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Karls' ambitions grow,
rooted in family, curiosity, fruit,
and fun





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**Berry Good,
Indeed**

Karls' ambitions grow, rooted in family, curiosity, fruit, and fun

COVER PHOTO: KRIS VAN DE SANDE



KRIS VAN DE SANDE

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FAMILY ADVENTURE



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Rope Drop

Tivoli Transformation

Marking the park's 183rd Anniversary on August 15, Tivoli Gardens—Copenhagen's historic amusement park—opened its new Japanese-inspired area, Hikari. Meaning "light," Hikari introduces five new F&B locations, art installations, neon sign theming, and two brand-new attractions. Hotel Hikari recreates a classic funhouse featuring a vortex tunnel, a tilted room, and a mirror maze. Typhoon's Eye is a modern Rotor from SBF-Visa Group where guests find themselves suspended against the walls of a rotating drum.

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Launch



LEEDS CASTLE, KENT

APPLIED TECHNOLOGY

The Queen's Gambit

History gets a high-tech makeover as Leeds Castle hosts the world's first AI queen encounter

by Juliana Gilling

MEETING A QUEEN IS RARE. Meeting one who died seven centuries ago should be impossible. But at Leeds Castle in Kent, England, visitors can now hold conversations with an AI-powered avatar of Eleanor of Castile, the medieval monarch who once made the castle her royal home.

An Audience With Eleanor is the finale in a new exhibition, Pilgrimage of Love: Eleanor of Castile, which runs through Nov. 1. This interactive installation shines new light on the 13th-century Queen of England and the first female owner of Leeds Castle.

The project is a significant step for a heritage sector that has traditionally approached emerging technologies with caution. The team behind the experience emphasizes that the AI avatar complements—rather than replaces—conventional historical interpretation.

“We are taking people from passive listening to active participation,” says Kelly Boosey, head of business development for the United Kingdom and Europe at SKC Studios, whose conversational AI platform, named 1956 Individuals, supports the exhibit.



LEEDS CASTLE, KENT

"All Hail the Queen." The AI-powered avatar of Eleanor of Castile, the medieval monarch, stands ready to chat with visitors.

Recreating a historical figure requires balancing innovation with historical authenticity. The team members made a series of considered choices. They had to understand the risks and ensure that the avatar's responses were appropriate and rooted in historical accuracy.

Visitors begin their journey into Eleanor's life in a meticulously researched exhibition. The life-size AI avatar is in the castle's chapel, creating a distinct space for people to engage with Eleanor after exploring her story.

Remarkably, the team's starting point was never about how to use AI. It focused on creating an experience that deepened visitors' understanding of Eleanor and her place in history. "Eleanor's story needed to be brought back to life. The challenge was how to humanize someone who died more than 700 years ago," explains Dr. Dominique Bouchard, who served on the project team while working as heritage and engagement director at Leeds Castle. The team concentrated on what the character should know, feel, and remember.

"Museums are risk-averse and trusted institutions," Dr. Bouchard continues.

Inviting visitors to speak to an AI avatar raised several questions for the team. What if she says the wrong thing? What if her voice doesn't sound right? Should the AI avatar use only approved content, or should it roam free on the internet?

Rather than confining its AI version

of Eleanor to "a walled garden of content," Leeds Castle allows broader, unscripted conversations while carefully designing the experience. "Value the expertise your visitor brings with them—they know what interests them and why. The power of a conversational AI like the Eleanor of Castile avatar is that we've given it the capability to answer any question it is asked," says Dr. Bouchard.

The queen discusses wide-ranging subjects while sidestepping difficult topics with phrases such as, "My attention is better spent on my time than on the controversies of yours."

The AI avatar is aware of her surroundings, recognizing that she is inside Leeds Castle and knowing when visitors approach her. She is multilingual and speaks with queenly authority. "She's very impatient—some would say rude," Dr. Bouchard says.

The system detects whether visitors are adults or children through camera recognition. The exhibit does not store any visual or auditory information, but it saves conversation transcripts.

"Quality and ethics go hand in hand with this technology. False authority is the biggest ethical risk. Even when evidence is thin, an AI can seem confident, especially if it is dressed in the form of an historical figure, so we kept strong scholarship at the core of the experience and informed visitors about its potential and limits," says Dr. Bouchard. "She knows she's an AI. We are not trying to fool anyone and pretend something is real when it's not. This is a game, not a history teacher."

One of the project's key takeaways, according to Dr. Bouchard, is that "you can never test too much." Five months of testing, including two months on-site, ensured a seamless and intuitive experience for staff and guests.

"Overwhelmingly, our visitors loved the experience. Having a truly conversational AI that answered any question in real time was exciting, and the unique personality and incredibly detailed artist-created avatar meant the experience felt both familiar and human," Dr. Bouchard concludes. **FW**

leeds-castle.com



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](#).



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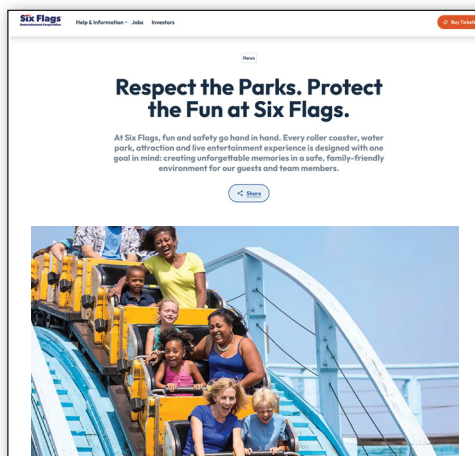
1

SAFETY & SECURITY

SIX FLAGS PROTECT THE PARKS

In a year marked by “teen take-overs,” swatting incidents (see page 36), and social media videos showcasing poor behavior, **Six Flags** issued a transparent statement: “Theme park safety is everyone’s responsibility.”

In June, a social media influencer posted video of himself riding a roller coaster while ingesting fast food products he concealed in his pants. Mainstream media picked up on



the video and the influencer was banned for life from all Six Flags-owned properties.

“Our parks operate under strict safety standards, and every rule, guideline, and instruction is in place to protect guests, team members, and the overall experience,” Six Flags penned.

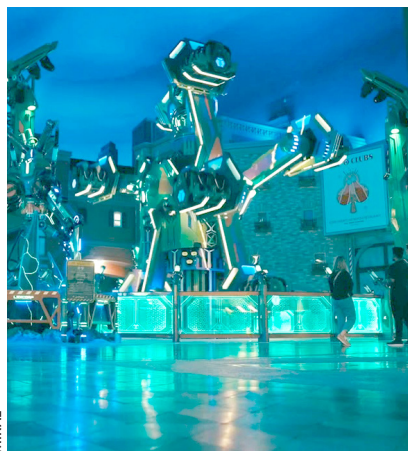
All attractions operators can use Six Flags’ proactive post as insight. Read it here: sixflags.com/blog/protect-the-parks

2

RIBBON CUTTINGS

ABU DHABI POWERS UP

Warner Bros. World Yas Island, Abu Dhabi opened the spinning **Kryptonite Collider** in July. The 32-seat centrifuge-style thrill ride from **Zamperla** marks the first permanent ride addition since the park opened in 2018. Backwards spinning motion, onboard audio, and lighting effects bring its Lex Luthor storyline to life. General Manager Hind Galadari says every element of the new ride is “designed to deliver the immersive storytelling.”



MIRAL

GUATEMALA SPLASHES

IRTRA began welcoming bathers to the new **Xetulhá** water park in late July. The name comes from Mayan meaning “underwater.” While the facility includes 40 new slides supplied by **ProSlide** and **WhiteWater**, IRTRA President and IAAPA Hall of Fame member Ricardo Castillo Sinibaldi says, “We don’t dream small: we build big.” Xetulhá is a separate facility from IRTRA’s neighboring **Xocomil** water park.



WHITEWATER

VIETNAM SOARS

The new **Aerobar Sky Park** in Vietnam offers panoramic views of the South China Sea, Mỹ Khê Beach, the city of Da Nang, and mountains in the distance. The open-air gondola features seating where riders’ legs dangle openly as passengers sit around a table. Manufactured by **Aerophile**, adults receive one complementary drink while scaling the tower. All passengers must be 110cm to ride.



AEROPHILE

3 RESEARCH FINDING HAPPINESS

The **Balder** roller coaster at **Liseberg** in Gothenburg, Sweden, has a new role: research assistant. **Happiness Lab** is a research collaboration between Liseberg and the **Stockholm School of Economics' Center for Wellbeing, Welfare, and Happiness**, with affiliated researchers from **Karolinska Institutet** and the **London School of Economics** studying how Balder from **Intamin** creates happiness, a sense of wellbeing, and a social connection. More than 1,000 voluntary participants will complete surveys and physiological measurements before, during, and after visits. The aim is to better understand how “eustress”—positive stress—affects humans.



LISEBERG

4 MERCHANDISE THINKING CAP

With average summer after-noon temperatures soaring to 96° in Frisco, Texas, the new **Universal Kids Park** offers more than 20 novelty headbands.

“The nice thing about the headbands is even in the heat, they’re not hot,” Cathy Fischer, senior vice president of global merchandise for **Universal Destinations and Experiences** tells Funworld. The headband offerings follow a similar trend at **Universal Studios Japan**. “In-park play is extremely important in our Asia markets. We’ve brought that back to the North American markets, and we are definitely seeing the demand,” Fischer says.



MICHAEL COSTELLO

5 FOOD AND BEVERAGE PLAYING WITH FOOD

Timeless Brands opened the world’s first Monopoly-themed steakhouse in San Pedro Garza García, Mexico. The restaurant brings the board game to life through an immersive fine-dining experience. Named **Monopoly Steakhouse**, the venue combines the sophistication of a premium steakhouse with playful luxury. Developed under a licensing agreement with **Hasbro**, the menu offers 15 starters, six vegetarian dishes, 10 main entrees featuring lamb, mussels, octopus, and duck, and seven desserts.



TIMELESS BRANDS

6 MARKETING MESSAGING TWO WORLDS

Spanish operator **PortAventura World** debuted two major attractions in late July. First, **Coral Bay, La Leyenda Perdida** opened as a new themed area at **Caribe Aquatic Park** anchored by a water coaster and multi-adventure pool. A week later, **Makamanu Jungle, The Adventure Trek** opened at the theme park with 18 elevated treehouse cabins, and 20 rope tunnels. The facility shared the news a week apart, generating sustaining coverage in the press.



PORTAVENTURA WORLD



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

BEHIND THE SCREAMS OF JOY and the tempting aroma of french fries, there's technology at work at attractions everywhere. Funworld's Tech Turnstile feature showcases the innovations, applied technology, and ingenuity found across the attractions landscape—and the manufacturers behind the breakthroughs, all of which are finalists in IAAPA's Brass Ring Awards.

(1)

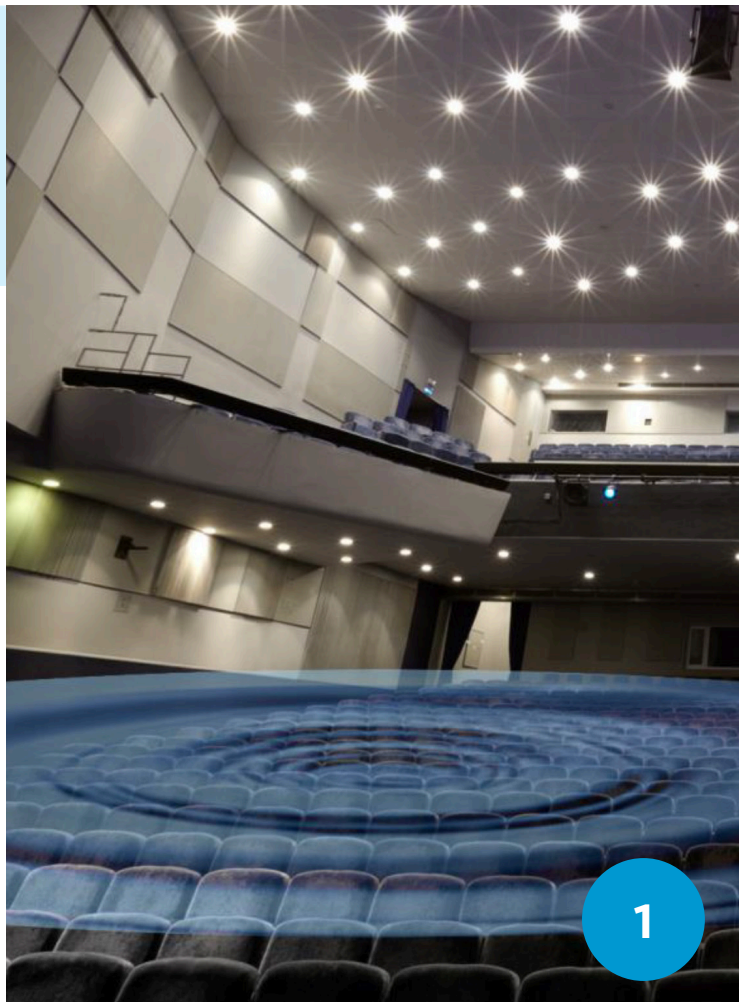
Epicenter of Sound

WHO: EDC Acoustics

PRODUCT: Volumetric Wave Field Synthesis (VWFS)

HOW: EDC Acoustics' developed a technique to shower guests with a virtual concentric circle of sound. The Volumetric Wave Field Synthesis (VWFS) places a sound field within the audience or ride car, creating 3D-localized audio. VWFS loudspeaker modules can be integrated into ride vehicles, seating, ceilings, or even floors, allowing designers to create immersive audio without compromising theming.

edcacoustics.com



EDC

(2)

Slide the Wall

WHO: WhiteWater

PRODUCT: Wall Runner

HOW: Grab a tube to experience "lateral drift" on a water slide. Wall Runner transforms the slide experience from a linear descent into a multi-dimensional experience. The innovation behind Wall Runner is novel: the slide uses alternating curved drops to build oscillation, while strategically managing water flow helps maintain speed and reducing energy loss.

whitewaterwest.com



WHITEWATER



..... (3)

Tech in Every Direction

WHO: Simtec

PRODUCT: HEXaPOT Dark Ride System

HOW: Simtec created a patented next-generation ride vehicle combining a 6DOF Stewart platform with infinite 360° yaw rotation on a single chassis. The HEXaPOT enables pitch, roll, heave, surge, and sway, creating an immersive ride profile. Vehicles can accommodate up to 30 riders while integrating onboard effects, such as wind, spray, scent, vibration.

simtec.de/en/simtec-group



..... (4)

Fore Mini-Golf

WHO: Novus Attractions

PRODUCT: Argo

HOW: Precision sensing, dynamic visuals, and real-time software empower Argo. Novus Attractions created high-tech mini-golf that integrates sensors in the ball, tee, pathways, and hole to detect strokes, routes, and outcomes, feeding instant scores to a sideline screen. Operators can rotate through projection-mapped themes on different holes to match seasons, occasions, and sponsors.

novusattractions.com

Discover more technologies and innovations online. See the winners and second place finalists of IAAPA Expo 2025's Best New Product Award by visiting IAAPA.org/BestNew2025

BRASS RING
AWARD

Have an innovative new product? Share your news on Funworld's Turnstile page! Send news and photos to FunworldWorks@IAAPA.org



WERISEUP

Vekoma and PortAventura World Launch WeRiseUp

Vekoma and PortAventura World partnered to launch **WeRiseUp**, a new independent company dedicated to developing mixed reality experiences for the attractions and cultural sectors. Spun off from PortAventura World's digital innovation unit, **Adventure Labs**, the company will focus on two business lines: theme parks and cultural heritage. Combining the Spanish theme park's expertise in immersive storytelling with Vekoma's experience in attraction design and manufacturing, WeRiseUp aims to deliver turnkey mixed reality experiences for operators worldwide. PortAventura World will continue to serve as both a strategic partner and a test-bed for the company's future developments.

weriseup.ai



BROGENT

Brogent Unveils R-Ride

Brogent Technologies unveiled **R-Ride**, a new immersive motion theater attraction designed to combine dynamic movement with panoramic visual storytelling. The system features a 360-degree rotating platform capable of reaching eight revolutions per minute, synchronized motion seating, and a circular projection environment to create a highly immersive guest experience. Designed for theme parks and location-based entertainment venues, R-Ride supports a variety of themed content and intellectual properties. The first installation is scheduled to open at **VinWonders** in Vietnam in late 2027.

brogent.com



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SENTOSA DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

Greater Sentosa Master Plan Unveiled in Singapore

Developers in Singapore announced the next phase of the Greater Sentosa Master Plan, a long-term vision to transform Sentosa and neighboring Pulau Brani into an expanded leisure and tourism destination.

The master plan introduces new attractions, destination hotels, reimagined beaches, immersive nature experiences, and enhanced transport links to create a more connected visitor experience across the islands. The development also includes new lifestyle and waterfront precincts designed to encourage longer stays and attract both domestic and international visitors.

Guests can also look forward to the landmark Waterfront Lifestyle Development, scheduled for completion in 2030, and Super Nintendo World at Universal Studios Singapore. Other upcoming experiences include the Sentosa Sensoryscape, which links Resorts World Sentosa to the island's beaches through immersive gardens and interactive installations. The phased expansion aims to strengthen Sentosa's status as one of Asia's leading integrated leisure destinations while supporting Singapore's long-term tourism growth.

sentosa.com

South Korea's Lotte World Adventure Debuts Largest Investment

Lotte World Adventure opened Kong x Godzilla: The Ride, based on Legendary Entertainment's Monsterverse.

"Kong x Godzilla: The Ride offers an immersive experience into the world of global movie IP," says Oh Sang-kwon, CEO of Lotte World.

Developed in collaboration with Legendary Entertainment, Toho Co., Ltd., and Sally Dark Rides, the multimedia dark ride replaces the South Korean park's former Jungle Adventure



attraction. Guests board two interconnected, eight-passenger ride vehicles for an approximately 11-minute adventure combining large-scale media, towering animatronics, dynamic ride motion, immersive special effects, and cinematic storytelling. Spanning more than 5,100 square meters, the attraction represents the largest single-attraction investment in Lotte World Adventure's history, and one of the largest animated figures produced by Sally Dark Rides.

adventure.lotteworld.com

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DJURS SOMMERLAND/INTAMIN

Denmark's Djurs Sommerland Plans Serpentine Coaster

Midgårdssormen—the Midgård serpent that encircled the world in Norse mythology—will slither into Djurs Sommerland in 2027.

The Hot Racer roller coaster model from Intamin will snake through an expanded Vikingeland at the Danish park.

Midgårdssormen represents an investment of more than DKK100 million. The 603-meter-long ride will feature a top speed of 75 kph, three inversions, two launches, and a bespoke layout.

“For the first time, we are introducing inversions while continuing to focus on experiences that appeal to a broad audience,” says CEO Henrik B. Nielsen. Positioned as a family

thrill coaster, the new ride will feature a minimum height requirement of 120 cm.

Guests will travel in a train with one seat per row. “You experience a world that, for brief moments, feels out of balance—and that is exactly what will make the ride intense, fun, and different,” Nielsen says.

Midgårdssormen headlines a wider development that brings together a new playground, dining options, and retail in a unified themed environment designed by Leisure Expert Group.

djurssommerland.dk

Waterfly Takes Flight at The Land of Legends in Türkiye

Water wings take on a whole new meaning at The Land of Legends' Waterfly expansion, where dragonflies and butterflies inspire a themed land that brings color, movement, and a dash of nature to every splash.

“Waterfly represents the perfect fusion of storytelling, immersive design, and emotional guest engagement,” says Hande Tezerdi, senior executive director for strategic development at The Land of Legends.

The destination resort in Antalya, Türkiye, turned to several industry partners to develop the project. The ambition was to create “a water world that feels emotionally and visually different from a traditional water park,” says Becky Train, creative producer at Creative Studio Berlin (CSB). “Waterfly combines bold architectural design with a sense of freedom and speed. Every attraction was designed to feel like its own moment of excitement and surprise while still belonging to one cohesive story.”

