. This new digital resource is designed for members to share ideas, ask questions, and build relationships that extend far beyond the IAAPA Expo show floor or an IAAPA Meetup.

Each community group is centered around shared interests, giving members a space to collaborate, problem-solve, and celebrate successes with the peers who understand their world. The platform offers something for attractions professionals of all

kinds. Whether a family entertainment center operator, a supplier developing new products, or a student kickstarting their career, IAAPA Communities provide a home base to stay connected.

However, it's more than just a networking platform. This initiative reflects IAAPA's belief that meaningful progress happens through shared learning and collaboration. It's envisioned as a space where conversations spark the next wave of innovation across the attractions industry.

With IAAPA Communities, the conversations that begin at Expos and events won't end—they can happen every day, across every time zone, with the people who make this industry unique. Members are encouraged to log in, introduce themselves, and find their crew. **FW**



Tap into connection with IAAPA Communities here:

A large advertisement for Surfloch. The background is a photograph of a wave pool with a surfer riding a wave. In the distance, there are mountains and palm trees. The Surfloch logo is in the top right corner. On the left, there is a dark blue vertical bar with white text: "INSPIRED BY NATURE" and "BUILT BY HAND". At the bottom left, there is a QR code and the text: "BOOTH 1201 AT IAAPA EXPO MIDDLE EAST IN ABU DHABI SURFLOCH.COM".

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IAAPA Supports New Measures Addressing Unauthorized Drone Activity at United States Amusement Parks



Unauthorized drones buzzing over amusement parks have evolved from an occasional nuisance to a critical safety threat. This is why the IAAPA North America's Public Affairs team acts at the federal level to protect facilities and their guests.

After years of strategic engagement, the public affairs team has made significant progress that will fundamentally change how eligible fixed-site amusement parks can address drone threats. The breakthrough comes as parks nationwide report increasing incidents of unauthorized drone activity over high-traffic areas, creating risks ranging from guest privacy violations to potential collisions with rides and attractions.

The first major development centers on Section 2209 rulemaking, where the public affairs team works with IAAPA members and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) to propose a formal petition process that would enable eligible parks to secure permanent airspace restrictions over their facilities. For parks operating in environments with high visitor volumes and complex ride systems, this could provide the long-term airspace protections that have been desperately needed as consumer drone usage continues to skyrocket.

"The attractions industry is built on trust, safety, and innovation, but drone technology and use have far outpaced existing policy, which has created new risks," says Matt Eckert, president and CEO of Holiday World & Splashin' Safari, and chair of the IAAPA North American Government Relations Subcommittee. "Protecting eligible parks from drone-related threats requires collaboration among policymakers, regulators, and operators to ensure the tools and authorities are in place to mitigate risks and prevent incidents before they occur."

The second major development is equally critical—the enactment of new federal legislation enabling eligible fixed-site amusement parks to work directly with state and local law enforcement to detect and neutralize drone threats in real time. This new coordination framework gives parks and their law enforcement partners clearer authority to act when unauthorized drones enter protected airspace, a gamechanger for facilities that previously had limited options when facing immediate threats.

"We are working to ensure these federal actions strengthen the industry's ability to prevent and respond to unauthorized drone threats, while preserving the ability for parks to operate drones for legitimate purposes, including drone shows, inspections, media production, fireworks integrations, and security operations," says Keith Stephenson, director of public affairs for IAAPA North America. "We will continue working with federal agencies and policymakers to advocate for a risk-based framework—rather than one based solely on attendance—to ensure protections reflect the real-world operating environment of all fixed site amusement parks in the U.S." 



Maddy Kraftchick

is the marketing manager for IAAPA North America. Maddy has been passionate about the attractions industry since attending her first IAAPA Expo in 2003. Having experienced 454 roller coasters across 22 states and Canada, she brings both professional expertise and an enthusiast's perspective to her work. Connect with her on [LinkedIn](#):



Join the Ranks of the IAAPA Global Board of Directors



The following positions are available beginning in 2027:

One second vice-chair.

Three regional advisory board chair directors, one from each region:

- o APAC
- o EMEA
- o NA

Two facility member/lifetime and honorary directors.

Learn more about the IAAPA Global Board of Directors at [IAAPA.org/BoardofDirectors](https://iaapa.org/BoardofDirectors)



Industry leaders with expertise to share—and a willingness to help shape the priorities of the global attractions industry—are encouraged to apply to join the 2027 IAAPA Global Board of Directors. The association’s strategic direction and long-term priorities are guided in part by the 23-member board, which represents operators, owners, consultants, and manufacturers from IAAPA regions around the world.

For those who serve, the experience offers far more than a seat at the table. Board members consistently point to the value of learning from peers whose perspectives, business models, and cultural contexts differ from their own.

Andrew Bolstein, president and general manager of Shanghai Disney Resort, says his time on the IAAPA Global Board of Directors is both professionally and personally meaningful.

“Serving on the IAAPA Global Board of Directors for the past three years has been an inspiring and rewarding experience,” Bolstein tells Funworld. “The board brings together a diverse group of industry leaders—individuals representing a range of cultures, business models, creative philosophies, and operational approaches.”

Dr. Neil Dwyer, current board member and vice president of park operations at Six Flags Qiddiya City, shares how participation on the IAAPA Global Board has allowed him to elevate priorities specific to the region he serves. “[I help] guide the strategic priorities of an industry I am so passionate about by representing

a number of key areas that I have focused on, including the Middle East, education, and safety.”

In addition to regional representation, conversations among the board often center on the issues shaping attractions worldwide—from safety and sustainability to technology and talent development.

“Topics like safety, sustainability, technology, and talent are not just abstract priorities,” Bolstein says. “They are essential pillars of our long-term success and resiliency.”

For industry professionals weighing whether to apply, Bolstein offers straightforward advice.

“For anyone considering applying to serve on an IAAPA Board, my advice is simple: take the leap,” he says. “Opportunities to help shape the direction of an entire global industry do not come along often, and this one is rewarding on both the personal and professional level.”

Online applications are open until June 4. 

IAAPA Education: Learning for Every Career Stage

From frontline professionals to executive leaders, IAAPA Education offers a global learning ecosystem designed to strengthen careers, teams, and organizations across the attractions industry.



For more than 100 years, IAAPA has supported professional growth through education rooted in real-world industry needs. Today, that commitment has expanded into a comprehensive suite of learning opportunities—available in person, online, and on demand—designed to meet members wherever they are in their careers.

Digital Learning & Webinars

IAAPA's digital learning platform makes it easy to stay current in a fast-moving industry. Members can access on-demand courses and recorded webinars covering critical topics, such as safety, operations, marketing, sustainability, finance, human resources, and guest experience.

Live webinars connect learners directly with industry experts and peers from around the world, while many sessions offer continuing education units (CEUs) that can be applied toward IAAPA certification. Whether you're sharpening a specific skill or building long-term expertise, digital resources allow attractions professionals to learn anywhere.

In-Person Learning Experiences

IAAPA's in-person education programs provide deep, hands-on learning opportunities that go beyond the classroom. From multi-day institutes to regional summits and EDUSessions at IAAPA Expos, these experiences combine expert-led instruction with peer discussion and behind-the-scenes access to leading attractions.

Participants gain practical insights, explore case studies, and engage in meaningful dialogue with professionals facing similar challenges—building both knowledge and lasting industry connections.

IAAPA Certification

IAAPA Certification is the global standard for professional excellence in the attractions industry. Designed to validate knowledge and experience, certification demonstrates a commitment to best practices and lifelong learning.

Available across multiple disciplines and career levels, IAAPA certifications can help professionals stand out, advance within their organizations, and build credibility across the global industry.

Customized Learning Pathways

IAAPA Education supports learners through curated pathways grounded in the IAAPA Common Body of Knowledge. From early-career professionals to senior leaders, programs are designed to align with evolving responsibilities and career goals—ensuring education remains relevant at every stage.

LEARN MORE AT [IAAPA.ORG/EDUCATION](https://iaapa.org/education)

This is a partial listing of upcoming IAAPA events. Event details are as of Feb. 5, 2026, and subject to change. For the most up-to-date information, visit IAAPA.org/Events

MARCH 2026



30-April 2 | Abu Dhabi, UAE

APRIL 2026

IAAPA Safety Institute – Abu Dhabi

3 | Abu Dhabi, UAE

IAAPA Institute for Attractions Professionals – Abu Dhabi

3-4 | Abu Dhabi, UAE

IAAPA Institute for Executive Development

3-6 | Abu Dhabi, UAE

IAAPA Summit: Latin America, Caribbean 2026

20-24 | Miami

IAAPA Presents: Indoor Entertainment

22 | Antwerp, Belgium

MAY

IAAPA Safety Institute

6 | Orlando

IAAPA Meetup: IAAPA HQ

6 | Orlando



12-14 | Playa del Carmen, Mexico

JUNE

IAAPA Water Park Forum

4 | Wavre, Belgium

IAAPA Presents: Walibi Belgium

5 | Wavre, Belgium



9-12 | Hong Kong

IAAPA Presents: Karls Erlebnis-Dorf Elstal for Young Professionals

23 | Elstal, Germany

USPS POSTAL CIRCULATION STATEMENT 2025

Publication title: Funworld
 Publication number: 528
 Issue date for circulation data below:
 Date of filing: 09/01/2025
 Frequency of magazine: Bi-Monthly
 Number of issues annually: 6
 Annual subscription price: \$66.00
 Tax status: Has not changed during preceding 12 months
 Complete mailing address of headquarters or general business office:
 4155 West Taft Vineland Road, Orlando, FL 32837-4031
 Full names and complete mailing addresses of publisher, editor, and managing editor:

