

Roll Arena rumbles with cash-free transactions, smartphone apps and Facebook

By Connie Evener

Roll Arena, in Elyria, Ohio, was born the same year as Olivia Newton-John and James Taylor: 1948. When the brand new rink opened 65 years ago, music to skate by was supplied by an organist, not a deejay. The 25-cent admission, including skate rental, was paid in nickels, dimes and quarters. These days, admission runs \$4 for afternoon sessions and \$6 for evening sessions, plus a \$2 skate rental—and many of Roll Arena’s guests still pay in cash.

But in his six years at the facility, manager Allan Mitschke has seen a steady increase in the use of credit and debit cards. Most Roll Arena parties, Mitschke noted, are paid for by card. Frequently parents pay their kids admission by card then leave them to skate, play laser tag and climb the rock walls. Because most of his customers are under 18, an age group that doesn’t have credit cards, Mitschke doubts he’ll see an end to cash any time soon, including those rolls of dimes that show up every once in a while.

But the sheer convenience, for both customers and Roll Arena, makes cards attractive. In the old days there was almost a stigma to using a card, mainly because the process of making an imprint, creating a receipt, getting a signature and sometimes an authorization held up the line. “It used to be much more of a pain than it is now,” said Mitschke. These days, he pointed out, cards are so pervasive that they’re regularly used for even small purchases, like “a \$1 item at



Roll Arena in Elyria, Ohio, has seen an increase in cashless business.

McDonald’s.”

That’s because it’s pretty much swipe and sign, with almost instant authorization. And although there’s always room for error, he said, it’s less than there is with cash. When Roll Arena’s owner, Fred Smith, needs to separate payments into categories, it’s easier and much faster with transactions made by card. As long as the transactions have been entered correctly, the data can pretty much be generated any way he wants it.

It’s hard to predict how card transactions compare with cash, said Mitschke. “Last Saturday I had one credit card transaction with 150 people in the building. But next Friday or Saturday, I might run 30 credit card transactions with 250 people in the building. It’s give or take any day, depending on which crowd we’re drawing.” The more affluent the crowd, he said, the more likely they’ll

use cards.

Back in 1948, fewer than 60 percent of households had a telephone. The idea of each individual carrying his own “communication device” wouldn’t come along until Star Trek in the late ‘60s. But these days even cell phones are almost passé. To be cool and connected, you need a smartphone.

“Smartphones are taking over,” said Mitschke. Everybody we see has one, and the few who don’t are with friends who do.”

When Mitschke talked with The Rinksider in mid-May, he was pretty excited. “We’re working on getting a smartphone app through one of our regular customers. He set us up with a demo and everything looks great.” Before the end of May, Mitschke figured he’d be able to issue digital coupons that can be scanned to redeem. Say the coupon is for a free hot dog: “The customer will

head over to the snack bar, show their phone and get their hot dog. And with the computer application, I’ll be able to keep track of how many coupon redemptions there were and know how many hot dogs we gave out.”

The app will also serve to replace loyalty cards. “Say someone buys nine games of laser tag and the tenth is free. They’ll just hand over their phone, we’ll enter a password, and it will ‘punch’ their games and keep track of how many they’ve played.” The app will also solve the problem of loyalty cards, which are frequently left at home, laundered in pants pockets or lost altogether. But customers never seem to forget their smartphones.

Mitschke is planning text-to-win contests using the same application. “They can text our deejay, request a song, and their text will pop up on our projectors and TV screens,” he explained. “And we get their phone number, so we can send them messages about upcoming events.”

Mitschke sees the smartphone app as a great way to reach the rink’s target market, and he’s hoping it will bring in the kind of results he’s been seeing from Roll Arena’s Facebook Page. They’d been doing a regular Black Light Skate, 7:30 p.m. to 2 a.m., and drawing 200 skaters. Early this year they promoted it on their Facebook page, watched it go “viral,” and hosted 400 skaters.

He noted, timing is everything: “Facebook has a feature for you to ‘schedule’ a post. Our posts are viewed the most at 4:30 p.m., when kids are getting home from school and checking emails and Facebook.”

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