WhiteWater developed the rides and attractions, including a new landmark, the 52-meter-tall Dragonfly Tower, weaving together nine brightly colored water slides. The vertical water slide tower achieves maximum fun in a compact space while increasing capacity.

thelandoflegends.com/en/



THE LAND OF LEGENDS



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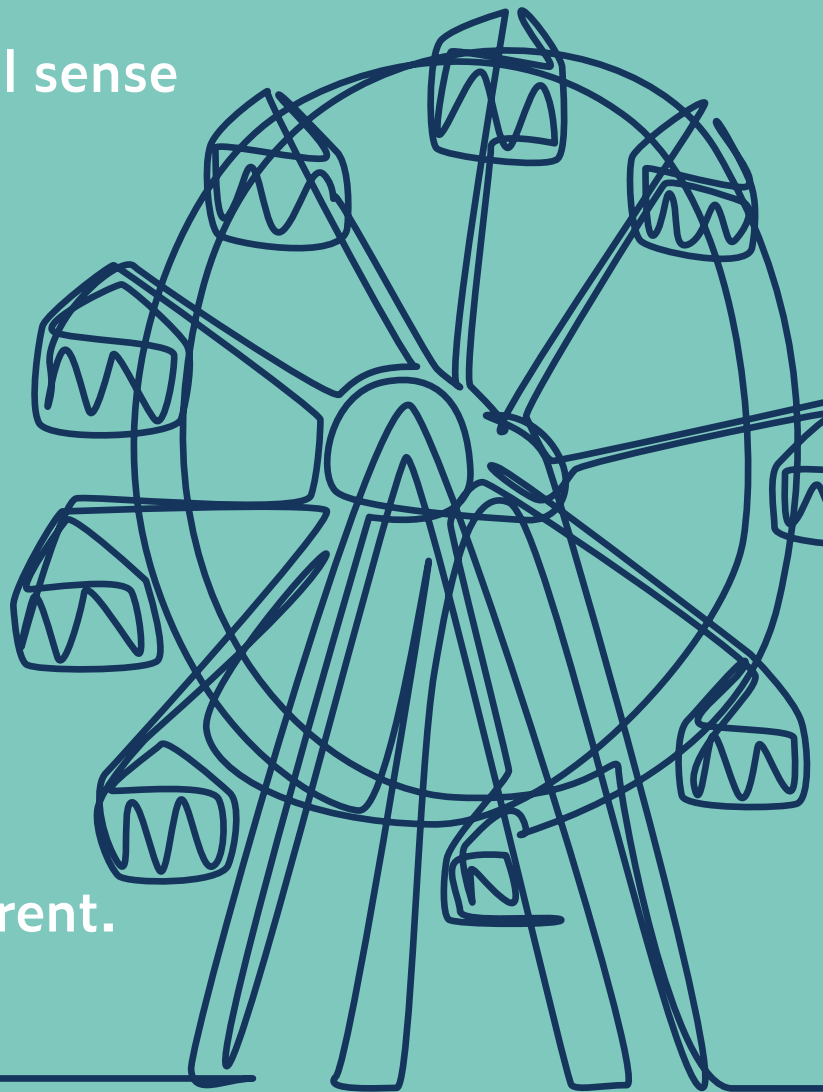
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SEVEN

SEVEN Opens First Entertainment Destination in Saudi Arabia

Saudi Entertainment Ventures (SEVEN) opened its first entertainment destination in early August. The Abha attraction offers Kawaken, a facility full of family rides; GolFi mini-golf; Cyber Bowling; two kinds of indoor karting; the Play-Doh Imagination Center; and Discovery Adventure, a mythical forest filled with climbing equipment. SEVEN Abha forms part of the Living Heritage of Aseer, part of a development that connects to the Abha International Airport.

“We are proud of this journey to begin in the Aseer region, delivering distinctive experiences that enrich quality of life

and contribute to the ambitions of Saudi Vision 2030,” says Abdullah Aldawood, chairman of SEVEN. His Royal Highness Prince Turki bin Talal bin Abdulaziz, Governor of Aseer, led the inauguration of the Abha facility.

The Abha attraction is SEVEN’s first project to be completed as a part of a strategy to develop 14 additional entertainment destinations in support of the Public Investment Fund (PIF) with Saudi Vision 2030. SEVEN is a wholly owned subsidiary of Qiddiya Investment Company (QIC).

Abu Dhabi’s New Masterpiece in the Making

The new Guggenheim Abu Dhabi will open its doors on Dec. 11 the Department of Culture and Tourism—Abu Dhabi revealed. The Guggenheim’s newest outpost of modern and contemporary art seeks to spark curiosity, connect cultures, inspire audiences, and celebrate art from the 1960s to the present.

Guggenheim Abu Dhabi joins the landmark cluster of museums on Saadiyat Island and is part of the international constellation of Guggenheim museums.

“The museum is shaped by the emirate’s long-held conviction that culture is the most enduring bridge between people and a building block for forward-looking

societies,” says His Excellency Mohamed Khalifa Al Mubarak, chairman of the Department of Culture and Tourism—Abu Dhabi. “Here, everyone belongs and can see themselves reflected in the stories the museum tells, engaging with ideas and artistic voices from across the world.”

The late Frank Gehry, Pritzker Architecture Prize Laureate,



GUGGENHEIM ABU DHABI

designed the museum as a composition of ten stacked sculptural cones, some as tall as 88 meters. The design maximizes natural ventilation and shade, boosting energy efficiency. Plan to see the new museum during IAAPA Expo Middle East, April 12-15, 2027.

guggenheimabudhabi.ae/en



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Puerto Rican Art Museum Begins Post-Earthquake Rebuild

The Museo de Arte de Ponce has begun a \$30 million reconstruction of its landmark Edward Durell Stone building. The project will restore the museum's main galleries following damage caused by Puerto Rico's 2020 earthquakes.

The planned work combines preservation of the original design with structural reinforcement, seismic upgrades, and the addition of new exhibition galleries. The reconstruction is funded through individual donations, corporate contributions, and local and federal funding. PRAR Architecture will oversee

the design. Founded in 1959 by Luis A. Ferré, the Museo de Arte de Ponce houses more than 5,000 works of art.

During reconstruction, the institution will remain active through international loans and touring exhibitions in the U.S. and Italy.

Following the reopening, Museo de Arte de Ponce is expected to support an estimated 150 direct and indirect jobs.

museoarteponce.org

Tech-Enhanced Mini-Golf Opens in Mexico City

Technology has scored a hole-in-one at a new miniature golf venue in Mexico City.

Located at Pabellón Bosques, HoleOut combines an 18-hole mini-golf course with food, beverages, and social gaming.

The experience is organized into nine-hole games that last 30 minutes. SmartBall technology automatically records scores and player performance throughout the experience, eliminating manual scorekeeping and streamlining gameplay. Each hole features a different theme and challenge that are designed to welcome players of all ages—from families to corporate groups. A full F&B program—including cocktails and premium drinks—complements the experience. By integrating technology, mini-golf, and dining, HoleOut joins a growing segment of entertainment destinations designed to extend guest dwell time beyond the core attraction.

holeout.mx



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MONA/JESSE HUNNIFORD

MONA Opens Phrontisterion in Australia

The Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) in Hobart, Australia, opened Phrontisterion, a new wing designed to expand the museum's visitor experience. The AUD 100-million development features a library housing more than 30,000 books and maps from founder David Walsh's personal collection—including a rare Shakespeare First Folio—alongside artwork and exhibition spaces. Highlights include a cave-inspired children's library and the Ames Rooms, a series of optical illusion spaces connected to the existing museum through underground sandstone tunnels. Rather than relying on the traditional Dewey Decimal

System, Phrontisterion uses custom digital tracking. The new system allows books to be placed anywhere while remaining instantly locatable. Operators believe the new technology will encourage visitors to browse and make unexpected discoveries. Inspired by Walsh's lifelong passion for libraries, the project combines architecture, technology, literature, and contemporary art to create an immersive cultural experience that reimagines how visitors interact with books and museum collections.

mona.net.au

Frida Crouton's Final Course Blends Dining and Play in Melbourne

Immersive puzzles, a three-course meal, and escape room mechanics on the menu at Melbourne's Frida Crouton's Final Course. Set inside the existing Poke the Bear restaurant in Northcote, the new experience casts guests as heirs competing to solve the mysteries surrounding the estate of the late chef named Frida Crouton. Puzzles are integrated into the food, drinks, and environment, with each course unlocking new clues and advancing the story. Developed over three years by a



FRIDA CROUTON'S FINAL COURSE

multidisciplinary team including a psychologist, architect, chef, and game designer, the new attraction reflects the growing popularity of narrative-driven dining with immersive play. Designed for groups of family and friends, the experience places equal emphasis on storytelling, collaboration, and culinary, illustrating how food-based attractions continue to evolve beyond traditional themed restaurants into fully immersive, guest-driven experiences.

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NBC UNIVERSAL

Kids Rule at new Universal Kids Resort in Texas

Universal Destinations & Experiences officially opened Universal Kids Resort in Frisco, Texas, on July 1, marking the company's first regional park designed specifically for families with young children. The 32-acre destination features seven themed lands inspired by popular franchises, including Shrek, Jurassic World, SpongeBob SquarePants, Minions, and Trolls. Designed primarily for children ages 3 to 8, the resort combines family-friendly rides, interactive play experiences, live entertainment, character encounters, and a 300-room themed hotel. The park introduces a new regional resort model focused

on younger audiences and shorter, family-oriented visits.

"Universal Kids Resort offers a completely unique experience to what we have at our other destinations—introducing a younger generation to Universal fun crafted just for them," says Molly Murphy, president of Universal Creative. The opening reflects Universal's continued expansion beyond its traditional destination theme parks while extending its portfolio into a growing segment of the family entertainment market.

universalkidsresort.com

Area15 Debuts 200-Foot Eye Dropper in Las Vegas

Eye Dropper, a 200-foot combo tower manufactured by S&S Worldwide, has joined the skyline in Las Vegas. The new attraction at Area15 reimagines the traditional drop tower as a cinematic, story-driven experience inspired by altered states of perception, and it features both Space Shot and Turbo Drop sequences, launching riders skyward, freefalling, or combining both experiences while reaching speeds of up to 36 mph with moments of weightless.

A custom LED marquee featuring an all-seeing digital eye crowns the attraction, while immersive lighting, audio, voice prompts, and synchronized effects extend the experience.

"We're in the midst of an extraordinary time of expansion and evolution at Area15," says CEO Winston Fisher.

One of the world's largest Museum of Ice Cream attractions opened at Area15 on July 3 in Zone 2. Spanning nearly 30,000 square feet, the new attraction features 14-installations.

area15.com



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Acclaimed Immersive Culinary Experience Debuts in Kenya

Immersive dining concept Le Petit Chef debuted in Kenya, Africa earlier this year at Hemingways Nairobi, a five-star boutique hotel in the country's capital. Created by Belgian collective Skullmapping and produced by Germany's 2Spicy Entertainment, the concept combines 3D projection mapping, animated storytelling, and fine dining.

In Nairobi, guests experience Le Petit Chef: The Beginning, one of several productions in the brand's repertoire. The story follows the miniature chef's first culinary adventure. Animated scenes project directly onto both the dining table and plates, as they introduce each of the five courses through synchronized digital storytelling.

In addition to classic and premium options, Nairobi's experience offers vegetarian and kids menus, with all diners sharing the same visual production regardless of menu selection. The experience is recommended for guests aged 7 and older.

The opening expands Le Petit Chef's global footprint to more than 100 locations worldwide, including Bangkok, Singapore, and Berlin. The two-hour experience accommodates individual bookings, families, groups, and corporate events, with shared seating offered on selected dates.

lepetitchef.com, hemingways-collection.com

The Goodall Centre of Hope Slated for Tanzania

Construction is underway on Dr. Jane's Dream, The Goodall Centre of Hope—a new conservation and educational attraction scheduled to open in late 2027. Located in Arusha, Tanzania, adjacent to the Cultural Heritage Centre, the facility was donated to Dr. Jane Goodall by Saifuddin Khanbhai and his family. Goodall remained closely involved in the project's design and development until her death in October 2025.

The center will tell the story of Dr. Goodall's life and pioneering chimpanzee research at Gombe, now protected as Gombe National Park. The world's longest-running wild chimpanzee study—now in its 66th year—continues there. Interactive exhibits will also showcase the work of the Jane Goodall Institute. Featured initiatives



include the Tacare community conservation program, African chimpanzee sanctuaries, and Roots & Shoots, the institute's global youth action program. Active in more than 75 countries, the program empowers young people to develop projects benefiting communities, wildlife, and the environment.

Designed as both a visitor attraction and an educational hub, the center will offer educational programs, interactive exhibition spaces, and areas dedicated to community engagement. The center will also host recycled-glass installations by Kenya's Kitengela Glass. Sculptures created by local artists and friends of Dr. Goodall from around the world will be displayed.

janedream.org



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Double Stock Carousel

Therme Horizon Appoints CEO

Christian Woller will lead **Therme Horizon** as chief executive officer. He will spearhead the company's strategic expansion across Therme Horizon's portfolio of wellbeing destinations. Woller joins from Merlin Entertainments, where he most recently served as managing director for theme park resorts and indoor attractions across Europe and the Asia-Pacific region. Previously, he served as vice president of Legoland Billund Resort.



THERME HORIZON

Therme Group Appoints Chief Entertainment Officer

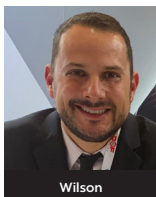
Therme Group hired **Rainer Maelzer** as chief entertainment officer. Maelzer brings more than 30 years of experience in the attractions industry, including co-founding **wiegand.maelzer** and serving as president of **WhiteWater's** entertainment division. In his new role, he will lead the development of entertainment experiences across Therme Group's global portfolio, supporting the company's immersive attractions, storytelling, and wellness.



THERME GROUP

FractaVisual Expands Leadership Team

Phil Wilson is the new director of global partnerships and marketing for **FractaVisual**. Wilson will lead the company's partnership initiatives and global marketing strategy. He has more than 30 years of experience in the attractions industry, most recently in leadership roles at **Extreme Engineering**. In addition, Wilson received the **IAAPA Meritorious Service Award** in 2022.



FRACTAVISUAL

Activate Names Chief Technology Officer

Activate announced **Scott Shultz** as chief technology officer. Shultz brings more than 30 years of experience in technology leadership and AI strategy, having previously held executive roles at **Exeter Finance**, **Topgolf**, and **Main Event Entertainment**. In his new position, he will oversee the company's technology strategy, supporting global expansion and investments in game experiences.



ACTIVATE

Parques Reunidos Creates Entertainment Leadership Role

Mark Reeves is the new group director of entertainment at **Parques Reunidos**. Reeves brings more than 20 years of experience in the attractions industry, most recently leading entertainment and events for **Six Flags Qiddiya City** and **Aquarabia** in Saudi Arabia. Reporting to



PARQUES REUNIDOS

Group Director of Business Development **Diego Gracia**, he will strengthen live entertainment and immersive experiences.

Family Entertainment Group Strengthens Leadership Team

Two appointments at **Family Entertainment Group (FEG)** will strengthen its executive team. **Jason Clark** joined the company as chief financial officer, bringing financial leadership experience from **Puttshack** and **McDonald's**. **Nick DiMatteo** will serve as senior vice president of equipment operations and strategy after more than 25 years in leadership roles at **Pinnacle Entertainment Group** and **Dave & Buster's**. DiMatteo will lead equipment operations and strategic initiatives across FEG's portfolio of managed locations.



FEG



FEG

Slick City Names First Chief Marketing Officer

Slick City Action Park appointed **Josh Cole** as its first chief marketing officer. Cole brings more than 20 years of experience building consumer and franchise brands, having previously served as chief marketing officer for **Sky Zone**, **Title Boxing Club**, and **Sandbox VR**. Previously a strategic advisor to **Slick City**, Cole will now lead the company's brand strategy, digital marketing, franchise marketing, partnerships, and engagement initiatives.



SLICK CITY ACTION PARK

Betson Adds Senior Marketing Director

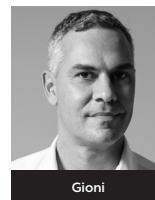
Michael Arnone is the new senior director of marketing at **Betson**. Arnone brings more than 20 years of experience in brand strategy and integrated marketing, having led marketing initiatives across the attractions, entertainment, and hospitality sectors. In his new role, he will oversee marketing strategy and execution across **Betson Enterprises** and parent company **H. Betti Industries**, supporting brand growth and customer engagement.



BETSON

New Museum Appoints New Director

The **New Museum** on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, New York promoted **Massimiliano Gioni** as its next **Toby Devan Lewis Director**. Gioni joined the museum in 2006 as curator. During nearly two decades at the museum, he has helped shape its exhibition program, established the **New Museum Triennial**, and developed institutional partnerships that have expanded the museum's international reach.



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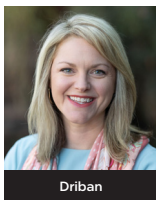
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National Aquarium Names First Female President and CEO

Baltimore's National Aquarium has appointed **Jennifer Driban** as president and CEO, making her the first woman to lead the organization in its history. Driban joined the Aquarium in 2016 and had served as interim president and CEO since 2025. Previously chief mission officer, she has led the Aquarium's conservation, education, guest engagement, public policy, and government affairs initiatives.



BALTIMORE'S NATIONAL AQUARIUM

Seattle Aquarium Promotes Veteran to President & CEO

The Seattle Aquarium promoted **Meg McCann** to president and CEO. McCann joined the organization in 2024 as chief operating officer and has twice served as acting president and CEO. Since joining the aquarium, she helped drive its growth to more than 1 million annual visitors while supporting initiatives that combine technology, marine conservation, and sustainability. She will lead the aquarium as it continues expanding its conservation, education, and waterfront initiatives.



SEATTLE AQUARIUM

Disney Experiences Announces Senior Leadership Changes

Disney Experiences announced a series of senior leadership appointments across its global portfolio. **Joe Schott** is the new president of Walt Disney World Resort, succeeding Jeff Vahle, who retired after 36 years with the company. **Natacha Rafalski** is the new president of Disney Signature Experiences after leading Disneyland Paris since 2019. **Christophe Murphy** succeeds Rafalski as president of Disneyland Paris, following leadership roles with Disney Cruise Line and Disney Experiences.



L to R: Schott, Rafalski, Murphy

DISNEY EXPERIENCES

North Carolina Zoo Appoints New Director and CEO

The North Carolina Zoo brought on **Mark Penning** as director and CEO. Penning joins the zoo after more than 25 years with Disney, where he most recently served as vice president of animals, science, and environment for Disney Parks. Throughout his career, he has led global teams supporting animal care, conservation, veterinary science, and sustainability initiatives.



Penning

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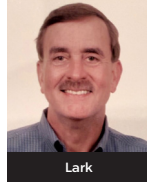


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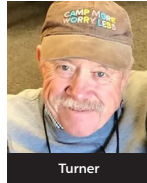
Billy Lark, Sr., a member of the family that founded Miracle Strip Amusement Park and Shipwreck Island Water Park in Panama City, Florida, died on June 9 at the age of 79. Lark joined his father and four brothers to open Miracle Strip Amusement Park in 1963, eventually taking over operations until it closed in 2004. He was also instrumental in developing Shipwreck Island, an adjoining water park in 1983, which the family continued to operate until 2025.



WILSON FUNERAL HOME

Lark

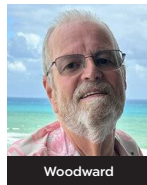
Steven E. Turner of Wildwood, Missouri died Sunday June 7, at the age of 74. After working at Six Flags Over Texas, Turner became part of the opening crew of Six Flags Over Mid-America in 1971. He went on to work for Acme Premium before starting his own business in 1996, Redbone Products, which provides game equipment and supplies to the midway and attractions industry.