Publisher: International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions (IAAPA), 4155 West Taft Vineland Road, Orlando, FL 32837-4031
 Editor: Scott Fais, 4155 West Taft Vineland Road, Orlando, FL 32837-4031
 Managing Editor: Michael Costello, 4155 West Taft Vineland Road, Orlando, FL 32837-4031
 Owner: International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions (IAAPA), 4155 West Taft Vineland Road, Orlando, FL 32837-4031
 Known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities: None

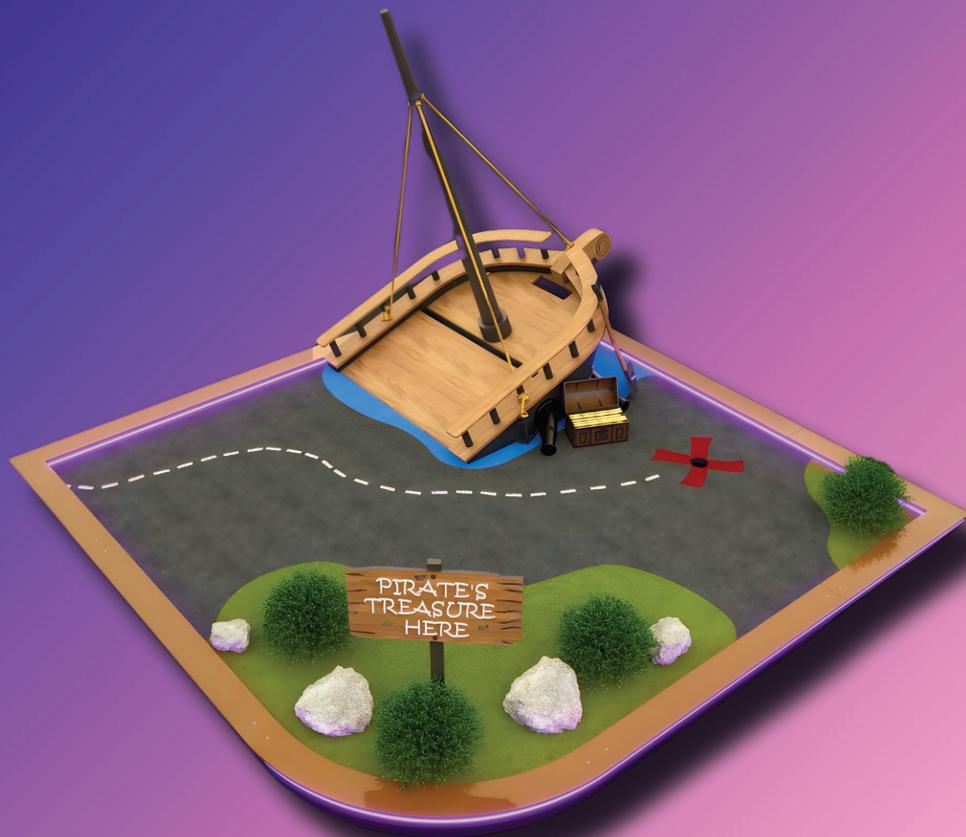
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An Oasis of GROWTH



The expansion era in the Middle East accelerates

by Juliana Gilling

PALPABLE EXCITEMENT IS IN THE AIR AS IAAPA PREPARES TO CELEBRATE A DOUBLE MILESTONE as “tremendous growth continues in the Middle East,” according to IAAPA President and CEO Jakob Wahl. In 2026, IAAPA will extend its reach, deepening the association’s commitment to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The expansion comes as attraction owners and operators continue to form new partnerships that will guarantee growth in the region for years to come.

Funworld looks at how the attractions landscape will continue to evolve across the Middle East—and how IAAPA plans to support the momentum in this era of unprecedented growth.





Six Flags Qiddiya City shimmers at dusk as the park comes alive under the lights.



The Zayed National Museum opened in early December 2025 on Saadiyat Island in Abu Dhabi. The museum's five lightweight, steel wings are part of the museum's natural ventilation system.

New Attractions Rise Across the Middle East

SAADIYAT ISLAND IN ABU DHABI, United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.), shimmers like a cultural oasis in turquoise seas, its shoreline crowned with a world-class collection of contemporary museums. This beacon of culture and contemplation is emblematic of a wider transformation across the Middle East.

The U.A.E., Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and their neighbors are focused on creating cultural, entertainment, and tourism infrastructure on an unprecedented scale, reshaping national economies and global perceptions.

Cultural Powerhouses

On Saadiyat Island, the five falcon wing-inspired towers of the Zayed National Museum, designed by Foster + Partners, reach for the skies.

“We are part of a cultural district designed to function as an interconnected ecosystem, where visitors can experience universal art, immersive digital environments, and natural history within minutes of one another, before encountering a nationally anchored narrative here. What makes the museum distinctive is that it gives context to that wider experience, grounding it in the history of this place,” says Dr. Peter Magee, director of the Zayed National Museum.

Since the museum's opening in December, guests have

journeyed into 300,000 years of regional history through the eyes of the Founding Father of the United Arab Emirates, the late Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan.

“A national museum must first resonate with the people who call this country home. If residents recognize their own history in the galleries, international visitors will sense the authenticity of that narrative,” Magee believes. The carefully curated objects trace a thread from the past to the present. “Every object, whether the Abu Dhabi Pearl, the Blue Qur’an, or the reconstructed Bronze Age Magan Boat, has been chosen to explain the continuity between ancient exchange networks and the U.A.E.’s contemporary role as a global crossroads,” he says.

The museum will continue to evolve through temporary exhibitions, storytelling that utilizes the latest technology, and public programming that includes live dance performances. These ongoing opportunities encourage visitors to return and engage in new ways. “Our aim is to sustain Zayed National Museum’s position as a bright star within the larger constellation of the Saadiyat Cultural District,” Magee says.

Also on Saadiyat Island, the Natural History Museum Abu Dhabi opened in November. Designed by Mecanoo, the museum’s faceted geometry echoes rock strata and cellular forms—architecture that mirrors the natural world it seeks to explain. Visitors travel through 13.8 billion years of history, seeing artefacts such as Stan, a 67-million-year-old, fossilized Tyrannosaurus Rex.

Meanwhile, the purpose-built, 18,000-square-meter teamLab Phenomena Abu Dhabi—operated by Miral—allows art lovers to immerse themselves within colossal digital artworks.

H.E. Mohamed Khalifa Al Mubarak, Chairman of Abu Dhabi’s Department of Culture and Tourism, calls the project “a

groundbreaking cultural landmark that redefines immersive art experiences on a global scale,” adding that it “pushes the boundaries of creativity, technology, and human perception, offering visitors an experience unlike any other.”

At the Louvre Abu Dhabi—the first universal museum in the Arab world, born of an unprecedented partnership between France and the U.A.E.—architect Jean Nouvel’s design marries tradition and modernity. Inspired by classic Arab architecture, the museum’s silvery dome (as seen on Funworld’s cover) seems to float between land and sea. Sunlight filters through its star-patterned lattice in a shifting “Rain of Light,” dappling floors and faces, and illuminating works that speak across civilizations and centuries.

Beyond its spectacular architecture, the museum’s rich permanent collection and rolling program of temporary exhibitions.

Soon, the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi will join this remarkable assembly, cementing Abu Dhabi’s standing as a global center for culture, arts, and creativity.

Intellectual Giants

With 2026 designated the U.A.E.’s Year of the Family, Yas Island’s world-class theme parks and attractions—Warner Bros. World



Louvre Abu Dhabi opened on Saadiyat Island in 2017

“A groundbreaking cultural landmark that **redefines immersive art experiences** on a global scale.”

—H.E. Mohamed Khalifa Al Mubarak

Abu Dhabi, Ferrari World Abu Dhabi, SeaWorld Yas Island Abu Dhabi, Yas Waterworld Abu Dhabi, and CLYMB Abu Dhabi—are the perfect playground, powered by strategic partnerships and intellectual properties (IPs).

“Once a blank canvas, Yas Island has been transformed into a one-of-a-kind, fully integrated and all-encompassing destination, where world-class attractions, hospitality, retail, dining, and



Yas Waterworld on Yas Island, Abu Dhabi, opened its Lost City expansion in July 2025, featuring more than 20 new attractions.

major events operate within one seamless ecosystem,” says Dr. Mohamed Abdalla Al Zaabi, Group CEO of Miral.

Investment continues with Yas Waterworld’s recent expansion, the Harry Potter-themed land coming to Warner Bros. World Abu Dhabi, Topgolf’s arrival on Yas Island, another record-breaking ride for Ferrari World, and new themed hotels.

Images of Robert A. Iger, outgoing CEO of The Walt Disney Company, striding across the future Disneyland Abu Dhabi site underscored the emirate’s transformation into a force on the global entertainment stage.

Abu Dhabi’s Tourism Strategy 2030 has propelled this wave of development, laying out a road map to attract 39.3 million visitors and increase the sector’s GDP contribution to AED 90 billion by the decade’s end.

Miral’s exceptional summer in 2025 reflects the growing momentum. Yas Island saw a 15% increase in visitation, while Saadiyat Island recorded a 14% rise across its cultural attractions and hotels. Yas Theme Parks had its best summer yet, up 9%, with a 50% increase in international visitors.

Dazzling Debuts

Across Saudi Arabia, vast new realms of entertainment continue to rise. Six Flags Qiddiya City stands as a testament to the Kingdom’s Vision 2030 in action. How many other theme parks would have the courage to send roller coaster riders off a cliff, as Qiddiya City does with Falcons Flight? The Intamin-designed roller coaster is one of the world’s tallest, fastest, and longest to date.

“This world-class destination combines cutting-edge, record-breaking attractions, immersive experiences for all ages, and the

signature thrills that have made Six Flags a global leader. We look forward to welcoming guests from across the Kingdom and beyond to experience the future of fun at Qiddiya City,” says John Reilly, president and CEO of Six Flags Entertainment Corporation. More world-firsts will follow at Saudi Arabia’s first water theme park, Aquarabia, slated to open later this year.

Saudi Entertainment Ventures (SEVEN), part of Qiddiya Investment Company, set the goal of creating a nationwide entertainment network. “The scale of development, construction, investment, and long-term vision is remarkable. Momentum is evident everywhere you turn, with a clear focus on sustainable growth and impact,” says Bianca Sammut, ICAE, executive director at SEVEN.

Funding the Future

Renewal is a recurring theme across the Middle East. With guest expectations higher than ever, Doha Quest, Qatar’s first indoor theme park, is committed to investing in novel attractions to stay competitive. “We are currently installing a new attraction called SkiQuest, which will allow our guests to ski or snowboard without traveling to the mountains,” says



SAUDI
ENTERTAINMENT
VENTURES

INSIDE SEVEN

Read more on the growth of SEVEN and how the operator plans to open attractions at several locations in Saudi Arabia with Funword’s original reporting. Visit [IAAPA.org/SEVEN](https://www.iaapa.org/SEVEN)

The New Year’s Eve opening ceremony at Six Flags Qiddiya City featured a stunning fireworks show with the Falcons Flight roller coaster serving as a focal point.





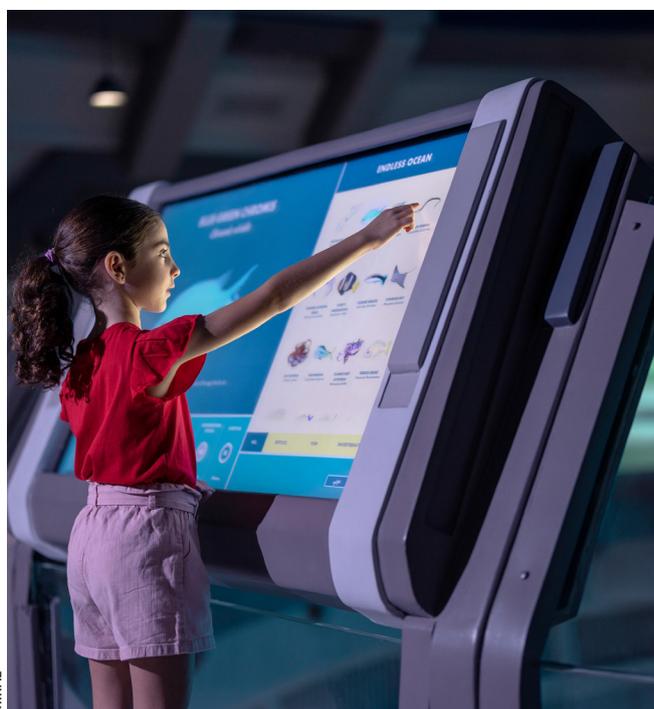
DOHA QUEST

general manager Heiko Engels. Doha Quest also partnered with Sally Dark Rides on the world's first Mini Dark Ride.

In Dubai, Atlantis, The Palm's reimagined Lost World Aquarium honors the aquarium's legacy while introducing immersive storytelling, advanced audiovisual technology, and enhanced educational content to spread its marine conservation message.

Ground Control Entertainment Co. has a slate of new openings planned for 2026.

"These include Nerf Action Xperience, Play-Doh Fun Factory, and Ground Control at Msheireb Galleria in Msheireb Downtown Doha," says founder and CEO Mohamed Mahmoud. "We are also launching Miraculous Adventure and Lock Down at Mall of Qatar, Ground Control at Reem Mall Abu Dhabi, Ground Control at Kingdom Centre Riyadh, and both Ground Control and Miraculous



MIRAL

ABOVE: Doha Quest in Qatar features more than 32,000 square meters and features more than 30 attractions.

LEFT: A young visitor to SeaWorld Yas Island, Abu Dhabi uses a touchscreen to learn about the fish inside the Endless Ocean realm.

BELOW: Ground Control operates FECs across in the region with more locations on the way.



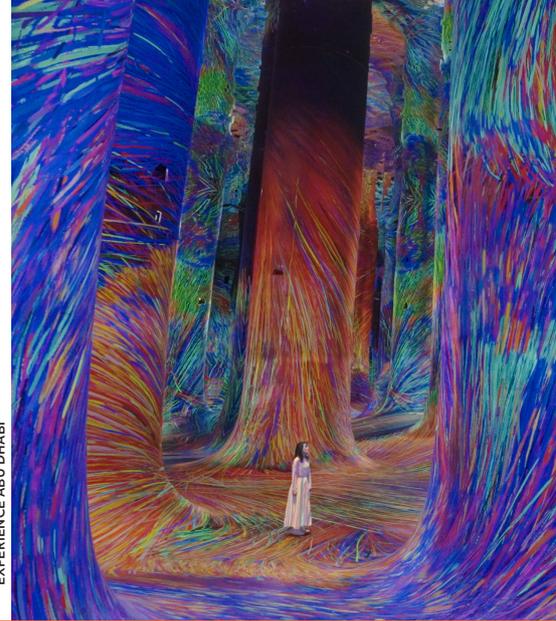
GROUND CONTROL ENTERTAINMENT

Adventure at Souq7.”

Steven Putzeys, leisure and entertainment business manager at Alshaya Group, says, “We are preparing for our largest expansion yet, with more than 10 new parks opening over the next two years. This includes DreamPlay from DreamWorks from Universal, at The Avenues in Riyadh.”

Dubai Parks and Resorts has doubled down on innovation, too. Guests staying at its new T-REX Glamping retreat can enjoy seamless access to Motiongate Dubai, Legoland Dubai, Legoland Water Park, and the soccer-themed Real Madrid World. Seasonal celebrations have increasingly motivated guests to visit. Motiongate Dubai recently threw its first-ever Halloween event, Fright Nights: The Party.

Therme Group plans to welcome guests to a towering new wellness resort, Therme Dubai—Islands in the Sky. Wynn Al



EXPERIENCE ABU DHABI

In the MENA Time |

IAAPA expands across the Middle East and North Africa extending support to a growing region

Call it a twin reveal. This spring marks the debut of the IAAPA Expo Middle East in Abu Dhabi (March 30 - April 2) and the announcement that IAAPA and MENALAC—the trade council that represents leading leisure and attractions companies across the MENA region—will join forces to launch IAAPA MENA (Middle East North Africa).

A new regional office in Dubai will anchor IAAPA’s expansion in the Middle East, bringing the association even closer to members and decision-makers in one of the world’s fastest-growing markets. IAAPA President and CEO Jakob Wahl believes this is a historic moment defined by an unparalleled opportunity to grow, assist members, and support the Middle East’s flourishing attractions industry.

While new projects are garnering attention (see page 14), Wahl also appreciates the industry’s deeper roots. He points to early attractions, like the 15-year-old Ferrari World Abu Dhabi and other the landmark attractions on Yas Island, Dubai’s

Global Village, and Dubai Parks and Resorts, which established the audience base and operational expertise that emerging projects continue to build upon. Flagship family entertainment centers show the region’s “advanced indoor entertainment business.”

Accelerating Growth

Development across nations and borders continues at a dizzying speed. “We see continued growth and incredibly ambitious plans,” Wahl says. “When you think about projects like Atlantis The Royal, Six Flags Qiddya City, Aquarabia, and SEVEN in Saudi Arabia, you see innovative concepts and attractions which we haven’t seen anywhere else. We know about the Disney park in Abu Dhabi, the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi is coming, and there’s also Expo 2030 Riyadh. It’s amazing what is happening on all levels. We are very happy and excited to be a part of this and to launch a new regional office for our members.”



Ferrari World Yas Island, Abu Dhabi, opened to the public in October 2010.

MIRAL



Located in the Saadiyat Cultural District, TeamLab Phenomena Abu Dhabi officially opened in April 2025.

Marjan Island is scheduled to open in spring 2027. And FEC operators, like Majid al Futtaim, rolled out the new SOCO at City Centre Mirdif in February.

SOCO's "social jungle" concept brings bowling, arcade games, and dining together in a bright, trendy environment that feels alive—thanks to its use of plants as part of the décor.

Ensuring Continuing Growth

With a brimming pipeline of projects, the Middle East looks poised to continue as a thriving global tourism hub. While the scale of developments may be beyond the reach of other operators around the world, this unprecedented era of expansion offers valuable insights: the importance of a long-term vision, sustained investment in tourism infrastructure, coordinated planning, regional and global relevance, carefully selected IPs, and the right people and partners to bring ideas to life. 

Powerful Partners

IAAPA's decision to establish a MENA base is the latest step in the association's ongoing regionalization, which has already seen the association expand across Europe, Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Asia-Pacific.

"IAAPA is a member organization, guided by the members for the members," Wahl explains. "With a growing number of members in the MENA region, it makes sense for us to embed ourselves in the Middle East. Our goal is to deliver relevant products and services for our members and help push the industry forward."

Everyone stands to gain from the IAAPA/MENALAC alliance. "We are better together," Wahl says, sharing that MENALAC created a legacy in the region that will be at work for years to come.

A respected voice for the region since its establishment in 2016, MENALAC was founded by leading entertainment companies with a shared commitment to ensuring the MENA leisure and attractions sector is represented, supported, and positioned for long-term growth in an increasingly dynamic global marketplace.

Through this collaboration, IAAPA builds upon the strong foundation MENALAC has established over the past decade—championing the region's interests, elevating industry standards, and fostering collaboration among theme parks operators, amusement parks, visitor attractions, family entertainment centers, manufacturers and suppliers.

"By establishing IAAPA MENA, we're ensuring that members in this dynamic region receive even stronger representation and resources while remaining fully connected to our worldwide network. MENALAC has served as a passionate and effective advocate for the region's attractions industry. Together, we are combining the strengths of two respected organizations to empower innovation, collaboration, and sustainable growth," Wahl shares.