CYPRESS POINTE CREMATION

Turner

Donald "Woody" Woodward passed away on May 8, at the age of 67. In the 1980s, he joined his family's business, Erieview Amusement Park in Geneva-on-the-Lake, Ohio, operating it until the park closed in 2006. In the late 1990s he opened the Adventure Zone family entertainment center,



BEHM FUNERAL HOME

Woodward

also in Geneva-on-the-Lake. In addition to serving on the Ohio Advisory Council of Amusement Ride Safety, Woodward also operated the Old Firehouse Winery, which featured Erieview's original Ferris wheel.

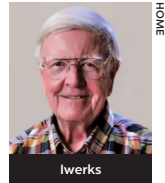
Richard "Dick" Knoebel passed away on July 16th at the age of 87. Starting full time at Knoebels Amusement Resort in the mid-1960s following his service in the United States Marine Corps, Dick helped to expand the business into a major destination. His 1985 relocation of the Phoenix wooden roller coaster had a profound impact not only on Knoebels, but the entire industry. He was named President of the family business in 1988, a position he held until 2025. Dick served on the IAAPA Board of Directors multiple times and in 2014 was inducted into the IAAPA Hall of Fame.



KNOEBEL'S AMUSEMENT RESORT

Knoebel

Don Iwerks an Oscar-winning inventor and Disney Legend, died on July 9 at the age of 96. After joining Disney in 1950 as a laboratory technician, he later moved into the Studio Machine Shop where he helped to develop the 360-degree CircleVision camera and the film equipment used at the 1964-65 New York World's Fair, Captain EO, Star Tours, and Epcot. In 1986, he founded Iwerks Entertainment, Inc., developing giant-screen theaters and 3D-projection-based theme park attractions.



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Thwarting Swatting

How attractions can prepare for unexpected threats



IT CAN BE AN ATTRACTION OPERATOR'S WORST NIGHTMARE: a threat prompting a high-profile response by the SWAT Team (Special Weapons And Tactics), that evacuates families, confuses employees, shuts an attraction, results in lost revenue, and often guarantees negative headlines.

In spring 2026, several zoos in North America closed for a day when operators were the target of threats. In July, a Florida water park was evacuated after a caller phoned in a threat. After a proactive response and thorough inspection from law enforcement, no immediate threat was discovered.

"Swatting" is defined by U.S. Department of Homeland Security as the malicious act of making a false emergency call to police to report an active crisis. Often, the caller will aim to trick emergency dispatchers into sending heavily armed first responders to an unsuspecting victim's location.

What should an attraction operator do when becoming victim of swatting?

"The initial response is critical," shares the Orange County Sheriff's Office (OCSO) in central Florida. "Affected attractions should treat every threat as credible until it has been assessed by law enforcement."

Welcome Law Enforcement Early

The best practice for managing a swatting threat is to prepare before a critical moment arrives. This begins with

establishing a strong relationship with local law enforcement. Whether an amusement park, science center, water park, museum, zoo, aquarium, or family entertainment center, the attraction should develop—and maintain—a strong working relationship with its local law enforcement and other authorities having jurisdiction. Best practices include:

- Inviting emergency personnel to visit a facility on a regular basis for a tour and conversation.
- Operations, food, and merchandise managers should show authorities evacuation routes, designate where first responders may park their vehicles, participate in tabletop exercises, and discuss further emergency response drills. These can be held before opening for the day or during the off-season.
- Designers should engage with first responders during the planning stage of major expansions or modifications.
- Offer opportunities for law enforcement to conduct its own training exercises, for example, inside an FEC's laser tag arena or a water park when appropriate.

Develop an Emergency Action Plan

Attractions should develop a comprehensive emergency action plan that addresses a variety of emergency scenarios, including swatting incidents. The plan should:

- Be flexible enough to address multiple threat scenarios—from swatting to severe weather (e.g., when should outdoor miniature golf courses and bumper boat attractions close when weather radar indicates a thunderstorm approaching).
- Clearly define notification (and escalation) procedures to senior managers and owners.
- Identify communication protocols for not only employees, but also for guests.

Conduct Training Exercises

Owners and operators should train office employees—those who are most likely to receive a threatening call—with tactics on how to calmly respond. These staff members should be given a set of instructions and a script to follow should they take a threatening call.

To familiarize associates, attractions leaders should schedule time to conduct tabletop exercises during the off-season or before the facility opens for the day. Local law enforcement agencies can assist in these training drills while adding a layer of expertise.

Gain further insight on "social takeovers" from the white paper published by IAAPA's global and regional Safety and Security Committees found at [IAAPA.org/SocialTakeover](https://iaapa.org/SocialTakeover). 



The United States Department of Homeland Security provides this **bomb threat checklist** that operators should familiarize themselves with. Scan the QR code here to review the document.



Scott Fais is the senior director of global editorial at IAAPA. The 12-time Associated Press-honored journalist enjoys visiting immersive attractions of all kinds—and meeting the professionals who design and operate facilities. His favorite attraction? The one he'll visit next. Connect with him on [LinkedIn](#).



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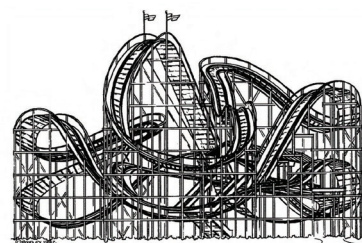
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Universal Epic Universe Lead Reflects on Success, Growth, and What's Next

EVP Jeff Polk shares what's working, what's evolving

EIGHT YEARS IN THE MAKING, Universal Orlando's fourth gate became a landmark achievement in planning, patience (read: global pandemic), and innovation when it officially opened on May 22, 2025. Touted as the first major U.S. theme park to open in 25+ years, Universal Epic Universe redefined Universal Orlando's product in Florida.

A year after opening, Funworld speaks exclusively with Jeff Polk, executive vice president and general manager of Epic Universe, who played an integral part in the facility's planning and development.



UNIVERSAL ORLANDO RESORT

One year after opening Epic Universe, how are you feeling?

I've been with the company for 37 years. Even back in 1990, when we were building the original Universal Studios Florida, the vision was always to create a true week-long vacation destination. With Epic Universe and our expanded hotel portfolio of 11,000 rooms, we've finally crossed into that space. Every morning, I spend about an hour walking through the park before the day begins. It's a great way to start the day, and it's rewarding to see guests enjoying something that took so many years to bring to life.

But this isn't an ending, it's a new beginning point for us. So many times, you're kind of stuck, but I don't feel like we are. We've got the world in front of us, and a great bunch of products and places, and I'm really excited to be a part of it.

What are some unexpected operational challenges?

Whenever you open a new theme park, there are always unknowns. You spend eight years developing something, but until guests actually arrive, you don't know exactly how they'll use it. You don't

know how they'll move through the park, what they'll prioritize, when they'll want to eat, or how they'll get from one area to another. Those are the fun challenges. It's a puzzle.

We've been refining wayfinding, adjusting food offerings, and making operational tweaks based on guest behavior. Those things take time. I always tell people it takes about 12 to 15 months for a park to fully settle in. That's where we are now. We feel really good about the past year, and it was great to reach the one-year anniversary.

What are guests telling you they want more of?

Guests consistently tell us they want less friction. Since the pandemic, we've focused heavily on simplifying the guest experience through both technology and operational changes. The response has been very positive. One example is photo validation [used for park entry and Universal Express line bypass], and another is our redesign of the locker systems.

What did you change in the locker experience?

Traditionally, guests would store their belongings before entering a queue, wait in line for an hour, ride the attraction, and then return to retrieve their items. Guests repeatedly told us they wanted to keep their phones with them. They want to take photos, communicate with friends, and stay connected while waiting.

We first tested a new locker concept on VelociCoaster [an Intamin launch coaster found at Universal's Islands of Adventure theme park] and then expanded it at Epic Universe. Guests now keep their belongings with them through most of the queue and use lockers just before boarding. The lockers are linked through

Guests entering Universal Epic Universe are drawn toward the Kronos, the imposing edifice that serves as an icon at the park's front gate.

facial recognition technology, and guests retrieve their belongings immediately after exiting the attraction.

Universal has experimented with allowing access to Celestial Park separately from the rest of the park. Is there potential for that concept to expand?

We're testing a variety of ideas, but we don't have a specific long-term plan in place today. We want to understand how these concepts operate in practice and whether guests actually want them.

The park still needs to function as a complete, full-day experience for guests who purchase admission. At the same time, Celestial Park is a beautiful environment with substantial capacity, excellent restaurants, and now a major nighttime

experience. We want to figure out the best way to leverage Celestial Park, but we don't have a complete plan yet.

A year in, what indicators do you use to determine it's time to expand?

There are a number of factors that go into that. First, we have to deliver on the park's original promise. Epic Universe was built to raise the standing of Universal Orlando Resort as a full destination vacation resort where guests can spend multiple days enjoying different experiences. The primary focus right now is making sure Epic fulfills that promise. From there, we respond to demand and market conditions. To remain successful, we have to keep things fresh.

As demand dictates, we'll evaluate opportunities for expansion. Even today, we're continuing to add new experiences within the park. We've launched Celestial Goodnight [evening fireworks presentation that opened July 7] and we've introduced atmospheric entertainment, such as Captain Cacao, in Celestial Park. Those additions help broaden the overall experience for guests. **FW**



Experience Universal Epic Universe in person during **IAAPA Celebrates** on Nov. 19. This exclusive evening at the park combines networking opportunities, rides, F&B sampling, and entertainment under the stars. Get tickets at [IAAPA.org/Expo](https://iaapa.org/Expo)



"We have to deliver on the park's original promise. Epic Universe was built to raise the standing of Universal Orlando Resort as a full destination vacation resort where guests can spend multiple days enjoying different experiences."



UNIVERSAL ORLANDO RESORT



Zach Laks is a travel writer and editor based in New York City with 10+ years of experience and bylines in 20 publications covering theme parks, cruises, resorts, and travel news. Connect with him on [LinkedIn](#):



Babbling brooks, rock formations, and green space create interest in Universal Epic Universe's central Celestial Park realm.



by Jacqueline Hoyos, chief media officer, Moroch

Creating an Optimal Media Mix for Funneling Fall Visitors

How to get the best ROI on paid media

IT'S FALL IN THE NORTHERN HEMISPHERE, bringing the potential for throngs of seasonally charged festivity seekers of autumn events, Halloween scares, and family bonding. However, a question that is always top of mind for any marketer is where to target their media spend to maximize visibility and return on investment (ROI).

Digital, out of home (OOH), connected TV, broadcast, and print all have their various appeals, depending on demographics, but first, attractions' brand marketers need to know the landscape that customers find themselves navigating before they make their buys.

Given the current state of the current economy, consumer decision-making in 2026 will look different than in years past. Families will have had less memorable moments throughout the year, nixing the annual big vacation as daily expenses mount. While this has caused pain that the industry has weathered, it presents an incredible opportunity for brands. Now is the time for attractions to elevate their new or traditional autumn experiences so they connect, create lasting memories, and build brand loyalty or familiarity.

As families stay home, media consumption has naturally increased on social and video. However, because consumers have stayed closer to home, there is an expanded impact in cinema and out-of-home ads. The massive success of family films like "Super Mario Galaxy" has brought cinema advertising back into the limelight. Meanwhile, free family-friendly areas have resonated at an increasing rate, providing higher ROI for OOH advertising. Especially when reaching multicultural audiences, out-of-home advertising for family events provides maximum visibility.



MICHAEL COSTELLO

Social advertising is still the primary driver for engagement for reaching mothers and teens: Meta (Facebook and Instagram) is the most used platform for mothers, and YouTube is best for promoting experiences for teen outings. TikTok and Snapchat are popular with the teen demographic, but delivering authentic messaging on those platforms is difficult, which leads to fragmentation.

In our research and spend at Moroch, data shows that when making social or digital spends, video outperforms non-video, because attractions and events are visually appealing and can deliver a taste of the experience. Consumers can easily envision themselves taking part in the event, rather than having to create the experience in their own mind that stems from a static visual cue.

Halloween and autumn need to be a priority spend for attraction brands. Fall is second only to the Christmas season in regard to per-person spending, and the number of people participating in Halloween activities has massively increased in the past 20 years. A National Retail Federation study found roughly half of all adults took part in 2005—by 2025, that number rose to more than 70%.

Don't get spooked by the seasonal spend. Consumers are actively seeking venues to fill the void that frugality has forced on them. 

Pumpkins galore at Bengtson's Pumpkin Farm in Homer Glen, Illinois.



Jacqueline Hoyos is chief media officer at Moroch, a media and creative agency based in Dallas, who has worked with Six Flags and Premier Parks as their agency of record. Connect with her on **LinkedIn**:



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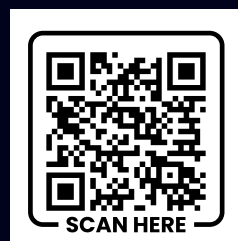


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Striking a Chord Through Immersion

Chris Stafford shares how his team lives a culture of emotional connection

AS DEMAND FOR IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCES CONTINUES TO GROW, Funworld spoke with Chris Stafford, CEO of Thirteenth Floor Entertainment Group, a producer of live events and location-based entertainment experiences, about the keys to success needed in this evolving entertainment landscape.

“We live so much of our lives communicating with friends and family in the digital world, on the device in our hands,” says Stafford. “Our goal is to create bespoke experiences that bring people together with a reason to socialize in person, authentically.”

While operators may struggle to quantify the financial return of immersive environments, can you share why these events are essential?

I think one of the biggest mistakes operators make is viewing immersion as a cost center rather than a value driver. When you create a truly immersive environment, you increase emotional engagement—and emotional engagement drives behavior. Guests stay longer, spend more, share more, and return more frequently. The return isn’t always isolated to a single attraction component. It shows up in attendance growth, premium ticket sales, ancillary spending, social media reach, repeat visitation, and brand loyalty. In today’s entertainment landscape, consumers have endless options competing for their time and money. Immersion is often the differentiator.

Which technologies meaningfully enhance guest immersion versus those that add operational complexity without clear value?

We try to focus on whether or not the technology serves the story. Technology should

never become the attraction itself—unless that’s the intended experience. When evaluating new tools, we ask ourselves: ‘Does it create a guest experience that cannot be achieved another way? Is it reliable enough to operate consistently at scale? And does the value it creates justify the operational and maintenance requirements?’ Some of the most effective immersive moments are surprisingly low-tech. A talented performer, thoughtful environmental design, and strong storytelling often outperform expensive technology.

What training framework is essential for maintaining consistency and guest satisfaction?

Maintaining consistency at scale starts with culture. Every team member receives extensive training to ensure they can handle a wide range of situations safely, confidently, and professionally while preserving the guest experience. We’ve built a structure that empowers our people while maintaining accountability. We view training as an ongoing process rather than a one-time exercise. Whether it’s integrating new technologies, enhancing customer service protocols, or adapting to emerging industry trends, we’re constantly evaluating how we can elevate the guest experience, and is what allows us to maintain high levels of guest satisfaction while continuing to grow.

What trends or shifts do you anticipate in guest expectations?

Guests increasingly look for experiences that feel personal, participatory, and memorable. The next generation of immersive attractions will move beyond passive consumption. People want agency. They want their decisions to matter. They want experiences that feel unique to them rather than identical for every guest who walks through the door. We’re also seeing a growing expectation for higher production value and richer storytelling. I believe the future belongs to experiences that create genuine emotional connection. Technology will continue to evolve, but the attractions that win will be the ones that make guests feel something and give them a story worth telling afterward. **FW**



Michael Costello is the managing editor, IAAPA News. 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](#).



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Evolution of Theme Park Dining

Driving satisfying experiences and revenue

FOOD AND BEVERAGE CONTINUES TO BE AN ESSENTIAL COMPONENT of the theme park experience. Today, culinary's role extends far beyond simply satisfying hunger, becoming a powerful driver of guest satisfaction, emotional engagement, and commercial performance.

At Miral Experiences—a subsidiary of Miral and creator of immersive destinations and experiences in Abu Dhabi—F&B is an integral part of the guest journey rather than a supporting amenity.

Across Yas Island's world-class attractions, dining concepts are carefully designed to enhance storytelling, deepen guest engagement, and extend the overall experience. From unit placement and menu development—to guest flow planning—every element is considered to ensure dining contributes to both memorable experiences and strong commercial performance.

This philosophy comes to life through destination-specific concepts that immerse guests further into the worlds they are exploring. At Ferrari World Yas Island, Abu Dhabi, Mamma Rossella brings the authentic flavours and spirit of Maranello to life through award-winning Italian cuisine. Meanwhile, Gran Tour Emilia celebrates the rich culinary heritage of Italy's Emilia-Romagna region, reflecting the origins of the Ferrari brand. At Yas Waterworld Yas Island, Abu Dhabi, Dockside Dining complements the park's adventurous atmosphere with a relaxed waterfront-inspired experience. At Warner Bros. World Yas Island, Abu Dhabi, The Starlight Restaurant transports guests to the glamour of Hollywood's Golden Age within Warner Bros. Plaza. Meanwhile, Fathom 11 at SeaWorld Yas Island, Abu Dhabi, draws inspiration from the wonders of the ocean, seamlessly supporting the park's One Ocean story.

Rather than operating as standalone



MIRAL

restaurants, these venues are designed to become extensions of the attractions themselves, reinforcing each park's identity and enhancing immersion. However, delivering memorable dining experiences at scale requires more than creativity alone. As attractions continue to grow in size and complexity, maintaining consistency across multiple parks and concepts becomes equally important.

One of the industry's biggest F&B challenges has become finding the balance between operational excellence and innovation. Guests expect originality and memorable experiences, but they also expect speed, quality, and consistency.

At Miral Experiences, guest feedback, purchasing behaviour, operational performance metrics, and guest insights help shape everything from menu development and unit placement, to seasonal offerings and capacity planning. This data-driven approach enables the team to continuously refine experiences while responding to evolving guest preferences.

The future of attraction dining will be defined by greater personalization, deeper thematic integration, and increasingly immersive culinary experiences. Successful attractions will explore new concepts, limited-time experiences, and be innovative when integrating culinary more deeply into the guest journey. Focusing on elevating F&B from a supporting function into a strategic business driver—one that enhances guest satisfaction—can encourage repeat visitation and contribute to commercial success. 

Ferrari World's
Gran Tour
Emilia



Wafic Tibi is vice president of food & beverage strategy and development at Miral Experiences, where he leads the strategic direction, innovation, and operational excellence across Yas Island's world-class attractions and experiences. With extensive international experience in hospitality, leisure, and destination dining, he specializes in creating guest-centric concepts that enhance guest experiences and drive commercial growth.

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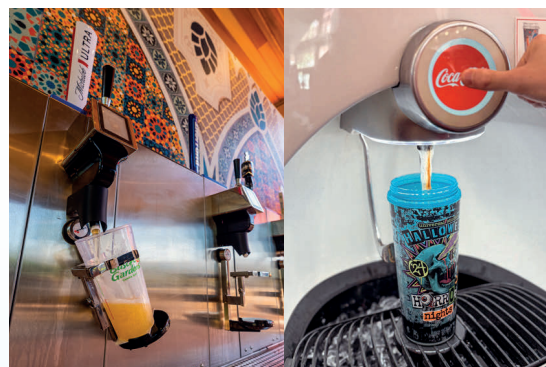
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The latest research reports and industry insights are available at [IAAPA.org/Research](https://iaapa.org/Research). All reports are available at no cost to those under a company or student membership. Most reports can be purchased by individual members and nonmembers.



Regional Economic Impact Studies

Highlight direct and indirect economic impacts of the attractions industry. Results are provided for the region and select countries, states, provinces, and territories. Key measures include estimated attraction inventory by category, annual attendance, revenue, employment impacts, and taxes paid by the industry.

Each regional report is updated every other year. North America, Asia-Pacific, and Europe & Sub-Saharan Africa will be updated this year. Latin America, Caribbean and the new Middle East & North Africa region will be completed in 2027.