An Extraordinary Expo

IAAPA will formally unveil the collaboration at the inaugural IAAPA Expo Middle East 2026, a "historic moment," according to Wahl. The new IAAPA Expo Middle East is an entirely new ven-

ture, and Wahl promises an unforgettable experience.

The show floor is sold out, even after two expansions. Attendees can connect with almost 350 exhibitors. "But we deliver far more than a trade show," Wahl says.

IAAPA Expo Middle East offers an unmissable opportunity to gain valuable connections and insights through a strong lineup of networking and educational events, led by industry experts. A packed education program features days devoted to indoor entertainment, water parks, "sportainment," and the Saadiyat Island museums. IAAPA will spotlight practical sustainability solutions at its Sustainability Forum.

EDUSessions will explore topics ranging from safety and artificial intelligence through to culture, global trends, destination branding, and accessibility. Guided tours will take guests

behind the scenes at Yas Island, Dubai Parks and Resorts, Qiddiya City, and the Galleria Mall.

Anticipation is high.

"I'm proud of the way the team is working so closely with our partners in Abu Dhabi, DCT (Department of Culture and Tourism) and Miral, and our wonderful members and friends to ensure a strong launch," Wahl says.

Abu Dhabi will serve as host of IAAPA Expo Middle East in 2026 and again in 2027. Afterward, the association aims to take the Expo on the road, reaching audiences across the Middle East. "It's important that this Expo is for the whole region," Wahl emphasizes.

From his perspective, IAAPA Expos are where the association truly comes alive. When peers unite, shared expertise translates into tangible industry growth, he believes. "Rising tides lift all ships."

IAAPA Expo Middle East 2026 is where news will be made, insights will be shared, and experiences will inspire. "You'll walk away thinking, 'Wow, I'm glad I was here,'" Wahl concludes.



ATTEND IAAPA EXPO MIDDLE EAST

Registration is open online and available in person at the ADNEC Centre Abu Dhabi for the inaugural IAAPA Expo Middle East. From a sold-out trade show floor and dynamic EDUTours, to networking opportunities and insight shared by experts, IAAPA Expo Middle East 2026 taking place March 30-April 2 is not to miss. Register today at IAAPA.org/ExpoMiddleEast

Operating Worlds of Wonder

How an Oregon-based entrepreneur duo taps into local markets

*story by Avery Matteo
photos and character graphics provided
by Teddy Albertson and Mike Bennett*

RUNNING A FAMILY ENTERTAINMENT CENTER demands far more than creativity—it requires constant operational decision-making from day one. Opening the doors of a facility brings with it a long list of responsibilities and considerations, from staffing and scheduling to guest flow and financial sustainability.

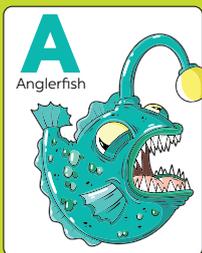
What should aspiring operators prioritize? Funworld asked Teddy Albertson, co-founder of Wonderwood Springs and Indoor Mini Golf, and Mike Bennett—a visual artist, self-identified “public joy creator,” and founder of Wonderwood Springs & Indoor Mini Golf, The Portland Aquarium, and Mike Bennett Studios.

For many entrepreneurs, the hardest part is creating a model that works operationally and creatively at the same time. For Albertson, those pressures weren't a deterrent—they were the design brief. With a background in hospitality and real estate, Albertson has spent the past three years building a new kind of family entertainment model alongside Bennett—one rooted in immersive storytelling, operational flexibility, and a deliberate role as a complementary tenant within larger retail and neighborhood ecosystems.





PORTLAND
MUSEUM

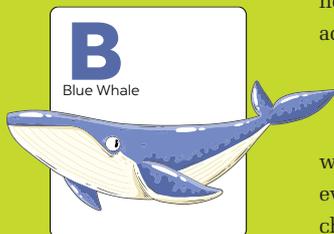
From Struggling Cafe to Immersive Anchor

Albertson describes the start of their first project as a practical one. There wasn't a vision for an FEC, but rather a struggling cafe in Portland's St. Johns neighborhood that needed new life.

"My background is in hospitality, and we had a somewhat underperforming cafe in the neighborhood where Mike had an immersive experience adjacent to it," Albertson says. "I reached out to Mike and said, 'Hey, will you come in?'"

In roughly 45 days, Bennett transformed the interior using antiques and painted plywood. The result is Wonderwood Springs, a medieval fantasy cafe populated by Bennett's original characters—his own interpretations of unicorns, monsters, fairies, and other fantastical creatures.

"We instantly saw the business perform about five times better than it was before," Albertson says. "We created a true storyline-driven and immersive cafe environment."



Food, Beverage, and the Reality of All-Day Operations

Wonderwood Springs operates as an all-day café, serving breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Albertson acknowledges that stretching food and beverage (F&B) operational hours across an entire day—and offering different menu items as the day progresses—is often where hospitality concepts struggle.

"From an F&B standpoint ... [other attractions] may only really work at one of those meal periods and stretch into another to try and capitalize on the revenue," he shares. "But when you're working with this fully immersive storytelling, art-driven type of experience, I've found that it needs those all-day food offerings ... you can come in at 10 a.m. for coffee and a bagel, or at 7 p.m. for a burger and a beer, and it feels natural." In addition, their menu selections were designed to be approachable and price-sensitive for families.



"We instantly saw the business perform about five times better than it was before. We created a true storyline-driven and immersive cafe environment."

Managing Capacity

Unlike walkthrough attractions, mini-golf creates unavoidable bottlenecks. Rather than forcing guests to queue in place for their Wonderwood mini-golf experience, the team implemented a digital waitlist system.

“People can get kind of stacked up on each other,” Albertson says. “So, we have a digital waitlist where people can go explore the neighborhood and go to the businesses surrounding us.” He soon saw that the decision to implement the virtual waitlist had positive ripple effects beyond Wonderwood’s walls.

“We’ve seen an uptick not just for us, but for the entire neighborhood,” he says. “It reinforces our belief that these experiences work best as complementary tenants.”

That philosophy would become even more pronounced in the team’s next project—The Portland Aquarium.

Rewriting Aquarium Economics

Located on a prime downtown corner, The Portland Aquarium occupies just 3,000 square feet—a footprint too small for a traditional, live animal facility. Instead, the attraction uses illustrated environments and immersive storytelling to showcase more than 100 species, including animals such as blue whales and hammerhead sharks.

“The biggest difference between Wonderwood and the aquarium is the economics,” Albertson says. “The aquarium is purely ticket and retail driven—no food and beverage.”

He shares that downtown Portland is filled with popular food and beverage options already, and they did not intend to compete for those dollars. “We wanted to be a third space that complements what’s already there,” Albertson adds.

The illustrated format also dramatically alters cost structures. “Once you have the right number of attendees to cover your fixed costs, the flowthrough is pretty significant once you hit that break-even point,” Albertson says.

While a small number of guests initially expect live animals, Albertson says the response is overwhelmingly positive.

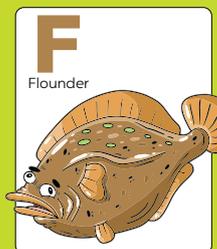
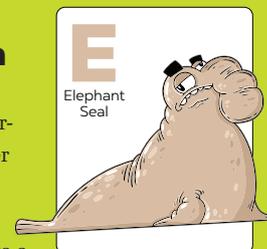
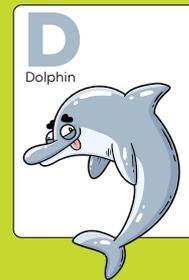
A Scalable Model for Suburban Markets

Looking ahead, Albertson sees the greatest opportunity in tier two and tier three markets—smaller communities that likely cannot support a traditional zoo or aquarium.

“There are so many cities that will never have a zoo or aquarium,” he says. “But families still want those educational, experiential moments.”

Because the model doesn’t rely on live animals, the facility can scale into spaces ranging from 3,000 to 20,000 square feet, adapting to shopping centers, outdoor malls, and downtown retail.

The team has also recently released a “zooquarium” podcast concept focused on teaching kids facts about land and sea animals. “By combining the science and the animal elements, we found that there’s a lot more long-term sustainability and opportunity within that space. People are resonating with it,” says Albertson.





That approach is especially evident within The Portland Aquarium.

“We can talk about how we can bring back sea otters to the

Oregon coast or what we can do to take care of our coastlines,” Bennett says, “but it wasn’t too long ago that I was a student, and I can remember what being bored felt like. I can also really remember what being entertained while learning felt like, and that’s the stuff I remember from school. So, I try to use that as a North Star.”

The Value of Incubator Cities

Both founders point to Portland as an ideal testing ground. “This city really does a great job of adopting ideas and embracing them,” Bennett says. “Sometimes people refer to Portland as an incubator city. It’s where a lot of ideas come from and then expand globally.”

For Bennett, transforming existing buildings in the city he’s called home for a decade carries weight. “Turning a 100-year-old department store into a space full of joy is an honor and a responsibility,” he says. “You’re adding new memories to a place that has decades and decades of memories built into it. I think it’s really awesome to get the keys to some of these spaces and transform them.”

Bennett’s earliest work began at his own home. He created an art exhibit named A to Zoo, which featured the addition of one new animal installation in his front yard each day during the pandemic. Word of the installation quickly spread,

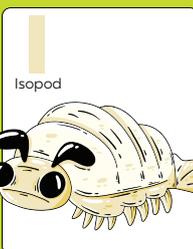
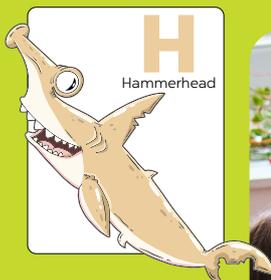


The Creative Engine

While Albertson brings his business acumen to the table, Bennett serves as the emotional and visual core of each experience.

A former preschool teacher, Bennett brings an educator’s mindset to immersive design.