Global Quarterly Outlook Report

Features participants' expectations over the next six months, including the global and regional economies, business conditions, future performance, and top opportunities and challenges.



Global Benchmark Reports

Include data on facility operations, attraction mix, admissions, staffing, visitor information, revenue, and expenses. The series includes an executive summary comparing attraction categories and individual attraction type reports.



Safety Reports

For IAAPA members, fixed-site amusement ride safety and water slide safety reports provide a data-driven view of ride safety across regions. Using aggregated incident data, they provide verified statistics on reported events, track safety trends over time, and support operators, regulators, industry professionals, and the public by promoting transparency and continuous safety improvement.



Global Theme and Amusement Park Outlook

Annual overview of the theme and amusement park industry with historical and five-year projections for economic data, attendance, guest spending, industry trends, and major park developments.



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 NEWS

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Wonder:
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2026 Preview
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IAAPA Expo 2026 Grows with Largest Trade Show Floor Ever

Expansion into West Building brings additional innovations and connections



IAAPA EXPO 2026 PROMISES TO BE THE LARGEST SHOWCASE of innovation and connections in the organization's 108 years. With the expansion into the Orange County Convention Center's West Building, there's guaranteed to be new innovations, more interactive experiences, and additional opportunities to make connections with decision makers across the global attractions industry.

Largest Trade Show Floor Yet

Surpassing 2018's milestone with 604,500 square feet and 1,247 exhibitors, this year marks the largest show floor in Expo history. With more exhibitors than ever before spread across the South and West Buildings, there are plenty of opportunities to spend each day of the

show connecting with exhibitors, allowing attendees to source new products and discover solutions to move their businesses forward.

Within the new layout of the South and West Buildings, attendees will recognize the familiar pavilions that are staples of the trade show floor. On the South Building show floor, attendees can still expect to see the inflatable pavilion, show production and design pavilion, games and arcade pavilion, family entertainment pavilion, and outdoor exhibits. New on the South Building trade show floor this year will be the Sail Away Lounge and the Adventure Outpost Lounge. These two lounges will host meetups for communities within the industry and for constituencies, where attendees can connect and discuss

industry trends and find solutions to current business challenges.

Western Expansion

Only a short walk across the pedestrian bridge or a ride on a continuously departing shuttle, attendees will find expanded offerings. The West Building will be home to IAAPA Expo favorites like the Opening Ceremony, held in the Chapin Theater on Tuesday morning, and the Haunting Grounds, an interactive haunt experience that expands to the show floor. IAAPA Central returns as the home for all things IAAPA membership related.

"Moving experiences such as the Chef Demo Stage and Haunting Grounds onto the show floor instead of on the concourse brings the community together in a whole new way" says Todd Andrus, vice president and executive director of IAAPA North America. "Experiences like this, that are woven into your show experience, are what sets IAAPA Expo apart. Our members are in the business of making memories, and it is only fitting that we offer these memorable moments to our attendees," says Christy Spahn, vice president of IAAPA Expo operations and sales. The West Building is home to more than just interactive experiences on the show floor. Attendees will find the Food and Beverage Pavilion, First Time Exhibitor Pavilion, EDUTalk stage, and for the first time, the new What's New Theater showing video highlights from new products from around the world.

IAAPA NEWS



170+ Opportunities to Learn

Not only is IAAPA Expo 2026 notable for its number of exhibitors, but the education conference will host more than 170 educational events—more than ever before. EDUSessions will take place starting on Monday and run through Thursday, bridging both the South Building and the West Building. Featured this year is the IAAPA Leadership and Talent Development Forum in which attendees learn from leaders from across the global attractions industry to explore the strategies, tools, and mindsets that drive meaningful workplace culture.

Learning will take attendees on location with EDUTours at major theme parks and other attractions throughout central Florida to see firsthand how best practices are applied in real life. There will also be educational opportunities on the show floor at the EDUTalk and Innovation Stages where 20-minute presentations will provide quick learning opportunities for all.

Connect Beyond the Show Floor

The historic event this November deserves a grand opening and that is exactly what is slated to take place on Tuesday morning in the Chapin Theater in the West Building. Attendees will be able to attend the Opening Ceremony that will feature a buzzworthy experience with the grand opening of the trade show floor to follow.

On Tuesday evening, the West Building will feature IAAPA After Hours, a new event just outside the trade show floor. “This is a free event for all to come and celebrate the opening of IAAPA Expo. IAAPA is creating an accessible evening event to encourage attendees to make new connections and rekindle old,” says Andrus.



The week culminates Thursday night at IAAPA Celebrates hosted by Universal Epic Universe theme park. After the positive response to the inaugural event last year, returning to Universal’s newest park—and opening ticket sales to members and non-members alike—is the best way to celebrate a successful IAAPA Expo week. Ticket holders will receive exclusive access to the entire park, exceptional F&B offerings, entertainment, and the groundbreaking attractions. IAAPA Expo 2026 is an event attractions professionals cannot miss. 



Trisha Sissons is the marketing director for IAAPA North America, leading marketing strategies that grow awareness of IAAPA membership in the North America region and promotes attendance at IAAPA Expo Orlando along with NA events. Connect with her on [LinkedIn](#):



Hong Kong Welcomes IAAPA Expo Asia

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1, 2027, in Osaka,
Japan. Learn more at:
IAAPA.org/Expos

WITH ITS UNIQUE FUSION of a modern international destination and old-world charm, the bright lights of Hong Kong made for a memorable backdrop during IAAPA Expo Asia 2026.

Built around the theme of “Pursue the Wonder,” June’s event encouraged attendees to push creative boundaries, embrace new perspectives, and unlock fresh opportunities for growth—both for their business and professionally—with 22 EDUSessions, more than ever before offered at IAAPA Expo Asia.

“We saw full EDUSessions and we saw full EDUTours. This is ultimately the spirit of the association: to come together, to see each other, to network with each other, and to learn from each other,” says IAAPA President and CEO Jakob Wahl.

Learning opportunities also abounded outside of the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre (HKCEC).

An EDUTour to Hong Kong Ocean Park delighted attendees with the opportunity to see panda bears in their habitat and an up-close look at husbandry activities behind the scenes. A few attendees became overcome with emotion, sharing their joy through tears of happiness. The tour also gave attendees a backstage look at how animal care professionals expertly attend to the fish and reptiles that call the park’s Grand Aquarium home.

From emerging technologies to operational advancements, the trade show floor offered a showcase of the latest innovations, products, and services driving the evolution of the attractions industry.

ASIA EXPO BY THE NUMBERS



5,447
Verified Attendees



3,665
Qualified Buyers



2,522
Participating Companies



339
Exhibiting Companies



79
Speakers



73
Countries Represented



22
EDUSessions



12
EDUTalks



4
EDUTours

IAAPA Vice President and Executive Director of Asia-Pacific Jack Chan says about the trade show floor, “There were so many new connections being made and old connections being rekindled.”

This year’s Opening Reception felt like a dream sequence as attendees were ushered into Hong Kong Disneyland for a reception and dinner fit for royalty. The Leadership Breakfast consisted of an energetic conversation from Chimelong Founder and Chairman Su Zhigang, who hosted expo’s two-day post tour at his collection of notable attractions in Guangdong, China.

“It’s very hard to imagine our business without IAAPA. We’ve been attending all the [IAAPA] Expos as much as possible, especially here in Asia,” says founder and President of Enchanted Kingdom, Mario Mamon from the Philippines, as he and his family look forward to next year’s IAAPA Expo Asia in Osaka, Japan.

IAAPA NEWS





Brass Ring Award Winners Share Insight

IAAPA's recognition program honors international innovators

ITS INFINITE GOLDEN LOOP SYMBOLIZES EXCELLENCE. As one of the most prestigious professional honors awarded to IAAPA members, the Brass Ring Award is bestowed to facilities and operators of distinction. From stunning live entertainment productions to creative culinary, and innovative training to imaginative marketing, IAAPA Brass Ring Award winners are at the top of their field.

Winning an IAAPA Brass Ring Award is just as legendary as its namesake, when riders of 19th century carousels would pull a metal ring from a dispenser—with most acquiring an iron or steel ring—while a lucky few would pull a brass-colored ring.

Several 2025 winners share insight with Funworld on operating with distinction, purpose, and innovation.



How to Score
LBE of the Year:
Deutschlandmuseum
Berlin

“Quality really makes a difference—and try to innovate. It doesn’t mean you have to prototype anything; it’s about using ingredients and mixing them together differently. You don’t do it for the recognition; you want to create something special, something the guests can connect with emotionally. I would advise that you find that niche, that story, and really try to make things different.”

— Chris Lange, Creative Studio Berlin



Using Winning Feedback
Best New F&B Special Event/ Festival: Cherry Jubilee
Gilroy Gardens, Gilroy, California

“We’re getting feedback—not only from our guests—but our team members. We take that feedback constructively; use a lot of trial and error; and we’re very ‘fruitful’ in our budget. There are times when we need to supplement certain ingredients just to keep that cost effectiveness. A lot of times, we depend on the full-time managers from a labor perspective when it’s all hands-on deck. Therefore, the Brass Ring is rewarding for everyone.”

— Sandy Le, Gilroy Gardens



Go Beyond the Norm
Most Creative Social Media Marketing Campaign: Baby Capybara Yoga
Jungle Island, Miami

“Go beyond the regular metrics. The heart and the core of the new ideas that we try in the attractions world are so subjective and so unique to demographics, to context, to where you are located.

Create a fun presentation [for the Brass Ring Award judges]. Show all the wonderful things that your team has done—and just send the application away!”

— Rebeca Morgado, Jungle Island



The 2026 IAAPA Brass Ring Award application window closes on October 16. Learn more about categories, requirements, and the submission process at [IAAPA.org/BrassRing](https://iaapa.org/BrassRing)



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As of August 1, 2026

COMPANY	BOOTH	COMPANY	BOOTH	COMPANY	BOOTH	COMPANY	BOOTH
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2026 GLOBAL EXHIBITORS

501 FUN	S4543	Guangdong H-FUN Water Recreational Articles Co. Ltd.	S349
abc rides switzerland	S1418	Guangdong Zhengrong Amusement Equipment Co. Ltd.	S5041
accesso	S2123	Guangzhou Design Art	S3534
Ace Amusement	S2003	Guangzhou EPARK Electronic Technology Co. Ltd.	S5048
Adler Amusement Equipment Co. Ltd.	S1111	Guangzhou HuoShi Chuan Yu Technology Co. Ltd.	S3311
AEROPHILE	S1122	Guangzhou iFun Park Technology Co. Ltd.	S3834
Aier Inflatable Group Co. Ltd.	S2336	Guangzhou Infinity Technology Co. Ltd.	S3203
Alterface	S3719	Guangzhou Luckyplay Amusement Equipment Co. Ltd.	S4534
Ankam Water Park Equipment	S3628	Guangzhou Movie Power Technology Co. Ltd.	S2813
AQUAKITA	S5203	Guangzhou Sea Animation Technology Co. Ltd.	S3227
Arihant Water Park Equipment	S1118	Guangzhou Yinghua Technology Co. Ltd.	S3711
Avius	N4800	Hafema Water Rides GmbH	S4218
Axess	S1114	Hangzhou Hogwood Amusement Equipment Co. Ltd.	S5103
Beijing YIDELI Amusement Equipment Co. Ltd.	S3608	Hangzhou Trains Equipment Co. Ltd.	S229
BERTAZZON	S2017	Haystack Dryers Limited	S729
Bolliger & Mabillard Inc.	S1403	HB Leisure	S1401
Brogent Technologies, Inc.	S3817	Hebei Haiber Play Equipment Co. Ltd.	S4030
Brunswick Bowling Products	S817	Henan Dinis Entertainment Technology Co. Ltd.	S4407
Buzzpark	S217	Huaxia Amusement Co. Ltd.	S3814
Cheer Amusement	S703	Hunan Zhongyi Amusement Equipment Co. Ltd.	S3607
Cinola Technology	S4427	Huss Park Attractions	S723
Concept 1900	S2623	HY Technology Ltd.	S2828
Creneux Culture & Tech (Shenzhen) Co. Ltd.	S4143	I.E.Park Srl Soli Bumper Cars	S2619
Delta Strike International Ltd.	S2012	Instal Frigo Ice srl	S3727
Dino Works	S826	InstaVR	S5227
DOF Robotics	S317	Intamin Amusement Rides	S1316
Dongguan Unistar Industrial Limited	S131	Intelligent Entertainment	S4922
DOTTO Trains	S1523	InterCard	S2730
Dreamland Playgroup Co. Ltd.	S4802	InterPark Magazine	S1712
Elephant Sculpture Art Company Ltd.	S5113	iPlayCO	S2426
Ellis & Associates	S2826	Jargee.Foto	S2839
EMBED	S2707	JB-Inflatables BV	S1937
EMPEX Watertoys-Canada	S2410	Jiyou Animation	S1903
ETR Ride Systems	S1218	KristallTurn	S1311
FABBRIO Group	S719	LaserBlast	S3127
FEVER	N4829	Laserforce	S3319
FlowRider	S623	Leisure Activities Co. Ltd.	S2436
Funlandia Play System Inc.	S5123	Liben Group Wenzhou Toy Co. Ltd.	S850
Gengu Dinosaurs Technology Co. Ltd.	S4512	LightUpToys.com	S3807
Gooest Media Technologydaqing Co. Ltd.	S3431		
Gosetto SRL	S1419		
Great Coasters International, Inc.	S617		
Guangdong Domerry Amusement Equipment Co. Ltd.	S1301		
Guangdong Dream Catch Recreation Equipment Co. Ltd.	S1333		

2026 FIRST TIME EXHIBITORS

4escape	S3742	Frog Amusement Srl	S143
501 FUN	S4543	Future Street GmbH	N4703
6DOF Systems Oy	N5003	Gantom Lighting & Controls	TT013
ABH Tech	N5015	Geese Design - Trends	N4703
AETI GLOBAL LTD CO	S3240	Global Solutions for Clothing (GSC) Ltd	S4341
AI Gaming Ltd	N5128	GLP German Light Products	N4730
AI Things Nice Vending Ltd.	S139	Green World Merchandise	N4833
ALV International d.o.o.	TT009	Guangdong Zhengrong Amusement Equipment Co. Ltd.	S5041
ArcaMaster Inc.	S3941	Guangzhou LEKABI Technology Co. Ltd.	S3314
Arctic	S339	Guangzhou Anchi Amusement Equipment Co. Ltd.	S3113
Arti Grafiche Julia S.p.A.	S4042	Guangzhou Anmiao Information Technology Co. Ltd.	S3735
ATA PARK OYUN GRUPLARI ve MERK.	S3511	Guangzhou Boyun Amusement Equipment Co. Ltd.	S3316
AttractionBz Aps	S4637	Guangzhou Daka Animation Technology Co. Ltd.	S3213
Attraxion	S4144	Guangzhou Design Art	S3534
AXB Group (AXB Trading Ltd)	S3136	Guangzhou East Sports Co. Ltd.	S1843
Beijing YIDELI Amusement Equipment Co. Ltd.	S3608	Guangzhou Funsen Amusement Technology Co. Ltd.	S5217
Beijing Yingda Technology Development Co., Ltd.	S4906	Guangzhou Gold Fever Amusement Co., Ltd.	S5234
Blacklight Attractions	S4242	Guangzhou Happy Island Education Recreation Equipment Co. Ltd.	S5216
BOAZ Concept	S4140	Guangzhou Harvy Amusement Equipment Co. Ltd.	TT021
Bomb Squad	S4228	Guangzhou Joint Fun Technology Co. Ltd.	S3211
BRASS MONKEY GLOBAL FZCO	N4519	Guangzhou Kule Amusement Equipment Co. Ltd.	S2843
Bubble Inc. Ltd.	S5301	Guangzhou Lechuang Electronic Technology Co. Ltd.	S3616
Carrousel des Desserts	S3340	Guangzhou Lionet Amusement Equipment Co. Ltd.	S2832
Chengdu Tailong Recreation Industry Co. Ltd.	N5018	Guangzhou New Yingjia Technology Co. Ltd.	S238
Chifuntek Limited Company	S1344	Guangzhou Palm Fun Electronics Co. Ltd.	S1137
Christie Digital Systems	S837	Guangzhou Potato Animation Technology Co., Ltd.	S1132
Chuliang Technology (HK) Limited	S3640	Guangzhou Season Ambition Amusement Co. Ltd.	S5230
Cinchio Solutions	S837	Guangzhou Shuangqu Electronics Co. Ltd.	S5339
Cinesite	S837	Guangzhou Toda cartoon LTD	S3307
CLIC-IT	S5313	Guangzhou Tongluofeng Amusement Equipment Co. Ltd.	S5043
Clockwork.dog	S4040	Guangzhou Tongshuo Industrial Co., Ltd.	TT007
Color Room	N5106	Guangzhou U-Rides Attraction Co., Ltd.	S3606
Combat Laser Games Ltd	S3847	Guangzhou Wangerbao Software Development Co. Ltd.	S1139
Concept Factory BV	S3937	Guangzhou Xiaocheshou Technology Co. Ltd.	S3530
CoreGo GmbH	N4703	Guangzhou Xiongzhixie(Jiaxin) Animation Technology Co. Ltd.	S3838
Cowboy Group (Guangdong) Industrial	S2727	Guangzhou Zhisheng Digital Technology Co. Ltd.	S1216
Creneux Culture & Tech (Shenzhen) Co. Ltd.	S4143	Guohui Mechanic Producing Taizhou Co. Ltd.	S5139
Dead Walk Designs LTD	S4809	Hane Bowling Ekipmanları Sanayi Ticaret Limited Sirketi	TT011
Dennypay UAB	S1343	HAWE Micro Fluid GmbH	TT012
Detail Creations	S3731	Henan Karry Amusement Equipment Co. Ltd.	S1942
Dewesoft	S2731	High-Tech Digital Modules s.r.o.	S4244
Director's Choice Limited	S337	Hive Media Control Ltd	S4736
DongGuan Tongxin Paper CO, LTD	TT002		
DOTMILL INC.	N4821		
Draftserv Technologies, LLC.	S3141		
E-Service (Europe) Ltd.	S3201		
EisBerger GmbH	S3150		
Endless Surf	S722		
EPIC Outdoor Cinema	S3507		
Erebrisanlagen Roth&Challier GmbH	TT019		
ESA Elite Skills Arena	S3106		
Etienne Lacroix Tous Artifices S.A.	S5327		
EVtrain AS	N4903		
Expian	TT003		
Family Parks s.r.o.	N4708		
Fantasy Rides Industry	S1242		
FEVER LABS INC.	N4829		
Foshan Wewin Go-kart Industry Co., Ltd.	S5000		