“Kids want to learn,” Bennett says. “That’s something that’s easy for us to forget. But I have a 17-month-old at home, and even now, she’s learning all the time and is so engaged when something new is happening.”



and the number of visitors began to get out of hand. “At one point, we had 1,000 people show up in a single day,” Bennett says. “That’s when I knew it needed to live somewhere else.”

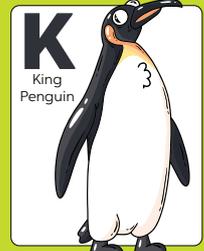
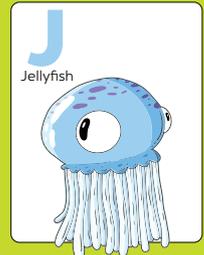
Community, Merchandise, and Momentum

Merchandise sourcing and development remains in-house, built directly from Bennett’s original characters. While early offerings focused on small, traditional souvenirs, the line is expanding into games, plush, and educational products.

“We began to expand into games like Go Fish, plushies, stickers ... we’re also trying to focus more on educational products. We’re doing alphabet flashcards, coloring books—really trying to focus on the combination of art and education,” says Albertson.

Community engagement is equally central. From free art days to a fundraising event where the public was invited to help paint the world’s largest dachshund, the team views its spaces as more than ticketed attractions.

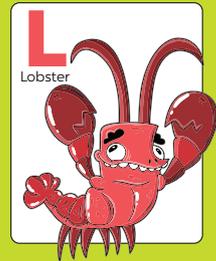
“We did [the dachshund event] in tandem with a local food provider for people in need, to help the void of SNAP benefits [being disrupted]. So, our best events are things that incorporate



giving back to or supporting the community,” Albertson shares. So, really, we’re just creating an open community space centered around joy, creation, and art where people can engage.”

What’s Next

Looking ahead, Albertson says that growth will depend on finding the right real estate partners—ones who understand experiential tenants. “We’ve done everything on a shoestring budget. We’re completely self-financed, so we’ve done things in a very DIY fashion ... but at the same time, we’re looking to find someone that can see the value that we bring. It’s about scaling it with the right people.” 



From Engagement to Advocacy

How brand experience centers create brand ambassadors

by *Sophie Brookover*

SOME OF THE MOST NOTABLE GROWTH IN THE ATTRACTIONS INDUSTRY comes from brands outside of the traditional attractions space. Under the umbrella of brand experience centers—ranging from museums and factory tours to hands-on installations and theme parks—companies are increasingly using immersive environments to extend reach and deepen consumer engagement.

Bart Dohmen, managing partner at TDAC and IAAPA Education Committee member, describes a successful brand experience center, or brand house, as “a commercial that works to change the visitor into an ambassador of that brand.” While a traditional advertisement may offer only seconds to convey a message, a brand house can provide “one or two hours to really get people into the brand.” At the same time, Dohmen cautions that experiences that feel overly commercial can alienate visitors. Brands that prioritize authentic storytelling—rooted in history, place, people, and culture—are better positioned to create emotional connections that guests carry forward and share with others.

Common Threads Across Brand Experiences

Representatives of brand experience centers from companies like Volvo, Formula 1, Cimory Dairy, Conservas Pinhais, and Cacao Show shared lessons learned from developing brand-specific attractions. Across sectors and regions, common themes emerged that helped companies in their journeys to connect consumers with brands.

Emotion Through Immersion at Cacao Show

One of the boldest statements of purpose among brands expanding into the attractions sector comes from Alê Costa, CEO and founder of Cacao Show. The Brazil-based chocolate company leader



describes the company as not “merely a chocolate manufacturer, but as a true ecosystem of happiness.” Building on the operation of eight indoor shopping center parks and multiple themed hotels, the brand is now focused on developing Cacau Park. The full-scale theme park is set to open in 2027 outside of Sao Paulo and envisioned as the company’s “ultimate destination.”

This ambitious project blends thrill rides with emotional storytelling, supported by a partnership with Dutch manufacturer Vekoma and storytelling embedded in the design of the park’s “authentic, engaging physical spaces.” Among the park’s signature attractions is Ghost Rider, a launch coaster that attains a top speed of 120 kph. The park’s other attractions will include an optical illusion-based mad house ride, a family roller coaster, and a flying theater.

Cacau Park is designed as “a grand sensory journey from the bean to the heart,” with five themed areas tracing key moments in chocolate’s history, from antiquity to future innovation. Even the queues will be programmed with educational content, allowing visitors to learn about chocolate processing or biscuit manufacturing while they wait. Costa describes the holistic approach—from themed hotels to attractions for all ages—as a strategy to create effective memories that leave visitors feeling “enchanted, welcomed, and inspired.”

Accessibility as a Strategic Priority

Accessibility is central to that vision. Costa emphasizes that innovation and safety will not come at the expense of affordability, noting that international theme park travel remains out of reach for many Brazilians. Costa says it’s important to bring “that



global standard of quality” to Brazilian soil, which is wrapped into Cacau Park’s goal of welcoming three million visitors annually.

Pricing accessibility is also a priority at Grand Prix Plaza in Las Vegas. Austin Brown, vice president of marketing for Las Vegas Grand Prix, Inc., notes that ticket pricing and free parking are two facets of the 39-acre multiuse complex’s focus on attracting casual Formula 1 fans, with an objective of encouraging them to “engage more deeply” with the globally popular sport. Prices for Grand Prix Plaza’s suite of attractions—the F1 X immersive design and simulated drive experience and the F1 Drive karting experience—start at \$37, and free parking is not easy to find in Las Vegas. Grand Prix Plaza also offers a variety of activity packages for F1 Drive to appeal to a variety of budgets and racers ages 12 and older. The a la carte structure allows visitors to customize their experience





Cacao Park

while supporting the broader goal of growing Formula 2's U.S. fan base, which now includes races in Miami, Las Vegas, and Austin, Texas.

Designing Entry Points for New Fans

Entering its second full year of operations in 2026, Grand Prix Plaza is focused on expanding entry points for new audiences, particularly sports fans introduced to the sport through the Netflix series "Formula 1: Drive to Survive." F1 race watch parties held at Grand Prix Plaza, which are free to attend, have been "a tremendous success," according to Brown.

At the same time, Grand Prix Plaza's attractions are designed to meet the expectations of the core Formula 1 fans. Technology investments include widening the F1 Drive kart track to allow for overtaking and incorporating a segment of the same circuit used during the Las Vegas Grand Prix. Within F1 X, visitors can view historic race cars on loan from the Petersen Automotive Museum and design custom cars in a studio developed with Brian Burke Creative.



Turning Heritage Into Experience at Conservas Pinhais

High-tech solutions, however, are not prerequisites for a successful brand experience center. Conservas Pinhais in Matosinhos, Portugal, has leaned into the heritage of the 100 year-old sardine company at its combined canning factory and brand house. In 2010, owner Jakob Glatz realized they "have something truly unique that needs to be shown to the world." Small-group tours allow visitors to observe the brand's fully artisanal sardine-packing process, guided by staff working within the original 1920s factory.

Glatz and his team worked with architects to ensure the experience remained rooted in local identity. This choice ensured that Conservas Pinhais could rely on telling the brand's story "without too much technology that could hide the authenticity of our brand and our identity." The brand's commitment to an artisanal approach also played a role in keeping the experience low-tech and infused with a human touch. After watching an award-winning introductory film about the brand's history, visitors are primed to connect with factory staff, especially women on the production floor who take pride in demonstrating their craft. The tour's script, developed with filmmaker and creative advisor Thomas Dirnhofer, guides visitors through the brand's history with a clear storytelling arc.

The experience concludes with guests hand-wrapping their own cans of sardines using packaging that's



Grand Prix Plaza



Conservas Pinhais

remained unchanged since 1935. This tactile, behind-the-scenes interaction reinforces tradition and creates what Glatz describes as “deep impressions and lasting memories.”

Evolving a Legacy Brand at World of Volvo

Volvo, another historic brand, has a long history and “a great heritage story to tell,” says World of Volvo Chief Experience and Operating Officer Viktoria Wallner. The former Volvo museum focused primarily on history, while the new World of Volvo experience that replaced it is designed to “nurture the brand, its legacy, and its future.”

The building housing World of Volvo in Gothenburg, Sweden, was designed by Denmark’s Henning Larsen firm to honor “Scandinavian design values,” including *Allemansrätten*, “the Swedish concept of freedom to roam in nature.” World of Volvo also maintains a commitment to Gothenburg as a whole. World of Volvo offers free concerts in partnership with the Gothenburg Opera and City Symphonics in addition to programs for students through area universities. Wallner says that although World of Volvo’s originally expected audience was adults—especially Volvo employees—World of Volvo now regularly welcomes families, tourists, senior groups, and corporate visitors.

Cimory

Cimory Group’s entrée into the attractions sector went hand in hand with the company’s inception in 2006. CEO Wenzel Sutantio described the “a small restaurant directly above our first milk processing facility” as a small-scale vertical integration enabling customers to enjoy “fresh milk straight from the factory below as part of the dining experience.” The restaurant gained quick popularity and taught the company that “direct, memorable consumer experiences are far more impactful than conventional advertising alone.”

Over Cimory Group’s first 20 years, their brand experience portfolio has grown to 10 attractions across Indonesia, including restaurants, a tourable factory, theme parks, and gardens featuring miniatures of world landmarks appealing to casual visitors as well as social media content creators. Cimory Group’s core business is



Cimory Dairy

now in dairy and meat products, brand DNA reflected in the farming themes of all of their attractions. Sutantio couldn’t provide specifics about attractions in progress, but confirmed that their current “focus remains on strengthening and scaling our presence within Indonesia”. In the long term, Cimory Group continues to maximize the broad appeal of their attractions while offering visitors factory pricing on their products within their theme parks, an “integrated model [that] shows how attractions can be built as an extension of a larger brand platform, rather than as isolated entertainment assets.”

Turning Visitors into Advocates

Brand engagement centers are less about spectacle alone and more about sustained relationship-building. Whether through high-tech immersion, hands-on craftsmanship, or community-focused programming, successful brand houses translate values into experiences that resonate emotionally and socially. For attractions operators and brand leaders alike, the takeaway is clear: When storytelling, accessibility, and authenticity are aligned with business objectives, brand experience centers can transform visitors into long-term advocates. ^{EW}



World of Volvo

POWERING THE EDUCATION-TO-CAREER PIPELINE

How innovative collaborations with colleges create pipelines for skilled, career-focused talent

by Lisa A. Beach



IN SEASON AND OUT, attraction operators often face a stubborn challenge—finding skilled workers for year-round roles. Food and beverage supervisors, ride technicians, animal-care professionals, and assistant managers remain difficult to recruit, even as global forecasts suggest travel and tourism will need tens of millions more workers by 2035.

That's pushing operators to rethink how they develop talent. Rather than relying on traditional hiring and short-term training, many turn to deeper partnerships with universities and technical colleges. David Mandt, recently retired executive vice president and chief governance officer at IAAPA, explains that the focus is “to help create the pipeline of talent for the future”—emphasizing year-round professional and skilled-trades positions.

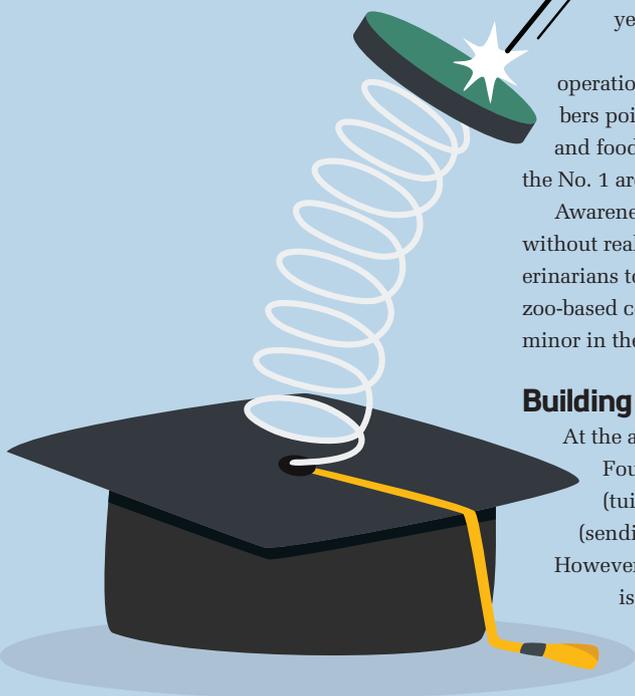
The challenge isn't just filling positions; it's finding people with technical, operational, and guest service skills who want careers in the industry. IAAPA members point to gaps in several specialized roles—welders, ride control technicians, and food service supervisors. These technical positions, Mandt notes, “are probably the No. 1 areas members need.”

Awareness compounds the problem. Many jobseekers see only guest-facing roles without realizing there are hundreds of careers in the attractions industry, from veterinarians to water quality technicians. This article examines how three programs—a zoo-based college in Florida, a resort management degree in Ohio, and an engineering minor in the Netherlands—are aligning classroom learning with real operations.

Building the Pipeline

At the association level, IAAPA connects members and educators. The IAAPA Foundation supports students through three scholarship types: academic (tuition and fees), experiential (group visits to IAAPA Expo), and industry (sending professionals to standards meetings).

However, Mandt notes that scholarships are only half the equation. The other half is awareness—particularly among welding schools and trade programs that may not see attractions as a natural destination. The following programs show how awareness translates into action.





Training Keepers by Being Keepers

At Santa Fe College in Gainesville, Florida, workforce development starts inside a fully accredited zoo on campus. Launched in 1970, the Associate of Science in Zoo Animal Technology program operates through the Santa Fe College Teaching Zoo, an AZA-accredited facility run largely by students.

“The key feature is that the program itself is designed to train the next generation of animal care professionals, and it does that within its own zoo,” explains Jonathan Miot, who serves as zoo director and is also a professor. “The facilities that these students are learning in is a high-quality facility that has to do everything that every other zoo has to do. The difference is we do it with brand new animal care professionals.”

Over five semesters, students rotate through birds, reptiles, mammals, and ambassador animals while handling tours and education programs. The model removes the gap between theory and reality, allowing students to learn by being zookeepers. Graduates leave with hands-on experience in husbandry, safety, enrichment, and guest engagement—skills zoos struggle to teach on the job.

The results speak for themselves. Approximately 85% of graduates move directly into paid roles at zoos across the U.S. and abroad. “We have students leaving here and they’re going directly into working with big cats and great apes,” Miot notes. “These are some of the most advanced animals that you can work with.”

In-state tuition runs about \$10,000 total for the two-year degree. In addition, Miot would like to develop scholarship partnerships where zoos sponsor local students who return as employees.

sfcollge.edu/academics/programs/3106.html

Co-Ops as a Management Pipeline

In Sandusky, Ohio, Bowling Green State University and Six Flags prepares students for leadership roles through a public-private partnership. The Six Flags Resort and Attraction Management (RAAM) program launched in 2020 and addresses what Swathi Ravichandran, professor and founding director, calls “a need for qualified labor in the growing attractions industry.”

The curriculum blends business and operations. “Our curriculum is a healthy mix of business courses, such as accounting/finance, law, marketing, HR, and strategic management, and operations courses, such as merchandise, lodging, food and beverage, and events and entertainment,” Ravichandran explains.

A core feature is the co-op structure: students complete two paid, six-month placements with Six Flags while progressing through coursework and earning certifications. “Our students are available to work full-time for six months at a time, which is very attractive to employers,” Ravichandran notes, giving operators time to move students through departments and identify where they’re most effective.

Jason McClure, regional general manager at Six Flags, values how the program develops “the ability to apply data findings and insights to operational scenarios,” which are critical for seasonal operations where quick decisions matter.

Accessibility is built in. The program offers in-person, online, and hybrid options with flexible pacing. BGSU and Six Flags provide stacked scholarships, and employers, offer tuition benefits for employees completing the degree online.

The evidence of the program’s success is strong: 91% of RAAM graduates accept or continue jobs six months after graduation.

bgsu.edu/academics/resort-and-attraction-management.html

Designing Coasters in the Classroom

At the University of Twente in the Netherlands, a 10-week minor in Roller Coaster Engineering gives engineering students a direct line into attraction design careers. Launched in 2024, the full-time program accepts approximately 30 students from different engineering and science backgrounds.

“The goal of RCE is twofold,” explains Dr. Jurnan Schilder, assistant professor and program director. “First, we want to provide motivated students with the opportunity to study the engineering of roller coasters and amusement rides. Second, we want to help the industry find engineering talents with a passion for roller coasters and amusement rides.”

Industry involvement is built into the structure. “The majority of the lectures are delivered by engineers from several roller coaster manufacturers,” Schilder says. “Each company has adopted one or more topics, and they are also involved in the assessment. This ensures that the knowledge we teach is accurate and relevant.”

Students work on a realistic project for a regional park—defining theme and capacity, producing a track layout that meets EN and ASTM safety standards, and designing support structures. Those projects double as a recruiting tool. Several participants have already secured internships and master’s projects with the manufacturers who teach in the program, Schilder notes, effectively turning the course into a talent scout for specialized engineering roles.

utwente.nl/en/et/ms3/education/roller-coaster-engineering/

What Works in Academic Partnerships

Effective partnerships design around real jobs rather than abstract interest—Santa Fe students work zoo holidays, RAAM graduates read profit and loss statements, and Twente projects follow EN/ASTM standards that employers use.

Extended hands-on learning reduces both onboarding time and washout. Santa Fe’s five-semester immersion and RAAM’s six-month co-ops give employers confidence to invest in further training because graduates already know what the work entails.

RAAM’s online options, stacked scholarships, and employer partnerships—including tuition benefits from Herschend and Universal Orlando—directly lower barriers, while Santa Fe’s \$10,000 in-state degree and potential zoo sponsorships make training affordable.

Finally, the strongest programs involve deep collaboration, not guest lectures. Manufacturers lead most Twente sessions; Six Flags codevelops RAAM metrics and adjusts placements; and Santa Fe’s advisory board continuously updates curriculum to match industry needs.

How Attractions Can Get Started

For operators without formal academic partnerships, experts recommend four steps:

1. Audit your local ecosystem. Identify nearby community colleges, universities, and technical schools, then initiate conversations about specific talent gaps and hiring volume.
2. Start small with career days, behind-the-scenes tours, or short co-ops to test fit and refine needs before launching full degree programs.
3. Explore funding models, such as scholarships or tuition benefits tied to return-of-service, similar to RAAM’s partnerships.
4. Commit to deep collaboration by developing curriculum, sharing operational data, and adjusting programs continuously rather than treating schools as vendors.

Attractions that treat academic partnerships as a core business strategy—rather than a nice-to-have—will be better positioned to build stable, skilled workforces in the decade ahead. 



Lisa Beach is an Orlando freelance journalist, copywriter, and content marketing writer. Her work has appeared in The New York Times, Conde Nast Traveler, Islands, Parade, Good Housekeeping, USA Today, Costco Connection, and dozens more. Connect with her on [LinkedIn](#).