LTG Carnival	S2832	Tianjin Brother Tourist Train Co. Ltd.	S1127
MACK Rides	S823	Triotech	S2223
MANMAO Textile Co. Ltd.	S1409	TÜV NORD	S4722
Martin & Vlemminkx Ltd.	S4501	Twelve Design (Guangzhou) Co. Ltd.	S2827
Mich Playground Co. Ltd.	S4822	UNIS Technology (H.K) Ltd.	S3206
Moser's Rides S.r.l.	S711	Uremet Corporation	S1231
Murphys Waves Ltd	S2823	Vekoma Rides	S4316
Nanjing Fagao Electronic Technology Co. Ltd.	S3516	VENU+	S3341
Neofuns Amusement	S3207	Viewpoint Videos Ltd.	S3028
Nets Tribe	S3231	VIVATICKET	S1722
Neveplast	S1732	Wahlap Tech	S3303
Ningbo Sinoknit Co. Ltd.	S4807	WALLTOPIA	S2923
NOBLE Rides - JINMA Rides	S1927	Water Technology, Inc.	S2723
OASYS Water Park Systems	S1128	Wenzhou Pokiddo Amusement Toys Co. Ltd.	S739
Pixel Games	S3419, S3323, S3423	Whirley-DrinkWorks!	S3244
Polgun Waterparks & Attractions	S1628	WhiteWater	S423
Premier Rides	S1923	Wibit Sports	S1002
Preston & Barbieri S.r.l.	S1018	Wiegand Josef GmbH & Co. KG	S3023
ProSlide Technology Inc.	S2522	wiegand.waterrides GmbH	S3027
Purplay Amusement Equipment	S5003	World Waterpark Association	S434
QubicaAMF Bowling Products	S1806	X-Kart	S2500
RCI Adventure Products	S834	Xiaofeixia Amusement Equipment Group Co.Ltd.	S1516
Redbone Products Inc.	S1437	YPFuns Global Corp.	S4206
REVERCHON SAMC	S2919	YUEHUA INDUSTRY CO. LTD	S1016
Rides And Fun Italy	S2801	Yuto (Guangzhou) Amusement Equipment Co. Ltd.	S1907
RMC Rocky Mountain Coasters	S5119	Zamperla	S1322
Ruimove (Yancheng) Technology Co. Ltd.	S1809	Zhengzhou Huajin Amusement Equipment	S4726
S&S Worldwide	S4417	Zhengzhou Tonle Inflatables Co. Ltd.	S2141
Saoa Cashless System	S2422	Zhengzhou Wanle Amusement Equipment Co. Ltd.	S4107
Sally Dark Rides	S2819	Zhengzhou Wolong Amusement Equipment Co. Ltd.	S2243
SARTORI	S2023	Zhongshan Luck & Jinying Amusement Machine Co. Ltd.	S1036
SBF-VISA group	S1822	Zhuoyuan Co. Ltd.	S1411
Semnox Solutions	S3723	ZIERER	S1122
Severn Lamb & Trams International	S1416	Zigong Changying Intelligent Technology Co. Ltd.	S3215
Shanghai Jiego Play Facilities Group Co. Ltd.	S1514	Zigong City Ocean Art Co. Ltd.	S3115
Simtec Systems	S1919	Zigong Haitian Culture	S2841
Sindrax Technology Co. Ltd.	S1800	Zone Laser Tag	S4022
Sub Sea Systems, Inc.	S2627		
Sunflower Amusement Equipment Co. Ltd.	S3331		
Sunkid	S1726		
Synergy Water Park Rides Pvt Ltd.	S430		
Taki Playground	S810		
Technical Park srl	S1222		
Themed Entertainment Association (TEA)	S2127		
Themics Philippines Inc.	S2119		

Hololabs Studio Inc.	N4515	Manufacturing Co., Ltd.	TT017
House of Play (Europe) Limited	S4345	Siachuan Genial Technology Co., Ltd.	S4014
Hunan Zhongyi Amusement Equipment Co. Ltd.	S3607	SkilMachine	TT023
Ideas Extremas, S.A. de C.V.	TT014	Smart Parking	S5117
Illusion Design and Construct Ltd.	S837	SMOVE sp. z o.o.	S5140
INSERT-PLAY GmbH	S5325	Social Rivals Ltd.	S4237
Inter Expo Consult GmbH	N4703	Spielbau GmbH	N4703
International Ride Training, LLC	S4439	Spiro	S837
IQ Park Ltd.	S3806	SRL Avian Biscuiterie	S3342
Justin's Design GmbH	N4703	Steripower GmbH & Co.KG	N4703
Kaiki Group, Ltd.	S5213	Stylographics Ltd.	S135
LEAPScheme Ltd	S837	Sunflower Amusement Equipment Co. Ltd.	S3331
Leasing-Contor Hamburg Goeppfert GmbH	N4703	Suzhou Joybble Amusement Equipment Co., Ltd.	S4240
Leicon (Leisure Consulting Company)	S5233	Suzhou LvDong Amusement Equipment Co. Ltd.	S3026
Leverage Science and Technologies Limited	S5341	Synthia Ltd.	TT006
LOKT Ltd.	S5141	Taylor Made Designs	S4036
Lynx Bowling	N4929	The Bear Factory	S5135
Magic Money Holding Inc.	S3408	The Carat Shop Ltd.	S4145
Magic Playground	N4728	The Entertainment Crew	S3841
Martin Meijer Used Amusement Rides BV	N5119	The Flash Pack	S837
Mascots Inc Limited	S837	The Great Age Animation Technology Co., Ltd.	S1507
Maxplay Çocuk Oyun Ekipmanları San. Ve T.c. Ltd. _T_	S3533	The Puppet Company Ltd.	N4906
MIXR Co. Ltd.	S741	Ticket Tailor	N4819
Monstrum	N4501	tictkbro GmbH	N4703
My People Counter	N4738	Tigerplay	S1237
Nanjing Paradise Amusement Equipment Co., Ltd.	S5116	Tiko Scan	S4141
Nano Systems H.K. Limited	S3826	Timberlab B.V.	S5333
Next-Gen Reality B.V.	S440	TOBRA	S3041
Nola Technologies - Crowd Analytics Platform	TT022	Twelve Design (Guangzhou) Co. Ltd.	S2827
OBYPAY	S1702	Van Vliet Duurzaamhout	S5335
Paddock Pool Equipment Company	S5316	Veneta Projects Ltd	S837
PAESA Development, S.L.U.	N4732	VenueSumo Pty Ltd.	N4921
Patch Retention	N5019	Vesaro	N4823
Precision Chains Limited	S3410	Visbyl	S4241
Printbox	S3943	Voxel Studio LTD.	S837
ProFighter	N4919	VR Base NV	S4142
Project: Syntropy GmbH	S2743	VRCAVE Inc.	S3829
PT TOMO TRADING GROUP	N5107	Walter Rau Lebensmittelwerke GmbH	N4703
Puttsack USA Inc.	S5237	Wenzhou Happy Zone Recreation Co. Ltd.	S4526
Quiz Room	S3947	Widdop & Co.	S5837
RECLIMB P.S.A.	S3843	Workforce HCM Ltd.	S2906
Red Online DE	N4703	Xiamen Charmlite Trading Co., Ltd	S5140
Redbone Products, Inc.	S1437	XOrdinary by Crucial FX	N4714
Rich Products Ltd	S3248	Xperiamus	N5129
Roberto Sport srl	N4900	YiFun Life Amusement Co. Ltd.	S4236
Robobike Limited	S146	Yiwu Buono Imp & Exp Co. Ltd.	S242
SA EUROPE TECHNOLOGIES	S438	Yumeal	S3243
Safepay Ltd	S3541	Zhejiang MSD Group Share Co., Ltd	S5250
SAPIENSCORE TECHNOLOGIES LLC	S3837	Zhengzhou Hanlin Amusement Equipment Manufacturing Co., Ltd.	S3529
Scolia Technologies Kft.	N5009	Zhengzhou HotFun Park Rides Co., Ltd.	S1331
SEAWAG EUROPE LIMITED	TT024	Zhengzhou Yuetan Amusement Equipment Co., Ltd.	S5312
SEPER LTD	S837		
Shandong KAIMULE Amusement Equipment Co., Ltd.	S1300		
Shenzhen Kings 3D Co., Ltd.	N4918		
Shenzhen Yipai Network Technology Co., Ltd.	S2839		
Show Plus	S3438		
Sichuan Chongming Amusement Equipment			

IAAPA North America Sets the Stage for 2027

Announcement of early in-person events to provide connections

IAAPA ARCHIVES



in Dallas, Texas. Designed for executives and visionaries ready to lead the future of attractions, the summit features high-level strategic insights, and unique EDUTours, including a behind-the-scenes look at the brand-new Universal Kids Resort, Universal's first theme park designed especially for families with young children.

"These events represent what IAAPA North America does best: bring our community together to learn, to lead, and to champion this industry. Whether you operate an FEC, lead a major attraction, or want your voice heard in Washington, there is a seat for you in 2027," says Todd Andrus, vice president and executive director, IAAPA North America.

Registration details—along with the full 2027 lineup of additional events, including IAAPA Meetups and IAAPA Presents—can be found at IAAPA.org/NorthAmerica2027 **FW**

IAAPA NORTH AMERICA WILL HEAD INTO 2027 with a first quarter built for momentum with three events designed to connect and educate attractions professionals across the region.

The year opens with IAAPA FEC Summit, Feb. 7-9 in Atlanta. Built around the business of creating big memories on smaller footprints, the summit pairs expert-led education and strategic insights with exclusive behind-the-scenes EDUTours of local FEC and entertainment facilities. Keynote speaker Jacob Robinson, founder of Dig World, who appeared on the reality television program "Shark Tank," will inspire attendees with what is possible when imagining "what if" and what happens when you dare to dream.

IAAPA North America travels to Capitol Hill for IAAPA Public Affairs Conference, March 1-3 in Washington, D.C. The conference gives members direct access to lawmakers, creating opportunities

to share their stories, advocate for policies that affect their businesses, and engage in conversations shaping the future of travel and tourism.

The spring lineup continues with IAAPA North America Summit, April 18-20



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](#):



IAAPA ARCHIVES

A photograph of three people in a bowling alley. In the foreground, a woman with curly red hair and a man with glasses and a red shirt under a blue button-down shirt are laughing. A third person is partially visible behind them, also laughing. The background shows bowling lanes with glowing pins and colorful lights.

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QUBICAAMF

Tomorrow's Talent Takes Stage at IAAPA Expo

IAAPA Foundation's partnership with the Immersive Design Academy

IAAPA'S GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP WITH THE IMMERSIVE DESIGN ACADEMY (IDA) will expand career pathways for students and young professionals entering the attractions industry.

Designed to bridge the gap between education and employment, IDA provides an 11-month immersive training program that equips participants with real-world skills and industry connections.

Through this partnership, the IAAPA Foundation has funded experiential scholarships for IDA participants.

"By partnering with the Immersive Design Academy, the IAAPA Foundation aids in expanding access to high-quality educational experiences that prepare students and emerging professionals for successful careers in the attractions industry," says Meghan Roth, program manager, IAAPA Foundation. "We are proud to support programs that inspire creativity, foster professional growth, and strengthen the future workforce of our industry."

Representatives and students from the virtual training program participated at IAAPA Expo Asia in Hong Kong in June, and will again be on hand at IAAPA Expo Europe in London this Sept. to showcase collaborative studio work and connect with global attractions professionals.

For 2026 student Brett Ellison, IDA helped turn a lifelong passion into a tangible career opportunity.

"It's been a dream since I was a kid to design theme park experiences. I had zero contacts, zero experience, and no idea where to begin. Immersive Design Academy has given me years' worth of insight from experienced professionals and mentors, while IAAPA has opened



IMMERSIVE DESIGN ACADEMY



doors by connecting me with industry contacts I never would have met otherwise. Both have been incredibly supportive in ways you don't find in other industries."

The culmination of the program will be on display at IAAPA Expo 2026 when IDA students showcase their final projects at the

Young Professionals Hub, a dedicated space

for student and young professional programming throughout Expo week. On Thursday, Nov. 19, from noon - 3 p.m., attendees can experience the Student Showcase and get a firsthand look at the industry's emerging talent, innovative ideas, and future workforce.

For Laura Marakowits, program director of the Immersive Design Academy, the showcase represents the culmination of months of collaborative learning and mentorship.

"By providing an opportunity to learn through guided and collaborative practice with regular assessment—and in an international environment—we truly believe that we are enabling the most qualified and confident new generation of candidates. Our partnership with IAAPA further facilitates connection for the membership with this next generation of talent."

To learn more about IDA visit immersivedesignacademy.org.

IDA students showcase their projects at IAAPA Expo.



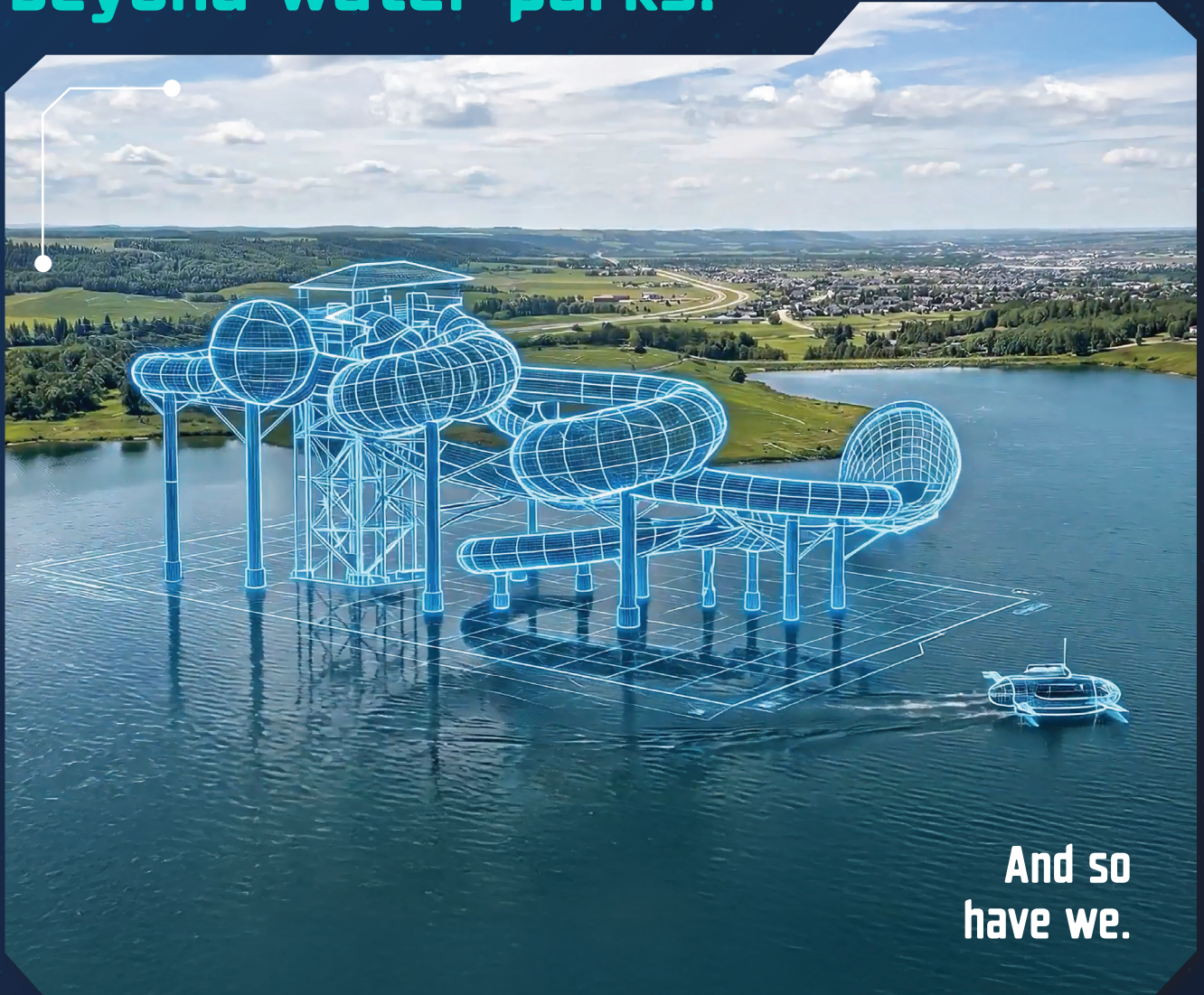
Frank Hamedl is IAAPA's program manager, Global Professional Development, leading efforts that support leadership growth and career advancement for passionate young professionals and future leaders across the global attractions industry. Connect with him on [LinkedIn](#).



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My IAAPA Journey

A commitment to lifelong learning and professional growth

EDUCATION IS A LIFELONG JOURNEY, and one of the most meaningful chapters of my professional career is my experience with IAAPA. Through continuous learning, industry exposure, mentorship, and leadership opportunities, IAAPA has significantly shaped my understanding of the attractions industry and strengthened my commitment to delivering exceptional guest experiences.

When I first became involved with IAAPA in 2020, during the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, I viewed it as an opportunity to expand my knowledge beyond the daily responsibilities of my role as a rides and attractions operator. I wanted to gain a broader understanding of the industry and learn from professionals who were driving innovation and excellence around the world. What began as curiosity soon evolved into a transformative journey of growth, inspiration, and lifelong learning.

Receiving my IAAPA membership was one of the proudest moments of my career. It represented far more than membership in a professional association—it symbolized my commitment to personal and professional development.

At IAAPA Middle East Trade Summit in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, in January 2024, I walked into a room filled



with industry leaders, innovators, manufacturers, and passionate professionals from around the world—an experience that proved both exciting and inspiring. As a first-time attendee, I explored emerging trends, discovered new ideas, and gained valuable insights into the future of the attractions industry. It strengthened my belief that professional growth often begins when we step outside our comfort zones and embrace new opportunities.

My IAAPA journey is still unfolding. As an IAAPA Show Ambassador for IAAPA Expo Middle East 2027, I will represent an organization that has contributed significantly to my growth. The role provides an opportunity to welcome attendees, foster meaningful connections, encourage participation, and contribute to creating memorable experiences for professionals from around the globe.

As our industry continues to evolve, the importance of lifelong learning becomes even more critical. IAAPA has shown me that growth is not defined by a destination but by a willingness to remain curious. To anyone considering investing in their professional development, my message is simple: never underestimate the power of learning. 



REVERCHON & BELANTIS

IDEFIX ADVENTURE!

With “Idefix Abenteuerland”, BELANTIS unveils a brand-new themed area. Reverchon is proud to contribute to this exciting project with **Idefix's River Adventure**, an 86-meter Mini Flume designed to deliver a fun and immersive first water ride experience for the whole family.

This installation also marks another important milestone for Reverchon, as **it is the third Mini Flume delivered to La Compagnie des Alpes**, further strengthening a trusted partnership built over more than 20 years.

And this is only the beginning: **another Reverchon Mini Flume is already scheduled to open in the first quarter of 2027.**

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Become a Mentor or Mentee in 2027

One connection can change a career

FOR MANY PARTICIPANTS, THE IAAPA MENTORSHIP PROGRAM becomes more than a professional development opportunity—it creates relationships that continue long after the formal program ends.

Program mentee Ari Bluestein experienced this firsthand. “I would recommend the IAAPA Young Professionals Mentorship Program because it provided personalized guidance, industry networking opportunities, and lasting professional support. My mentor motivated me to pursue relevant growth opportunities and connected me with people in their network who could offer valuable insights,” says Bluestein.

The IAAPA Young Professionals Mentorship Program is a global initiative that connects young professionals with experienced industry leaders through structured

one-on-one mentoring. Mentors also benefit from the experience.

“Serving as a mentor is vitally important for the industry to continue to thrive. You have so much to give with your experience and stories—and mentees are ready to hear them,” says previous mentor Dalton Fisher.

The impact extends beyond networking and career advice.

“I would describe the IAAPA Mentorship Program as a rare opportunity to gain genuine insight, expand your network in a meaningful way, and accelerate your professional growth,” says mentee Marie Weissbach.

Applications for the 2027 cohort are open through Sept. 30. Whether participants want to accelerate their careers or help develop the next generation of industry leaders, now is the time to get involved. 



FRANK HAMEDL

Email YoPro@IAAPA.org with questions on the 2027 IAAPA Mentorship Program. Learn more here:



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This is a partial listing of upcoming IAAPA events. Event details are as of Aug. 17, 2026, and subject to change. For the most up-to-date information, visit [IAAPA.org/Events](https://iaapa.org/Events)

SEPTEMBER

IAAPA APAC Summit 2026

2-3 | Nagoya

IAAPA Safety Institute

8 | São Paulo

IAAPA Presents: ZooTampa at Lowry Park

8 | Tampa

IAAPA Safety Institute

10 | Penha

IAAPA Institute for Attractions Professionals

19-20 | Chessington



21-24 | London



NOVEMBER

IAAPA Presents: Central Europe

12 | Prague



16-20 | Orlando

DECEMBER

IAAPA Theme Park Summit

14-15 | Paris and surrounding area

FEBRUARY 2027

IAAPA FEC Summit

7-9 | Atlanta



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IPA	8.5	Birde Bliss	9
Lager 6	6.5	Eagle Punch	9.5

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Berry Good, Indeed

Karls' ambitions grow, rooted in family, curiosity, fruit, and fun

by Juliana Gilling

AS THE STORY GOES, HE WAS PRACTICALLY BORN IN A STRAWBERRY FIELD—Jokingly, of course.