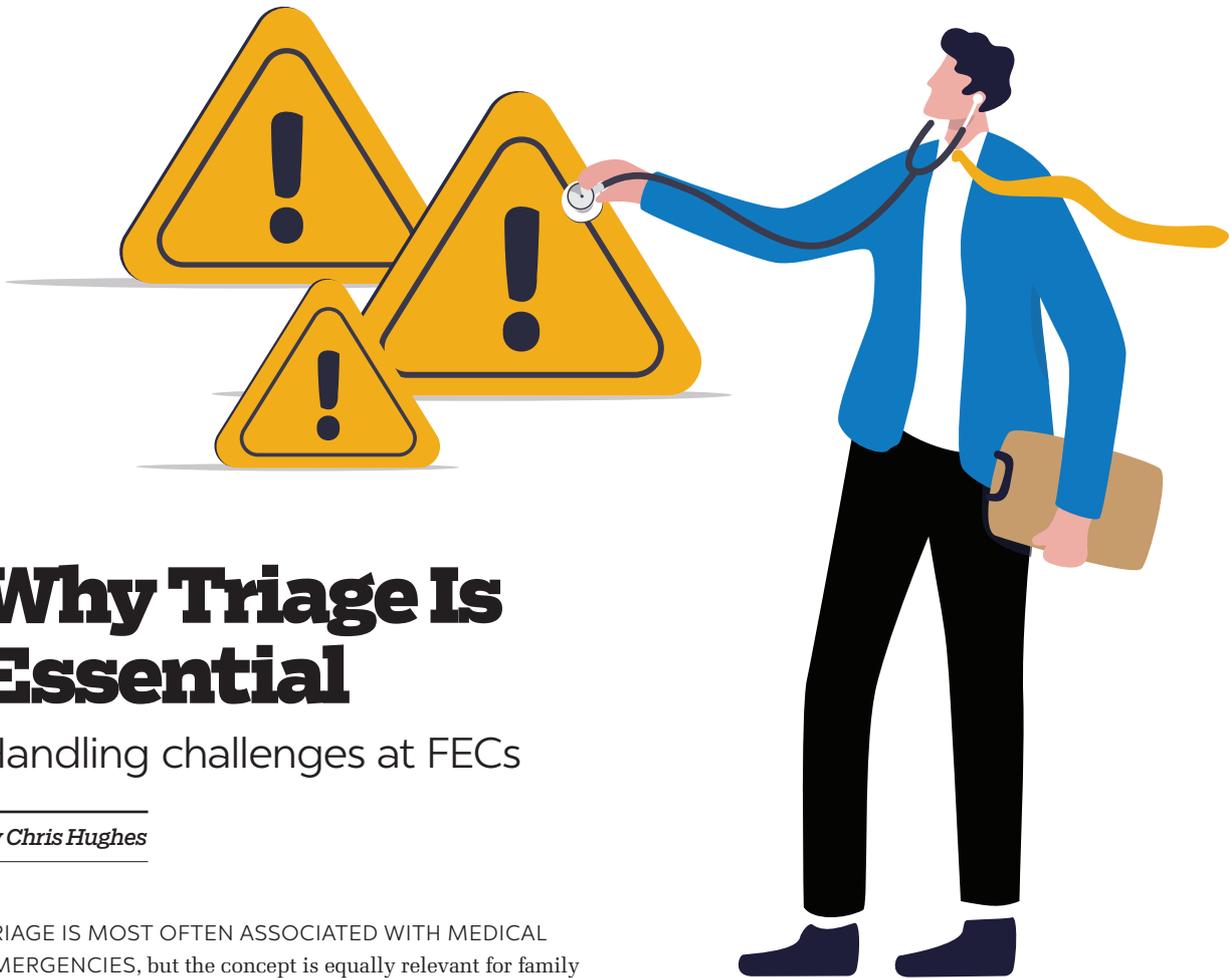
Katie Pfingsten stepped into the executive director role for the IAAPA Foundation in January, alongside her work as IAAPA’s vice president, people and culture. As

the executive director, Pfingsten is inspired by the Foundation’s commitment to workforce development, education, and expanding access, which she sees as vital to the future of our industry. Pfingsten’s background as an HR professional in the hospitality industry of over 15 years offers the perfect bridge to her new position. “I am energized by the opportunity to deepen our impact and continue serving our global attractions community in a meaningful way,” Pfingsten says.



Meghan Roth, program manager for the IAAPA Foundation, leads the strategic planning, implementation, and evaluation of global workforce development initiatives.

Since joining the Foundation in April 2025, she remained dedicated to inspiring the next generation of talent within the global attractions industry. Meghan brings more than a decade of diverse experience to her role, seamlessly blending expertise in program and event management with a background in nonprofit fundraising and community outreach. Her approach ensures the Foundation’s mission resonates with a global audience and fosters a sustainable pipeline for industry leadership.



Why Triage Is Essential

Handling challenges at FECs

by *Chris Hughes*

TRIAGE IS MOST OFTEN ASSOCIATED WITH MEDICAL EMERGENCIES, but the concept is equally relevant for family entertainment center operators navigating complex, fast-paced environments. With multiple attractions, staff roles, and guest touchpoints in constant motion, even minor issues can quickly compound if left unaddressed.

Applying a triage-based mindset allows operators to identify, prioritize, and resolve operational pain points before they escalate. “FECs have a fast-paced environment with lots of moving parts and people, so compounding problems can make costs add up,” says Nate Reinhart, owner of The Upload Company. “A practical framework of diagnosing, treating, and preventing can make sure that an FEC is thriving and not just surviving.”

This approach can be broken down into six core steps designed to help FEC leaders move from reactive problem-solving to proactive performance management.

Triage Mindset

A triage mindset will help operators break down problems into four categories—urgent and important, urgent but not important, important but not urgent, and neither urgent nor important.

“Important is an attraction that is not performing; urgent is one of your top-performing games not working,” says Barry Zelickson, owner of Next Exit Entertainment and a 35-year industry veteran. “The triage mindset helps determine where you need to put your attention.”

Root Cause Analysis

“Are you fixing the actual problem or just putting a bandage on it, which then continues to be a problem or becomes a larger problem?” asks Zelickson. Once you identify the fundamental reasons behind a problem, it’s easier to solve.

For instance, if parents routinely become frustrated over disappearing party hosts at children’s birthday parties, venue leadership can surely tell the host to stay in the room. However, this approach is not always effective.

“Have your party host give a clear communication of expectations to parents,” Zelickson explains. “Give them the schedule, and let them know when their room time ends. Tell your party host if they have to leave the room, let the parents know when they will be back.”

Immediate Intervention

A top-performing arcade game can fit this step. Zelickson warns that guests seeing broken games on the floor will result in a negative impression of the FEC. Leaders should take action as soon as a broken game is brought to the facility's attention, and a plan should be determined by the facility's root cause analysis.

"If the game is just going to be down a day or two, put a fun sign on the game to let customers know you're aware of the issue," he says. "But if the game is going to be down for a week, just pull it off the game floor. Finding a game that's down is a negative for the guest."

Action Plans

Action planning involves creating a step-by-step strategy for sustainable fixes. For example, an out-of-operation pizza oven is a nightmare scenario on a busy Saturday full of birthday parties. This is an urgent and important issue based on the timing, but the facility then has to figure out a way to make sure it doesn't happen again.

"Push through the moment to get through it, but afterward, figure out what went right and wrong, then you can create an action plan to deal with it

better the next time," says Jeremy Hoyum, owner of Urban Air Trampoline and Adventure Parks. "For the pizza oven example, if it was just bad timing due to a part wearing out, look into preventive maintenance."

Growth Readiness

It's hard enough to have a handle on the operations of one FEC, but these issues can compound quickly if multiple facilities owned by the business are not prepared.

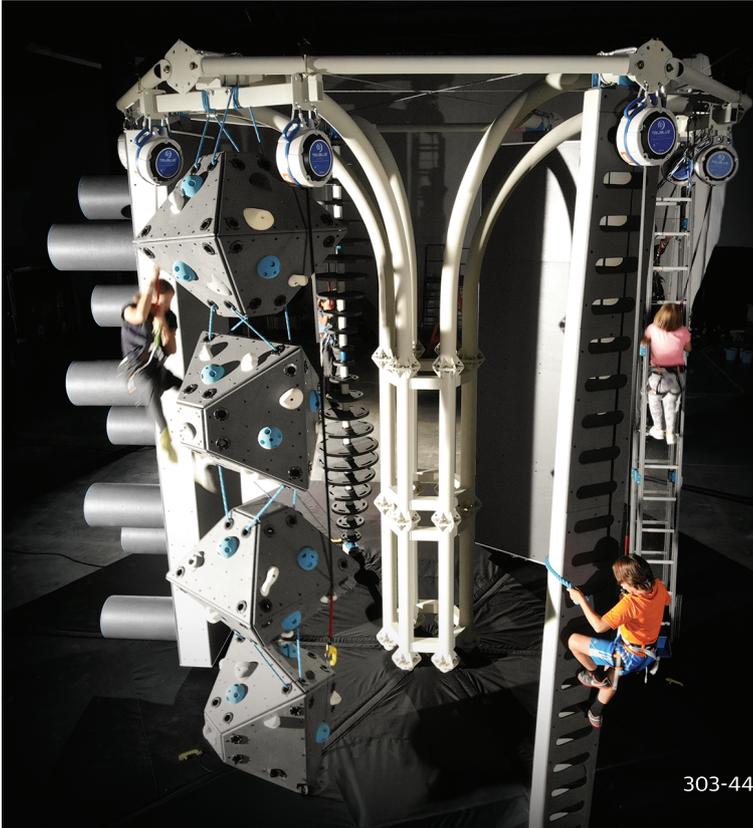
"It's easier to handle an issue and be reactive if you have one facility, but if you have more than one, you need to be proactive," Hoyum shares. "You don't want to have pizza ovens going down at all of your locations due to the same part wearing out."

Evaluate and Evolve

Operating an FEC is a never-ending process of monitoring and learning, according to Zelickson.

"The industry is full of continuous change, but there are easy ways to keep your facility fresh," he says. "It can be as simple as rearranging the games in your arcade or offering a limited-time item on your food menu. Find things that keep people thinking that things are new and fresh." 