Robert Dahl, managing director of Karls, sports a scarlet strawberry-stickered hard hat, ahead of his newest location: Karls Erlebnis-Dorf (Adventure Village) located next to the Westfield Centro shopping mall in Oberhausen, Germany.

It's launch day in mid-July as the new attraction—complete with its oversized toilet slide—opens to the public. The operator has the kind of presence usually reserved for rock stars rather than executives. As he walks around the park on opening day, there's a steady stream of people hoping for a photograph, a handshake, or a chat. He's happy to oblige. His enthusiasm is genuine; his energy boundless.

Some people wear their hearts on their sleeves. Dahl wears his brand there, too. "I love strawberries so much, I got a tattoo on my arm!" he says, laughing as he rolls up his cuff to reveal the company's cute strawberry logo.

Employees have even asked if he'll foot the bill for their strawberry tattoos. "I say, 'Of course!'" More than 70 people at Karls have them. He was less thrilled when his eldest daughter came home from Ibiza with one, but now, all three of his grown children have tattoos as well. The permanent ink shows how the Dahls are serious about strawberries.

Cultivating Fun

What began as the family strawberry farm near the German city of Rostock—started by Dahl's grandfather, Karl—has diversified into a strawberry empire spanning eight Karls Erlebnis-Dorf destinations, retail, food and beverage, hospitality, and accommodation offerings.

Karls is still Germany's biggest strawberry producer. Its strawberry-themed kiosks are a national familiar sight, an idea sparked by a strawberry-shaped booth that Dahl's sister Ulrike saw on a 1989 trip to Wimbledon in England.

Karls' retail sales offset the lack of park admission charge.



KARLS



Gain additional insight from Robert Dahl on Sept. 23 in London at the Leadership Breakfast during IAAPA Expo Europe. Learn more and purchase tickets at IAAPA.org/ExpoEurope



“My favorite German word when I’m thinking about Karls is ‘niedrigschwellig,’ meaning ‘low threshold.’”



KRIS VAN DE SANDE

The Oberhausen project is the eighth Erlebnis-Dorf park, joining Rövershagen, Zirkow, Koserow, Warnsdorf, Elstal, Döbeln, and Loxstedt. Karls has also planted the seeds for its first park in the United States at Channel Islands Harbor in Oxnard, California. Dahl aims to provide a fresh, homespun alternative to the state’s destination theme park resorts.

The Dahl family has a talent for blending strawberries with shopping, dining, and attractions. At Karls Erlebnis-Dorf Oberhausen, guests can race through a giant strawberry on a caterpillar coaster from SBF-Visa Group, browse homemade jams, and take a strawberry doner kebab-themed Gerstlauer Sky Fly ride for a spin, before tasting the real dish at Karls’ own restaurant.

Instead of a ball pit, there’s a corn barn where children—and kids at heart—can dive into piles of actual corn. Guests can ride Germany’s currywurst sausages at Curryversum, an attraction built by Metallbau Emmeln.

Among the attractions is an ABC Rides Switzerland tractor ride, the first ride that Dahl ever purchased for Karls. It was his gateway into the world of IAAPA Expos, an experience that would change the way he saw Karls’ future.

Sweetening the Deal

The parks’ playful, whimsical style reflects a broader strategy. A fruitful transformation of the Karl’s business is work: operate immersive experiences that bring people closer to the brand, encouraging them to stay longer, return often, and spend a little more. Karls’ recipe for success involves being regional, authentic, affordable, and accessible.

“Karls is not like a regular amusement park,” Dahl says. The parks are free to enter and allow families to enjoy many of the attractions at no cost, including the extensive playgrounds. Guests can pay per attraction, buy a day pass, or an annual pass, which is valid for all Karls Erlebnis-Dörfer. Oberhausen is a cashless park.

Karl’s flexible, pay-as-you-go model lowers the barrier to entry and broadens its appeal to a wide range of visitors. “My favorite German word when I’m thinking about Karls is ‘niedrigschwellig,’ meaning ‘low threshold,’” Dahl says. Karls is intentionally designed for easy, frequent

visits. From 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., people will pop in for strawberry cake, freshly roasted coffee, and maybe a ride or two with their children or grandchildren.

Dahl smiles as he recalls IAAPA President and CEO Jakob Wahl's quip that "Karl's takes no entrance fee, but you pay when you're leaving." Karls guests will often carry strawberry-themed goodies home.

Meeting the Makers

"The heart of each Karls is the Manufakturen-Markt," Dahl explains. Essentially, this is a huge makers market, where visitors can see everything from strawberry candies to jams, cakes, breads, soaps, and scented candles being made. Staff deliver live demonstrations daily, and Karls encourages people to try before they buy.

At Oberhausen, the Manufakturen-Markt covers 7,000 square meters. It is also home to an indoor playground, smaller rides, restaurants, and a large retail store.

Outside, guests will find more attractions, food options, and play areas, including a water playground and a play structure crafted from shipping containers. Karls has a tradition of using upcycled and recycled materials. Hotel Alles Paletti at Karl's Adventure Village Rövershagen demonstrates its sustainability credentials, transforming reclaimed materials into imaginative accommodations.

"Some of the bricks we're using at Oberhausen are up to 100 years old. So, even though it's a new build, the atmosphere from day one is really warm and cozy," Dahl says. Almost everything at Karls, from the rides and slides to the restaurants, tables and chairs, has what he calls "the strawberry touch." The result is an immersive environment that integrates the family's farming heritage into every aspect of the guest experience, strengthening the storytelling and the brand.

Dahl is thrilled with a pair of Betty's Beerchen Boomerang coasters from Vekoma launching this year at Karls Erlebnis-Dorf Döbeln and Karls Erlebnis-Dorf Elstal. The ride station is a massive version of one of Karls' strawberry kiosks, with ride vehicles (that debuted on the trade show floor at IAAPA Expo Europe 2025) resembling strawberry punnets. The station displays an 80-square-meter LED



KARLS



KARLS



KARLS



ABOVE: Karls' rides are all themed whimsically.

BELOW: Karls employees and members of the Vekoma team pose in a ride vehicle that debuted on the IAAPA Expo Europe 2025 trade show floor in Barcelona.



screen that features his mother, Elisabeth. "I found a picture of her selling strawberries when she was 39," Dahl says. Karls has turned that image into a mini-movie. His mother can talk again to guests and share stories from behind the strawberry counter. "It's very beautiful," he says.

Market Value

There was a compelling case to develop a Karls Erlebnis-Dorf in Oberhausen. Dahl estimates that 16 million people live within a 60-minute drive, while the neighboring Westfield Centro mall (which owns the land the attraction occupies) provides a steady flow of visitors. The mall provides free parking for Karls guests, which is a big advantage, according to Dahl. "Our customers are also their customers," he recognizes.

Karls wasn't starting from scratch, either. His team used data that showed many guests were already traveling from the region to Karls' existing parks.

There is still space for the Oberhausen park to grow. The first phase spans 4.6 hectares of the 7-hectare site and represents an

investment of around 45 million euros. Dahl plans two more development phases, giving Karls the opportunity to add new attractions and a hotel as the destination matures.

At peak periods, he expects the park to welcome up to 15,000 guests a day, with attendance naturally ebbing and flowing in line with seasonal demand and the operating calendar. "This could be the new number one Karls park," he predicts.

Belling on Bibi & Tina

So far, Karls has centered on a strawberry universe. But that's all set to change when the company opens the world's first Bibi & Tina theme park on July 1, 2027, next to the Karls Erlebnis-Dorf in Elstal near Berlin. Backed by a €60 million investment, the new park marks the next chapter in Karls' expansion strategy.

For years, Karls had its own intellectual property (IP): the cuddly strawberry-bear Karlchen and his cast of friends. Dahl wanted to bring Karlchen to life through movies to reach a wider audience. He approached Kiddinx, owners of the Bibi & Tina IP, which had brought the stories of the horse-riding best friends to the screen. Martina Priemer, who heads Kiddinx's parent company Good Time Holding GmbH, told Dahl a movie would be too expensive and suggested he start with audio dramas instead. Twelve Karlchen tales are now available on streaming platforms.

Dahl then asked why there was no Bibi & Tina theme park—and then offered to build one himself. He already knew the brand well. "I liked Bibi & Tina because I'd heard it many times in my daughters' rooms when they were little."

Becoming a steward of someone else's IP was a significant step. Fan expectations are high, and Karls must balance respect for the Bibi & Tina source material with an operationally successful theme park experience.

"When we started the design process, it was amazing and very difficult for us to dive into this totally other world," Dahl says. "The first thing we asked the design team to do was to listen to all 126 Bibi & Tina audiobooks and watch all 90 movies—because you can only design the story when you know the story."

Every experience will be rooted in existing stories. Guests will join Dr.



Eichhorn, the friendly young vet and a regular character in Bibi & Tina, for a ride in his jeep. The Old Oak (Die alte Eiche), where Bibi and Tina meet, forms the park's centerpiece. The Old Oak will contain a playground and serve as the focal point for the park's closing show. There's also a Bibi & Tina musical theater. Besides the park attractions, Karls is developing a Bibi & Tina-inspired hotel and restaurants. Dahl is abuzz with excitement about a Mack Rides collaboration to be unveiled at IAAPA Expo Europe 2026 in London.

Beyond the creative challenge, the development signals the scale of Karls' ambitions. The Bibi & Tina theme park joins the existing Karls Erlebnis-Dorf Elstal park on the 82-hectare site, creating the critical mass needed to drive visitation, extend dwell time, and increase the appeal of the venues. "Both parks will be stronger," Dahl says. His vision of a multi-gate theme park resort destination includes hotels and a water park.

Preparing to Innovate

Karls is always ready to try new concepts. The company organized the PopUp Festival in Wernigerode, Germany, operating from May through fall this year. It was an opportunity to trial ideas, engage people, and build anticipation before a permanent park opens there.

What's striking is the pace of delivery. Dahl first had the idea for the festival last winter, and the event was up and running by May 1. Even as Karls has grown to employ over 4,500 people during peak periods, he wants it to stay nimble. "I love the company when we are acting fast and not overthinking and overcomplicating things," he explains.

Much of that agility stems from Karls' recently created project development company, Karls Fun Factory. Under Diana Lewitzki's leadership, it delivered the PopUp Festival in 37 days. "It was incredible," Dahl says.

Karls continues to add seasonal events across its facilities, from Halloween's Grusel-Nächte (Scare Nights) to Karls Eiswelt (Ice World), and winter festivities. The parks are open 365 days a year.

When asked how large a family business can become in an attractions industry dominated by corporate groups, Dahl answers with confidence. "We have big plans."

KRIS VAN DE SANDE



"I love being a strawberry grower, a food and beverage operator, a hotel owner, and an amusement park operator."



Until last year, cash flow guided Karl's growth, limiting its investment strategy to a certain extent. Dahl explored the private equity route but ultimately decided against it. Having since secured bank financing, he plans to accelerate Karls' expansion in the coming years. "Then, of course, we can grow our cash flow. And when we grow our cash flow, we can keep growing fast," he estimates.

California Dreamin'

Dahl is open to bringing private equity into the U.S. arm of the business, Karls LLC, where the challenge of scaling might require a different approach. His current goal is to complete the Oxnard park. Karls plans to combine strawberry and nautical themes at the new attraction, which breathes new life into the Fisherman's Wharf site. Karls is digging in for the long haul, signing a 40-year lease with California's Ventura County. Construction is already underway, while Dahl targets a May 2028 opening. "We want to be ready for the start of the 2028 Olympic Games in Los Angeles."

Dahl is mindful of legacy. His two daughters and son have each spent a year shadowing him after finishing school, learning the realities of running the business. He hopes they might one day choose to join Karls but insists the decision is entirely theirs.

What drives him is a desire to inspire people. "I love to show that things are possible." That's the reason his days have become a juggling act. "I love being a strawberry grower, a food and beverage operator, a hotel owner, and an amusement park operator. It's a gift for my life," says the man raised in a strawberry field.

For now, his focus is on the future. New parks, new IPs, and new markets all beckon. If all goes as planned, "Strawberry Fields Forever" could become a reality for this family business as Karls' ambitions come to fruition.

While the parks bring in more revenue than strawberries these days, Dahl never loses sight of where Karls began, thanks in part to the tattooed reminder on his arm. "Strawberries are the heart and soul of Karls," he concludes. **FW**



In a new episode of **Attractions Industry Talks**, IAAPA Europe and South Africa Vice President and Executive Director Peter van der Schans sits down with Robert Dahl, CEO Karls, Joanne Hammick, managing director West Midlands Safari Park and Antoine Lebrun, deputy director general Pairi Daiza to explore how attractions are redefining the guest experience:





HOT ICE, ICE, BABY

story by Juliana Gilling
photos courtesy Blackpool
Pleasure Beach

FOR 90 YEARS, BLACKPOOL'S ICE SHOWS HAVE BROUGHT PEOPLE TOGETHER in a shared spectacle everyone can enjoy. The latest edition of Hot Ice reflects a resort intent on celebrating its heritage while looking to the future.

In the United Kingdom's summer heatwave, Blackpool's Pleasure Beach Arena offers a cool escape. However, with the 90th anniversary of Blackpool's famous Hot Ice show just weeks away, Pleasure Beach CEO—and the creator, producer, and director of Hot Ice—Amanda Thompson OBE and her team are turning up the heat on their ice skaters. The blades are sharp, the scrutiny is fierce, the sequins are sparkling, and the stakes are high.

"It's known for being the most technically and physically demanding show in the world," Thompson says. "This show has been going for 90 years, and it has an extraordinary reputation globally. If you've skated in Hot Ice, you will skate in any show in the world."

Hot Ice Show XC premiered July 6 and ends Sept. 10. For the first time, the matinee also has its own unique theme: Alice Frozen in a Wonderland of Dreams. The two shows capture Thompson's ethos of balancing tradition and innovation at Pleasure Beach. The evening show celebrates Hot Ice's 90-year heritage, while the new Alice-themed show adds a fresh dimension.

"I'm hoping it will reach younger people who perhaps wouldn't choose an ice show as an afternoon's entertainment," Thompson says.

By blending the "instantly recognizable" world of Alice in Wonderland with a frozen fantasy, she hopes to delight both loyal Hot Ice fans and first-time audiences.

The sheer speed of the skaters astonishes newcomers, Thompson says. "You can feel that rush of wind as they go past, and that's exciting. Skating is an extraordinary sport. The skaters are flying with their adrenaline, and audiences can really feel the thrill of live performance." It's an experience that never grows old.



History in the Making

Ice shows have been part of Pleasure Beach's DNA since 1936, when Thompson's grandfather, Leonard, introduced the world's first purpose-built ice-skating arena. "I'm holding onto his love for the theater and keeping what he began going for yet another generation," she says.

The inaugural production, Marina, marked the start of a record-breaking run for the U.K.'s only fixed seasonal ice show. Its run has exceeded that of Agatha Christie's "The Mousetrap," the world's longest-running play. "Although our show changes every year," Thompson points out.

"As soon as I finish one show, I'm already working on the next," she says. With Hot Ice Show XC, her ambition is to create "a beautiful show that celebrates sport, grace, and excellence."

The Pleasure Beach Arena, designed by the modernist architect Joseph Emberton, gives up to 2,200 spectators uninterrupted views of the ice-skating action. "Every seat is a good seat in this theater," Thompson says. An illuminated staircase suspended from the roof, a 1959 addition by Frank Wright (designer of the park's fondly remembered Wild Mouse roller coaster), remains part of the show today.

Blackpool's ice shows—rebranded as Hot Ice in 1984—have run continuously, raising spirits throughout World War II and only stopping once in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Hot Ice is a passion project for Thompson. In 1982, she formed Stageworks Worldwide Productions, which would become a leading producer and presenter of world-class live shows on stage and ice.

Hot Ice's hallmark is that everything is bespoke, from the venue to the choreography, original music, effects, lighting, and custom costumes, which are all handmade in-house. When British Vogue needed a bejewelled showgirl outfit for supermodel Kate Moss to wear on the cover, they called on Thompson's team. "That was a total and utter thrill for me," she says.

Teamwork at Every Turn

Thompson knows exactly what she wants—a trait that former Olympic competitor and Hot Ice choreographer Oula Jääskeläinen discovered early on. After he narrowly missed out on making the Finnish Olympic team again, she called with an offer to join the show, giving him a day to decide. “Exactly 24 hours later, my phone rang,” he laughs. Jääskeläinen took the leap, skated in the show, and the pair have been creative collaborators ever since.

Hot Ice attracts Olympic, world, and European champions. This year’s 31-member cast includes international stars and four homegrown performers (including Jasmine Robinson, the third generation of her family to skate in Hot Ice).

Jääskeläinen tailors Hot Ice to the skaters’ strengths. He combines trending, high-energy material for younger audiences with familiar moments that allow older spectators to relax and enjoy the show. Audiences can expect a thrilling triple twist lift and triple jumps this year, alongside legacy elements.

“Ours is an extreme sport,” he says. “Sometimes when I know a trick is coming, I’ll look at Amanda, and she’ll say, ‘It still scares me.’ It is not an easy show. If the skaters are not on the ice, they’re running backstage, changing costumes, and figuring out where to come in.”

Managing a cast of elite skaters is no mean feat. “Many have never skated with anyone else on the ice before,” Thompson explains. “I’m trying to change that. It’s very important that people learn in a group, as they can also learn from each other.” Skaters who might normally learn one or two numbers a year are now expected to master 10 to 14 quickly.

“They’re not very good at standing still,” she adds wryly. “I like driving a team forward and, hah, they get cross with me. But the first week of rehearsals is the hardest because they get terribly sore feet.”

The language barrier is a constant challenge. “Every day is a school day for everyone in here!”

Still, a strong community spirit runs through the show. The arena also offers skating lessons that give children and adults the chance to step onto the ice themselves.

With cast members coaching local children, it has become a pathway to possibility. Thompson believes sport and live performance can inspire young people, instilling discipline and encouraging them to aim higher.

Having built a career that spans stage and screen, company manager and show “dad” Ian Oswald understands better than most what Hot Ice can offer. He remembers seeing the show 25 years ago between rehearsals for *Mystique*. “Even as a dancer, I’d never seen anything like it before. I instantly fell in love with it.” For him, Hot Ice embodies aspiration, giving working-class kids with big dreams something tangible to aim for.

Oswald is part of a tight-knit choreography team with Jääskeläinen and Lynsey Brown. Collaboration is





Hot Ice through the decades.



essential, according to Alexa Scott Robinson, casting director and assistant to Thompson. Her work across casting and logistics helps deliver the talent and coordination required for a large-scale live show. The aim is to unite cast and crew to deliver a spectacular show with “impeccable precision,” she says.

Entertaining New Opportunities

To remain relevant and create products that resonate with her audiences, Thompson is always looking ahead. Outside, Pleasure Beach’s newest ride, Aviktas, a mighty Intamin Gyro Swing, is sending 40 riders soaring 42 meters into the skies above the park.

“If I had a bottomless pit of money, I’d build another hotel. I would do all the apartments on the Ocean Boulevard. The plans are done. I know where I want to go. I’ve got three big rides that I want to put in. I’d like to get the River Caves open,” she says.

She sees herself as Pleasure Beach’s custodian. For her, stewardship means evolution as much as preservation. “Change in our industry is essential. People don’t want to see the same old things. Pleasure Beach is old-fashioned in many ways, but it shouldn’t ever be perceived as that. We’ve

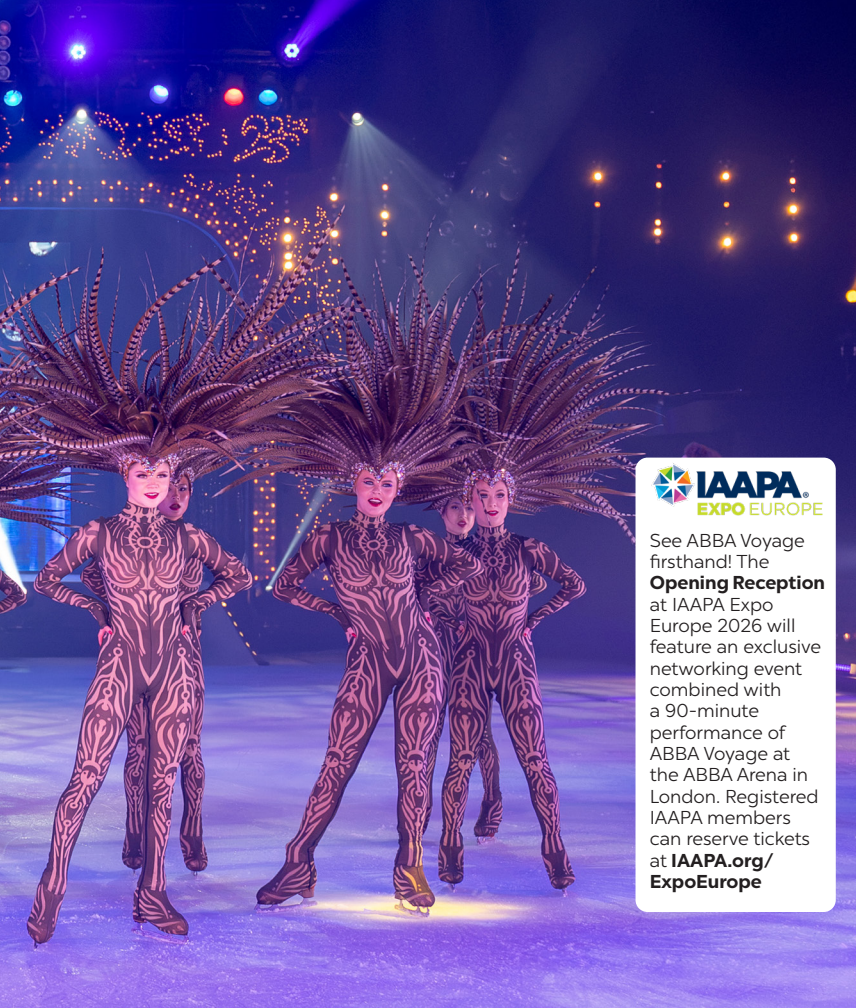


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kept alive what was exciting, and there's always room for change."

Thompson regards leading creators such as Europa-Park and Cirque du Soleil as a source of inspiration. Her experience of seeing ABBA Voyage, which blends lifelike "Abbatars" with live music, highlighted how quickly the entertainment landscape is shifting. "That show is totally going to take theater to a new dimension. What's also exciting is that someone who loves live theater created it. What that technology will do to the future of theater is unbelievable. With AI, I could have Ola back skating—if I could afford it!"

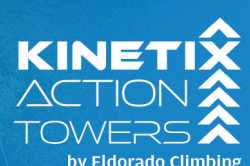
Hot Ice's skaters come to a perfectly timed stop in front of her as the soundtrack delivers the word "unforgettable." She repeats it, reminding everyone that creating a "memory that stays with you forever" is what matters. "It's about being brave and doing things differently. When you're a private business, and you don't have the power of money behind you, you have to be more creative."

That philosophy shapes Hot Ice, where athleticism meets artistry, continuing a tradition of live entertainment that aims to captivate audiences for generations to come. 



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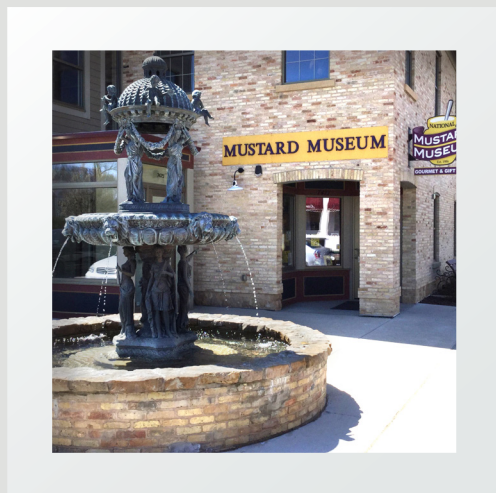
Tiny BUT Mighty

The Impact of Small Museums

Sophie Brookover



THE MERL



NATIONAL MUSTARD MUSEUM



MÜTTER MUSEUM

On an otherwise unremarkable day in April 2018, Adam Koszary, a staffer at the Museum of English Rural Life (colloquially known as The MERL) hit publish on a tweet. He'd paired an archival image of a massive ram in dire need of shearing with a cheeky little caption: "Look at this absolute unit." This was a format he'd been playing with successfully for months. A flurry of retweets ensued, as did a spike in followers. And then the retweets and new followers kept arriving in waves upon waves, until the small, free-of-charge museum tucked into a building on the campus of the University of Reading suddenly found itself the social media darling of the world of museums, archives, and libraries. Over time, The MERL parlayed this moment of virality into its brand identity, launching a podcast, "Absolute Units," and selling merchandise featuring the ram and its caption in the museum gift shop.

Small museums focused narrowly on niche subjects typically do not have particularly high profiles outside of their core audiences. Every so often, however, a small institution bursts into the popular consciousness or finds itself at the center of one of the most pressing political subjects of the era. Funworld spoke with representatives of four small museums to identify their approaches to change and innovation, what works, and what larger attractions—amusement parks, zoos, aquariums, botanical gardens, family

education centers, and even bigger museums—can learn from their colleagues at smaller venues.

Unique, With Broad Similarities

In addition to The MERL, representatives from the Tenement Museum in New York City, the Mütter Museum in Philadelphia, and the National Mustard Museum in Middletown, Wisconsin, participated in Funworld's survey. Each institution is devoted to preserving and interpreting a very specific sliver of human history, so each is deeply intertwined with its home city and region's broader history. With such a range of specializations, it might seem impossible to find common threads across these museums, but certain statistics paint a recognizable picture.

This quartet of museums also shares quite a bit of DNA in terms of their approaches to subject matter, embrace of experimentation, and even a bit of whimsy. Having the flexibility and nimbleness to make adjustments or follow a quirky idea farther than is typical of larger, more hierarchical organizations can be a distinct advantage.

The MERL: Specific and Unapologetic

The MERL was founded in 1951 to preserve and store vestiges of England's pre-World War II farming practices. Since a major renovation in 2016, the museum has shifted its focus to engaging a wide variety of communities within its home city of Reading. "We've been focusing on underserved communities, who may not have come to museums before," says Marketing Lead Joe Vaughan. When the "absolute unit" tweet went viral, the massive online engagement "mirrored all of the local community work we were doing, but on a global scale," inviting new and enthusiastic crowds of virtual visitors into the museum's exhibits and events.



THE MERL



NATIONAL MUSTARD MUSEUM



MÜTTER MUSEUM



TENEMENT MUSEUM

Vaughan attributes the success of the 2018 tweet and all that has followed in its wake to his predecessor Kozsary's embrace of the conversational, self-aware brand identities so popular at the time. Using the grammar of image-plus-funny-caption memes harnessed "playful, creative thinking" and allowed The MERL to "just share stories from the museum collection or encourage [people] to come to our free museum." The lack of any profit motive, combined with the museum's high degree of trust in its small staff and their creativity, both set and has maintained the stage for low-stakes experimentation. In 2025, Vaughan and Curator Dr. Ollie Douglas launched their podcast "to keep the tone and some of the humor of the short-form content, using that as a way to explore issues in a longer, meaningful way."

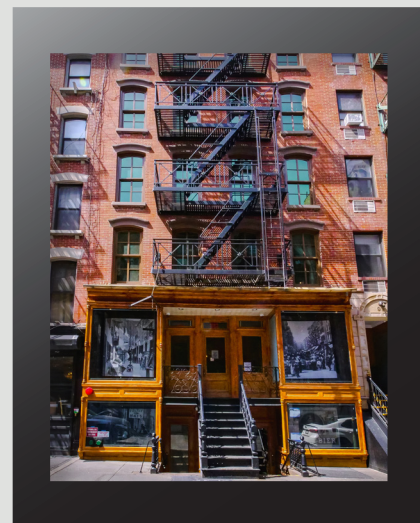
The National Mustard Museum: Spreading Whimsy

As the brainchild of one person with an intense and durable special interest, the National Mustard Museum has the most whimsical history of the four institutions. It's possible that Barry Levenson, the founder and curator, is indulging in a little myth-making when he describes the inspiration to open a museum dedicated to the history and many types of mustard, but his deadpan delivery and commitment to the bit are both undeniable. When "the Red Sox lost the World Series in 1986, I was very depressed, so I went to an all-night supermarket." As he "roamed up and down the aisles, I remember tears running down my cheeks, and when I passed the mustards, I heard this voice that said, 'If you collect us, they will come.'" While it's unlikely that the mysterious voice that inspired the fictional Ray Kinsella to create his "Field of Dreams" also moonlit in a Wisconsin supermarket, Levenson did begin collecting mustards at that time.

Levenson continued to collect mustards for another four or five years, when he says he decided that it was just too much fun to not go all in on mustards. The museum opened to the public in 1992 and now boasts over 7,000 mustards in its collection, representing all 50 U.S. states and 70 more countries. Within this group of museums, the National Mustard Museum has garnered the most coverage in legacy media, including segments on "CBS Sunday Morning" and pieces in Oprah Magazine. The museum also boasts large one-day crowds at its signature annual events, such as National Mustard Day in August (around 7,000) and the first round of its World-Wide Mustard Competition.

The Tenement Museum: Immigration Then and Now

As one of New York City's ecosystem of ethnic heritage museums, the Tenement Museum provides guided tours of its two historic tenement apartment buildings, along with its neighborhood on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Like other heritage-oriented museums, the Tenement Museum is "devoted to telling the story of one group's experience," says Senior Director of Curatorial Affairs David Favaloro. Visitors from Italian, Irish, and Eastern European



TENEMENT MUSEUM

Jewish backgrounds might visit to engage with their particular family history, and while "the particularities of groups' experiences might be different," Favaloro says, the museum's highly trained guides, called storytellers, emphasize and explore their common experiences, which for many was to create a new life in a new place.

With immigration stories at the heart of its mission, the Tenement Museum has always been story-focused, a feature that has taken on new resonances in the last couple of years. One of the storytellers' enduring tours includes the history of an Italian family whose patriarch and matriarch held different immigration statuses because of immigration quotas that took effect in the year between their respective arrivals in the U.S. The family's matriarch was legally an undocumented immigrant. Because of the political baggage attached to that term, "it's kind of a lightbulb moment for a lot of folks hearing that story," Favaloro says. "It's not what they were expecting, and it really complicates the picture they have of what an early 20th century immigrant experience might look like for an immigrant of European origin."

Many exhibits incorporate interactive digital elements—often in the form of oral history videos or digitized records and documents—all of which "widen the impact of the stories we're telling. But there's something very different about going on a tour with a real person. There are so many places where you're looking at something on your phone as you're going through the space, so you're mediating the thing that you came to experience" rather than experiencing it directly. The distinct makeup of

NATIONAL MUSTARD MUSEUM



each tour group yields “a wholly different experience and different kind of conversations” within each tour. Post-COVID, amid the isolation that record numbers of people report experiencing, the mundane experience of going on a walking tour in the company of our fellow humans is now a premium tourism experience.

The Mütter Museum: Leading With Fascination

Sara Ray and Erin McLeary, two department heads at Philadelphia’s Mütter Museum, are encouraged by the public’s reception of their ongoing efforts to marry the past with the present—by leading with fascination in the museum’s approach to storytelling. Fairly or not, the museum, founded in 1859 as a teaching collection for medical students, was shorthanded as a leading public collection of medical oddities. The Mütter now serves the public, teaching medical history through engaging storytelling.

For many years, the museum’s specimens—picture side-by-side skeletons of people with gigantism and dwarfism, or preserved body parts and tumors floating in jars of formaldehyde—were largely anonymous, divorcing them from the human beings to whom they once belonged. That might seem too academic or serious for the average tourist to bother with, but the Mütter’s collections are so famous that for the landmark 800th episode of “The Simpsons,” set entirely in Philadelphia, Homer Simpson visited the museum (and, true to form, broke its policy banning photography by taking a selfie in the galleries).

Today, McLeary, the senior director of collections and research, and her staff are “thinking in this current moment about

how we explode out from a particular [specimen] into a much bigger context,” restoring humanity and adding richness to the stories of the people behind the museum’s roughly 500,000 cataloged objects. “We’re digging into the collections and pulling out what we know about them, the context of them, how they might have come to the museum, and how we might tell their stories,” McLeary continued. The practice isn’t new in museums broadly, or at the Mütter in particular, “but we’re leaning into it far more than the institution has in the past.”

Ray, the senior director of interpretation, and her team create the museum’s public programming. She notes that the work of “reattaching individual specimens with a human identity or community of care” is possible largely “because our collection is almost exclusively from Philadelphia medical patients,” giving researchers a “unique opportunity to get all the way back to the person” whose remains are the responsibility of the museum. Subjects, such as the megacolon belonging to Joseph Williams, a Philadelphian previously known only by the initials J.W., and the distended kidney belonging to a previously anonymous Quaker woman, have gone from being grotesque objects of curiosity to the remains of fellow human beings whose stories can be known, shared, and understood in far more depth.

As staff at the Mütter have continued to explore and implement this updated approach to medical history storytelling, the museum’s two primary audience groups, the public and museum professionals, have embraced it wholeheartedly. A 2025 public program where Ray and McLeary shared details about the process and findings of their archival research drew in over 200 attendees.

Lessons For Larger Institutions

Just as these small museums don’t aspire to become The Met or the Victoria & Albert Museum, neither should larger institutions attempt to create note-perfect imitations of what their smaller peer organizations are doing. Chasing virality for its own sake is hollow and inauthentic. Instead, larger institutions can live up their voices in person and online by identifying and leaning into their own idiosyncrasies.

These can be visual, spatial, or sonic, old or new. Museums can cast a fresh eye on collections that have never enjoyed time in the spotlight. Amusement parks might adopt a visually distinctive ride as the park’s visual brand and develop a voice for it. Aquariums and zoos could choose a visitor favorite among their animals and designate it as their mascot. The keys are specificity and authenticity.

The MERL’s Joe Vaughan encourages larger organizations across the industry to consider working with well-regarded content creators and influencers already working in the attractions space. This reduces the likelihood of staff burnout and increases the chances of an attraction gaining more attention with its desired audience.

The Mütter Museum’s Ray and McLeary urge institutions whose collections have complicated legacies to “own it, and give the public the opportunity to help you figure out what that integration looks like in the future.” Shifting their interpretive lens should happen “in conversation with the audience, in public.” Above all, lean into the oddness. It just might result in a shoutout on a special episode of “The Simpsons.” ^{FW}



Sophie Brookover is a writer with bylines at Vulture, The Daily Beast, and Grammy.com. Thanks to her previous career in librarianship, she’s curious about everything from costume design and decorative arts to logistics and amusement design. Connect with her on [LinkedIn](#):



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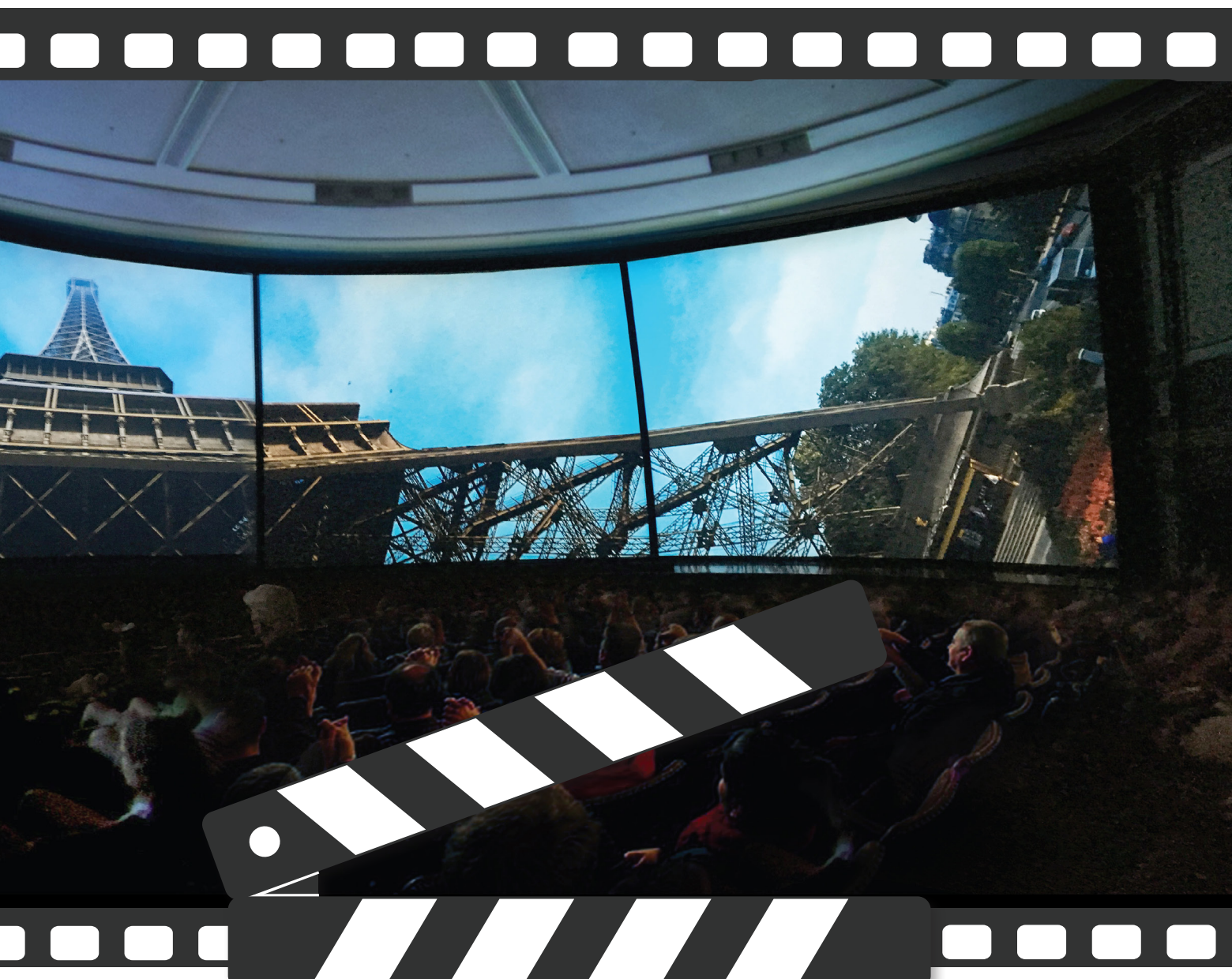




A BOB ROGERS STORY

Changing the world with
transformational experiences

by Michael Costello



THE HOUSE LIGHTS DIM, AND THE DELICATE SOUND OF A FLUTE performing Claude Debussy's "Syrinx" draws the audience into the experience. The curtains open, revealing a serene scene of seabirds skimming shimmering waters beneath the distinctive rocky cliffs of Étretat, Normandy, along France's Alabaster Coast. Over the next 18 minutes, audiences glide through scenic landscapes, French villages, and iconic landmarks, all bathed in golden sunlight. Presented across five screens that envelop viewers in a 200-degree experience, "Impressions de France" at Epcot continues to charm park guests more than four decades after its debut—presented in its original format with no updates needed.