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EXERCISE: Diagnose Your FEC



Many attendees at IAAPA Expo 2025 identified staffing as their top challenge. Hoyum says that getting a quality staff starts with hiring in alignment with the facility's core values.

"Let applicants know what they're walking into and how you do things—how you'll hold them accountable to this standard, and if they can't do that, they'll be miserable working here," he explains. "If you're hiring someone who hasn't had a job before, hire on attitude. Their personality is who they are; everything else can be taught."

Since many employees won't have a lot of prior experience, Zelickson says they'll be learning everything from your example.

"There's nothing more important than building a culture that people enjoy, and that will come across to your guests the moment they walk through the door," he says.

In order to help employees learn parts of the job, consider creating short videos that show them how to try some quick strategies to fix things themselves. This can save time and money as a business

owner while helping team members grow.

"Young employees have grown up with a super-computer in their hands, which is great, but they may not be equipped with problem-solving skills," Hoyum adds. "We love to promote from within, but we need to teach them the skillsets that are the most important."

A triage process can start at any time, before important and urgent issues arise.

FEC operators should look inward to the challenges faced by breaking them down into three key areas:

- 1. Operations:** Identify the top three operational challenges.
- 2. Financial:** Pinpoint biggest revenue or cost issues.
- 3. Staffing:** Define the biggest people problems.

Remaining proactive can help facilities stay ahead of costly repairs, staffing challenges, and operational issues, which will keep guest satisfaction high.



Chris Hughes' love for the amusement industry began at a young age. As a child of the 1980s, he spent many days (and rolls of quarters) at the arcade. He worked in television news in Orlando and Tampa, Florida, for nearly 15 years and has written and edited for several lifestyle and sports publications. His contributions for IAAPA include writing and copy editing for Funworld. Connect with him on [LinkedIn](#):



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Who's Next?

Succession planning for a changing attractions workforce

by *Vartika Puranik*

A SENIOR LEADER OR MANAGING DIRECTOR RETIRING or resigning can significantly disrupt business operations—particularly when the transition coincides with a peak season or crucial event. Succession planning exists to safeguard companies and organizations against these moments. By proactively identifying and preparing internal successors, attractions can maintain operational continuity and reduce the risks associated with emergency replacement hiring.

In an industry heavily built on consistency, guest trust, and operational efficiency, succession planning is not simply a best practice—it is a strategic necessity.

Why Succession Planning Matters

Succession planning is particularly critical for family-owned businesses. While fostering leadership talent within families or organizations helps ensure long-term stability, the reality is challenging. According to accounting services firms PwC and EY, only about 30% of family businesses around the world survive into the second generation, and fewer than 12% make it to the third—often due to insufficient succession planning.

Beyond ownership continuity, succession planning minimizes operational disruptions by eliminating service gaps and leadership vacuums when key professionals depart. Maintaining momentum is essential for attractions, where guest expectations, safety standards, and revenue performance depend on consistency.

There are also significant financial implications. The cost of hiring an external replacement can equal six to nine months of an employee's salary, making succession planning an advanced contingency strategy that helps to minimize turnover-related losses. A structured transition also supports morale, reinforcing employee confidence in the organization's stability and future. When teams and stakeholders see continuity at the leadership level, they are more likely to remain engaged and invested.

Building a Succession Framework

While there is no single, universally accepted succession planning framework, most effective approaches follow a series of adaptable steps.

To begin, identify roles that need immediate or long-term succession attention. These roles may be in operations, technology, business strategy, or guest experience. Map the company's structure and note which roles are of utmost importance for long-term planning and security. Note what operational, training, or retention challenges may arise if those positions become vacant.

Key Questions

- Who may leave or retire in the near future?
- What roles are likely to change or expand?
- Where are future promotions possible?

The next step includes evaluating the organization's goals, vision, and direction. While no plan can account for every variable, clarity about where the facility or manufacturer aims to be in the coming years helps shape a more effective succession strategy.

Strategic Considerations

- What industry trends will affect leadership needs?
- Is the current turnover rate sustainable?
- What skills should the company or organization invest in?

Crafting success profiles or individual development plans is the next step. This process involves identifying internal candidates, assessing skills and experience, and recognizing any gaps that need to be addressed. Leadership roles are often multifaceted, requiring not only technical expertise but also skills in governance, communication, and people management.

Once candidates are selected, structured learning and development plans become essential. These may include professional development opportunities such as training programs, mentorship, workshops, project assignments, or external

education. Progress should be reviewed regularly, with plans adjusted as needed to ensure readiness.

Succession Planning in Practice

Diane Dye, CEO of People Risk Consulting and a former IAAPA communications committee member, shares a case involving a family entertainment center facing the retirement of an aging CEO. Dye began organizing the transition process by evaluating the CEO role and its responsibilities, then laid out some potential paths—which included retaining the role, transferring responsibilities internally, hiring externally, consolidating duties, or engaging contractors or vendors.



Each option was assessed through a priority lens, examining urgency, importance, and feasibility. Dye emphasizes that succession planning can be emotionally taxing, particularly in family businesses, making emotional intelligence and a clear understanding of “why” essential to the process.

In this case, no family members were interested in assuming the CEO role. Instead, the organization hired a COO and executive leader externally while using succession planning to test restructured responsibilities and training schedules. The result was a successful CEO transition that ultimately led to innovation under new leadership.

From outside the attractions industry comes the example of Nitish Mehta, CEO and president of La Joya Jewelry, whose succession framework is rooted in his own leadership journey. Mehta defines “internal” candidates broadly, including extended family members and existing employees with leadership potential. When filling C-suite roles, he prioritized internal talent before looking externally.



He also replaced traditional training programs with real-world assessments known as “stretch projects,” assigning candidates responsibilities outside their comfort zones to evaluate performance in practical settings.

An additional element of Mehta’s approach was an exit-role strategy. Rather than removing outgoing leaders entirely, he defined advisory roles that allowed them to contribute strategically without disrupting daily operations. Mehta also stresses the importance of normalizing growth culture—openly discussing career paths, advancement opportunities, and performance expectations to reduce uncertainty and build trust.

Key Considerations for Success

Renee C. Fellman, CTP, an award-winning turnaround expert whose client base includes many family-owned businesses, highlights several principles organizations should keep in mind.



She emphasizes the value of gathering input from a wide range of stakeholders—including vendors, customers, managers, employees, industry experts,

and professional advisors—when evaluating candidates. Multiple perspectives can surface insights leaders may otherwise overlook.

Fellman also recommends using both group and individual assessments during training and interviews to reveal different strengths. While experience matters, she notes that measuring results is equally important, as the ideal traits for a role may vary. Fellman also strongly advises implementing legal documentation that encourages honest feedback from references, improving the reliability of the evaluation process.

Preserving a Legacy

While succession planning involves identifying who comes next, its deeper purpose is preserving and strengthening an organization’s legacy. For attractions facing workforce shifts, generational transitions, and evolving guest expectations, proactive succession planning ensures continuity—protecting not only leadership but the future of the business itself. 



Vartika Puranik is a journalist, content writer and strategist with bylines in Forbes, Business Insider, Canadian Business, Success Magazine and more. She covers business, organizational operations, entrepreneurship, company and employee management, and brand development. Connect with her on **LinkedIn**:



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Taking the Pulse of the Latin America, Caribbean Region

AS PART OF MY ROLE, I travel extensively throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, meeting with operators, developers, suppliers, and creative leaders who are shaping the future of our attractions industry. These conversations, combined with firsthand observation, reaffirm a powerful reality: our region is not simply following global trends—it is reinterpreting them through its own identity, creativity, and resilience.

One of the most inspiring trends I continue to observe is the originality of our industry in the region. Attractions are increasingly designed to celebrate local cultures, traditions, and stories, while seamlessly integrating global trends. These “glocal” ideas—global in inspiration and local in execution—are creating authentic experiences that resonate deeply with guests and position Latin America and the Caribbean as a source of innovation rather than imitation.

Innovation continues to be a defining force, extending far beyond rides or digital tools. It is evident in operational efficiencies, talent development, guest experience design, and the creation of new business models inspired in local culture. Innovation today is about mindset—being open to learning, adapting, and finding inspiration beyond our own industry.

These trends have directly shaped IAAPA Latin America and Caribbean’s event strategy for 2026. One example of this is the IAAPA Summit: Latin America, Caribbean 2026, which for the first time, takes place at sea. This unique setting reflects our commitment to expanding perspectives and embracing new ways of learning from innovative and featured attractions. This commitment will continue throughout the year with educational roadshows, 360 training courses for middle management and an FEC Summit.

Accessibility and collaboration remain at the core of our approach. The use of



During a busy IAAPA Summit: Latin America, Caribbean 2025, Paulina Reyes pauses for a photo with IAAPA members Sebastian Necolai, Xavier López Ancona, and Massimiliano Freddi.

Innovation continues to be a defining force, extending far beyond rides or digital tools.

AI-powered translation is key in making knowledge and events accessible to all our members, facilitating communication and learning across languages. In addition, collaborative learning will continue as a fresh and dynamic way to create meaningful solutions and connections to move businesses forward.

An essential pillar for the region’s future is our regional committees, formed by diverse experts who volunteer to help guide strategic vision, address specific segments, and deliver relevant products benefiting our industry. Following our strategic priorities in 2025, we created two more committees, dedicated to sustainability and FECs; each contributes to the development of customized products and services for the region.

With their support, we developed a comprehensive calendar of educational and networking events designed specifically for the needs and opportunities of all our members.

Our goal is to foster a strong, connected, and future-ready attractions industry throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. Stay tuned, there is plenty more to come. 

Paulina Reyes is the vice president and executive director of IAAPA Latin America, Caribbean. She has fostered new connections in the global attractions industry for more than two decades. Connect with her at PREyes@IAAPA.org or connect with her on [LinkedIn](#).



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