"It's the France they want, rather than necessarily the France that's really there," says Bob Rogers, describing the enduring appeal of "Impressions de France"—the opening-day attraction film that continues to play in the France pavilion at Walt Disney World's Epcot. Rogers played a large role producing the film before Epcot opened on Oct. 1, 1982. "You know, it's a selective version of what was true at the time. Probably, maybe is or isn't."

While the film's romanticized vision of France may differ from the country as it exists today, it remains a carefully crafted interpretation—one that captures an idealized sense of place and strengthens the pavilion's portrayal of French culture. Although it was not the first project of Rogers' career, it is among those that have demonstrated remarkable staying power—just like the man behind the film.

Bob Rogers is an active attractions industry trailblazer, IAAPA Hall of Fame inductee, and creator who served on the IAAPA Board of Directors. At IAAPA Expo 2026 in Orlando, Rogers will once again curate and host the Legends Panel, a session that he has led for more than two decades. He is also a member of the Board of Governors of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences—the organization that creates, administers, and presents the Oscars—and remains an active figure in Hollywood, where for 45 years his Burbank, California-based firm, BRC Imagination Arts (BRC), has remained headquartered.

Sitting down with Rogers and members of his team at the BRC office, Funworld was treated to stories from master storytellers.

A Start Scripted in Hollywood

An early project in college served Rogers as a crash course in the art of storytelling. While a student at CalArts, he volunteered to help co-write

“Cinematography: A Guide for Film Makers and Film Teachers” with his professor, Kris Malkiewicz, whose limited English made writing the book a challenge. The book went on to become a standard introductory text on cinematography and has since been revised multiple times.

“I put up my hand instead of studying whatever I was supposed to be studying at CalArts,” Rogers recalls. “I sat with him and wrote every word of that book.” Rogers would sit across the table from Malkiewicz, listen as his professor explained his ideas, then write them down and return his notes for review.

Rogers jokes about his aspirations in college. “I wanted to get in film. I wanted to be Steven Spielberg. At the time that job was occupied, and it still is. So, I had to find something else.”

He went on to direct commercials and educational films, but the consistent ribbon throughout Rogers' career has always remained transformational.



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—Bob Rogers

MAYA GUICE

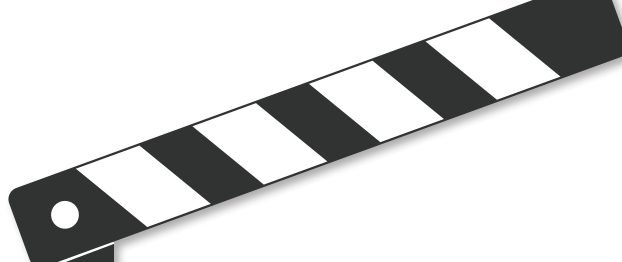
ABOVE: Rogers atop Paris' Eiffel Tower in autumn 1980 filming “Impressions de France” for Epcot.

LEFT: L to R: Brad Shelton, Bob Rogers (seated), Carmel Lewis, Christian Lachel, and Matthew Solari.

“That is to say, transformation experiences that have as their objective, changing what people do afterward; changing what you do, what you buy, what you study, what you advocate for, what you choose, etc. It’s truly a change, and that’s your goal as an organization,” Rogers explains.

Today, Rogers points to BRC’s track record of designing immersive experiences that measurably influence audience attitudes and behavior. He cites the Johnnie Walker Experience in Edinburgh, Scotland, as an example. More than half of visitors initially say they do not like or drink whisky. Yet, by the end of the experience, the attraction achieves a 91% brand conversion rate. That’s well above typical benchmarks of 70% to 80%—along with recommendation rates in the 81% to 85% range.

Rogers says BRC has refined this approach for nearly 50 years, applying it to outcomes ranging from brand loyalty and purchasing decisions to increased engagement with historical, educational, and scientific causes. He says the company’s underlying methodology—the “secret recipe” behind these results—is what distinguishes its work and is now being explored in his new book.



Creating Staying Power— And a World Record

Guinness World Records recognizes “Impressions de France” as the “Longest running daily screening of a film in the same theatre.” The Epcot film continued to be shown in the same unmodified form multiple times daily through Feb. 22, 2026—a period of 43 years, 4 months, and 20 days. The theatre closed temporarily for refurbishment from Feb. 23 - May 8. When it reopened on May 9, 2026, the theater resumed multiple daily showings with no editorial changes or updates, adding to the timelessness of the film, just like Bob Rogers himself.

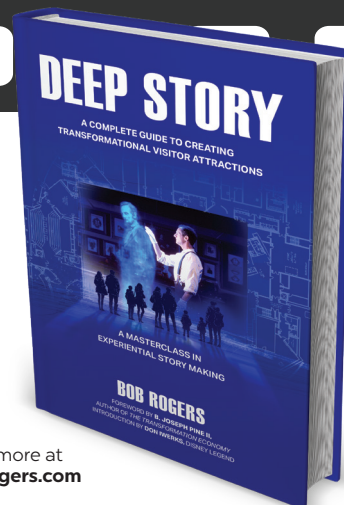


Personal Transformation

Today, Rogers finds himself in a position similar to where he was as a college student.

“And what do you know? I’m still doing that same thing, half a century later: sitting with a world-leading technical expert and trying to figure out how to explain it to a nontechnical person—a nontechnical audience,” Rogers says of his newly published book, “Deep Story: A Complete Guide to Creating Transformational Visitor Attractions.”

“You know, the interesting thing is that the ideas he lays out in the book are the things he has basically trained us on every single day throughout our decades here,” says Matthew Solari, vice president of creative and story at BRC Imagination Arts. “That’s the philosophy we were gleaned on.”



Learn more at
bobrogers.com



In Spring 2026, Bob Rogers visited IAAPA Headquarters in Orlando to share insight and stories with the IAAPA Team.

In his garage, Rogers founded his company, then known as Bob Rogers & Company Inc., in 1981. Today, the company operates as BRC Imagination Arts and has grown into a team of “Swiss Army knives,” those who are producers, designers, artists, and strategists bringing diverse expertise to every project.

BRC’s portfolio is concentrated in five major sectors: museums, cultural institutions, and history organizations; brand experiences (for consumer products, like Johnnie Walker whisky); entertainment and themed attractions; science, aerospace, and educational experiences; and corporate experience centers for major global companies. This diverse body of work reflects BRC’s specialization in experiential design that educates, entertains, and influences audiences.

One of the team’s most recent accomplishments is its role as a key creative partner for the USA Pavilion at Expo Osaka 2025 in Japan. Building on decades of world expo experience, BRC created a journey centered on the theme “Imagine What We Can Create Together,” using immersive storytelling to showcase U.S. achievements in areas such as technology, space exploration, and collaboration. The project also represents the enduring influence of Rogers’ creative philosophy, carried forward by the team he cultivated.

A Legacy Built to Continue the Story

Mindful of his team and the years of cultivation behind him, Rogers is focused not on stepping away, but on creating the conditions for the next generation to thrive. In early June, BRC announced a strategic leadership change. Ownership of BRC Imagination Arts transferred to Christian Lachel, chief creative officer; Carmel Lewis, president; and Brad Shelton, vice president of story and creative, along with Solari, formalizing a new structure. Yet, Rogers still goes into the office every day. He explains that he pondered the succession plan for a

while, but ultimately chose an option that allowed him to stay on with his team.

The approach differs significantly from the path many companies like BRC have taken, where a founder sells the business and walks away with a substantial payout or the company is acquired by a Wall Street firm or venture capital group. In some cases, those firms restructure and sell the combined entity. Rogers acknowledges that this model works for some organizations, but he sought a different path, one that prioritized the team he built and allowed its members to continue advancing.

“I just discovered the best way to help them succeed is to let them alone and don’t bother them. For the last 45 years, every time Bob talked, you had to figure out which of three things Bob was saying: Was he giving you a direct order? Was he making a gentle suggestion that you could take or not take? Or was he just thinking out loud?” Rogers explains about himself when speaking in the third person.

Rogers is clear that today, his comments fall into only the latter two categories: they are either gentle suggestions or thoughts shared aloud—not direct orders.

For now, his next chapter is a blank page—but not for long—as the master storyteller looks to be transformational in his next era. **FW**



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](#).



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Built for the Feed

How social media has reshaped F&B

by Jodi Helmer

DECISIONS ABOUT WHICH THEME PARK FOODS TO ORDER can now happen long before a guest reaches the register: Selection starts with tempting videos and reels posted on social media.

The slow-motion pour of melted chocolate, a towering milkshake balancing a stack of candy toppings, or a funnel cake so oversized it won't fit on the plate. Within minutes, thousands—sometimes millions—of potential visitors have watched the video, saved it for a future visit, or shared it with friends.

For attractions, food has become more than a concession. It's marketing. Platforms like TikTok have a major influence on dining decisions. A recent survey conducted by MGH found that 58% of TikTok users have visited a restaurant after seeing the business on TikTok—up from 38% in a similar survey conducted by the agency in 2022.

"We try to tell the story or feature food in a creative way," explains Logan Sanderson, marketing manager at Kentucky Kingdom in Louisville, Kentucky. "One of our primary goals is to drive engagement on social media and convert those people who are engaging with us [online] into customers."

Similar to TikTok, Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts can influence dining decisions. Thus, F&B teams that create menu items designed to attract attention on smartphone screens can potentially drive incremental revenue back inside the gates. Yet the challenge isn't just creating menu items worth posting in the digital space; it's delivering an experience that lives up to the hype back inside the park.

Menus that Go Viral

Food has long been an important component of visiting a facility, but social media has accelerated its role as both an attraction and a marketing tool. Oversized desserts, colorful drinks, and limited-time specialties generate online buzz that can extend far beyond a park's traditional audience.

When Dollywood in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, introduced the 25-pound apple pie to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the park, the menu item became a viral sensation. Guests began lining up to purchase slices that weighed in at a whopping five pounds each.

Hersheypark in Hershey, Pennsylvania, introduced the King Size Shake, a 28-ounce milkshake garnished with brownies or other baked goods and served in a souvenir mug, to celebrate its 110th anniversary in 2016. The shake became a social media sensation. Today, the park pours 14,000 ounces of milkshakes each week and has served more than 100,000 King Sized Shakes in the last decade.

"Bright colors, big portions, and a presentation that will catch your eye are all things that help make menu items more shareable," says Brydee Derk, who is with the food service department at Knoebels Amusement Resort in Elysburg, Pennsylvania. "We also have to consider how food items will look in photos because a lot of times that is how guests experience it first."

Visual appeal and viral potential matter, but menu items have the best chance of going viral when F&B departments consider their fit with park branding. Knoebels introduced more than 40 new menu items this season while continuing to build on regional favorites that include loaded baked potatoes, pierogies, and potato cakes.

"We don't create menu items just because they're trending," adds park President Brian Knoebel. "Every now and then trends can spark ideas, but all of our food items have to feel true to us."

Fostering Authentic Engagement

While scrumptious photos and salivating videos of food items might generate clicks, Sanderson believes that authentic engagement on social media is more important than a hard sell.

"We don't want to be overly sales on our social media accounts," Sanderson of Kentucky Kingdom explains. "We want [our posts] to be lighthearted and engaging."

Kentucky Kingdom has shifted away from simply posting pictures of menu items in favor of entertainment-first content. Rather than producing overt sales content, the park builds social media posts around humorous trends or interactive videos that naturally incorporate food. Social media influencers can also be key to helping park foods go viral. “We’ve had some food influencers come in and showcase their experience in the park and sample food,” Sanderson adds. “Word-of-mouth is just one of the strongest marketing tools we have, so if we have someone else showcasing ... food and rides, it helps the viewer to see themselves in that role versus if we’re the only people promoting it.”

When deciding which trends deserve attention, Kentucky Kingdom avoids chasing every viral moment. The marketing team scans social media for trends that will translate well when applied inside the park, including some content as trends emerge and saving others until they fit seasonal events or promotional campaigns. The algorithm matters, but menu development needs authenticity.

Emphasizing Operational Success

Going viral may be every marketing team’s dream, but it can quickly become an operational headache.

Food service teams need to be ready with ingredients, proper venue staffing, and a process that can handle a rush without slowing everything else down to keep up with demand after social media turns a menu item into a “must have” park food. Knoebels experienced the operational challenges firsthand after a video featuring chocolate-covered cheesecake slices went viral.

“They started selling faster than we could make them,” recalls Rachel Drumheiser of the park’s food service department. “Now we make sure when we share something, we have a plan and the ability to keep up once everyone wants to try it.”

Collaboration between F&B and marketing teams can streamline the process. At Knoebels, the teams work together on how to name, present, and share new foods with guests. Creating videos to present at industry events helps gauge reactions from superfans to decide which items have the best potential to become guest favorites or viral sensations.

Viral videos can spark interest, but lasting success still depends on operational execution, memorable flavors, and experiences guests want to repeat—not just post—which helps a menu item evolve into a revenue driver and a marketing asset.

“If it becomes a tradition for the next generation of guests, that’s a much bigger success than one food item going viral,” concludes Tiff Kalejta, a marketing representative at Knoebels.. 



Jodi Helmer has spent the past two decades covering topics ranging from healthcare and personal finance to gardening and theme park operations. She is based in North Carolina. Connect with her on [LinkedIn](#).



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Creating Loyal Guests

Examining how hotels and airlines use rewards to foster loyalty

by Dawn Allcot

AS COSTS INCREASE AND FAMILY TRAVEL BUDGETS SHRINK, now is a solid time for attractions to build loyalty, retain customers, and encourage repeat visitors.

New attractions may capture the attention of all ages, but operators know additions can carry a high investment cost. A well-structured loyalty program using proven, time-trusted strategies can help drive repeat visitation.

The first nationally recognized frequent flyer programs launched 45 years ago by American Airlines and United Airlines. As of 2025, 900 million people are estimated to be enrolled in at least one airline loyalty program, according to a research report from DataIntel. In 2024, more than 675 million travelers were part of a hotel loyalty membership program.

Travel loyalty programs succeed because they give customers an achievable reason to engage, valuable goals to work toward, and benefits that extend beyond cost savings. Attractions can borrow those principles to turn occasional visitors into guests who keep coming back.

“The main lesson from travel is that loyalty needs to be looked at as a profit center versus a marketing expense. Successful loyalty programs will drive additional revenue generating behaviors that wouldn’t have been seen without the loyalty program,” says John Taylor Garner, founder and CEO of Odyne, an embedded loyalty, rewards, and travel technology platform.

Deliver Fast Wins

Theme park enthusiasts want their rewards to be like the first seconds of a launch coaster—immediately thrilling with additional excitement awaiting beyond the first loop. That’s a formula top travel rewards programs have mastered.

For instance, new Hilton Honors members earn perks like free Wi-Fi, waived resort fees, late checkout (when available),

and a digital key to open doors when using the Hilton Honors app on a smartphone. ClubMiles, a loyalty program from Fareportal, offers 2,000 points just for signing up and \$100 off flights the first time a user books through the mobile app.

“ClubMiles is a very achievable awards program, especially when you use the mobile app to earn two times the points. People don’t have to wait forever to earn rewards,” says Tom Spagnola, senior vice president, partner relationships at Fareportal, parent company of CheapOair and OneTravel.

Reward More Than Just Park Admission

By offering immediate discounts for using their app, ClubMiles actively rewards behaviors the company seeks to encourage.

Spagnola also offers the example of airline rewards credit cards that deliver four times the points on restaurant spending. Dining out is often part of travel experiences, even if it doesn’t directly drive revenue for the airlines.

“Attraction operators need to think outside of ticket sales,” Garner agrees. “Reward behavior that increases engagement, not just transactions.”

Disney offers co-branded Visa credit cards issued by Chase Bank. Cardholders have opportunities to earn rewards—including points toward Disney Gift Card eGifts—through everyday purchases at grocery stores and restaurants. The Disney-branded card keeps the entertainment company top-of-mind for families planning their vacation.

Consider Partnerships

Hotel, airline, and credit card partnerships allow travelers to earn across programs, transfer select points and maximize rewards. Points-hacking, the act of maximizing these rewards through strategic transfers to travel for free or at steeply discounted rates, has emerged as an industry unto itself.

Attractions operators can avoid the complexity of point transfers and all that goes with points-hacking while adopting the best aspects: cross-marketing and giving consumers multiple ways to earn and redeem points.

"Many of the most successful loyalty programs go well beyond the product being offered. Attraction operators can offer added value by partnering with hotels, restaurants, retailers, and local tourism organizations," Garner says.

Hilton's partnerships with companies like Small Luxury Hotels of the World, AutoCamp, and Lyft exemplify this strategy. "These partnerships help make loyalty feel more flexible, experiential, and personalized," a Hilton spokesperson tells Funworld. "Partnerships are an important extension of how loyalty programs create value today because travelers increasingly want rewards and benefits tied to their passions and interests."

Offer Access, Not Just Discounts

Partnerships allow travel companies to create more opportunities for consumers to earn and redeem awards across brands. Within attraction facilities, operators can also consider ways to reward loyalty by enhancing the guest experience.

Free premium parking, expedited entries (passholder entrances or skip-the-line programs), VIP lounges, preferred seating at shows, behind-the-scenes experiences, and early access to new attractions are just a few of the popular benefits to consider.

Options like bring-a-friend access for season passholders, exclusive ride sessions, and early entry hours for passholders can send a message that a facility rewards loyalty in special, memorable ways. Access-based benefits like VIP seating at live shows and along parade routes may carry high perceived value—without requiring attractions to give away revenue in exchange for points.

Build Tiers Guests Want to Climb

Special events and activities create a sense of FOMO (fear-of-missing-out) for guests who aren't receiving those benefits. A good rewards program should offer tiered benefits that are both valuable and accessible.

"The best driver of loyalty can be a person's progress or level of achievement. This includes having better levels of service or exclusive access to events," Garner explains. Hilton has a well-established program that incentivizes guests to choose hotels within the Hilton family.

"As travelers stay more often, they can continue to unlock elite benefits, like space-available room upgrades and a daily food and beverage credit, as they move up the tiers with gold and diamond status," the Hilton representative shares. 



Dawn Allcot is a seasoned freelance writer with more than 20 years experience. Her work has appeared in TheStreet, CNET, MSN, and Nifty50Plus. A theme park and roller coaster enthusiast, Dawn also shares her favorite travel tips at GeekTravelGuide. Connect with her on [LinkedIn](#):



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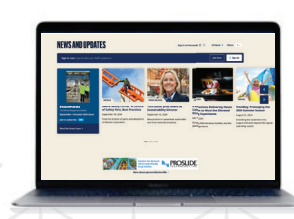
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Moment of the Year

How IAAPA Expo Europe comes to life



IAAPA NEWS

IAAPA EXPO EUROPE IS ALWAYS MORE THAN “JUST AN EVENT” FOR ME. Before I was working for IAAPA, I saw this expo as the moment of the year for our industry. A moment to catch up with old friends, make new ones, and of course, to be inspired by the numerous booths and education sessions.

Now, seeing it from an internal point of view, not much changes. I did, however, find a phrase that captures it all: IAAPA Expo Europe is the moment where the industry comes to life in one place.

Seeing the industry coming to life in one place is something you see in different ways: the What's New Video, where you, our members, show your newest additions with pride, the networking receptions where we meet, mingle, and connect; the innovations that mark our industry on one vast show floor; and even bigger productions like the Opening Ceremony, and of course, our Opening Reception, this year at ABBA Voyage.

This year IAAPA Expo Europe might even be more remarkable compared to other years. Besides a record-breaking show floor size (yes, again!), it is also the first IAAPA Expo globally, in our over 100-year history, that is a certified sustainable event. And that all, in the biggest market of our industry in Europe: the UK.

IAAPA Expo Europe is our own playground, made by and for the best of our industry. I am looking forward to bringing the full industry together in London this year—in the middle of the U.K.—a vibrant market that has so much to offer. See you in London! 🇬🇧



Peter van der Schans is the executive director and vice president of IAAPA ESA. Connect with him on [LinkedIn](#):





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