

Georgia owner uses video system to zoom in on what keeps customers happy

By Connie Evener

Greg Alexander owns Golden Glide in Decatur, Ga., and Cascade Family Skating (where much of the movie, ATL, was filmed) in Atlanta. He bought Golden Glide in 1993 and built Cascade Family Skating "from scratch," in 2000. "My managers and employees are very competitive," said Alexander. "If I do something at one facility without doing it at the other, I never hear the end of it."

So when it comes to adding attractions, Alexander has to be doubly careful. He's found that the best approach is to add components in stages. "I have to give customers something, then I have to watch the reaction to it, and that tells me whether I can take it to the next level," he explained.

Three years ago, at each of his facilities, Alexander and his staff put together a 12 X 20 foot screen with plywood, sheetrock and lots of white paint. Audio Lite supplied the first projectors and video mixers. Alexander had three ideas for phase 1 of his new video system.

First, he used a camera on the skate floor that he could control. "I could zoom in on people, just like they do at ballgames. I'd put them up on the screen and make them the center of attention," he said. "They loved it!"

Alexander's second idea was an exercise in problem solving. He'd noticed big drops in attendance on adult nights when sporting events, like the Super Bowl or NBA Finals, were broadcast. So he began showing the game on his big screen during the session. Now, he says, "People know they don't have

of the game." And, he adds, they're seeing the action in "huge living color."

His third idea was to incorporate music videos into the mix – carefully chosen for content. "If it's something I don't want my children to see, I'm not going to show it to anyone else's children," said Alexander



At Golden Glide and Cascade Family Skating rinks in Georgia, 12 x 20 ft. projection screens add a whole new dimension to the skate floor activities.

to stay home, they can come to the skating rink and while they're skating, while they're exercising, while they're having fun and seeing their friends, they're not missing any part

of those ideas implemented – and successful – Alexander moved on to phase 2. He'd been biding his time, waiting for prices on flat panel TVs to drop. When they did, he began placing them in strategic locations throughout the rinks. First, Alexander placed a flat panel TV on each side of his octagonal deejay booth – mounted into the walls and protected behind Lexan glass (a type of Plexiglas that's stronger and doesn't yellow over time.)

"I use a Mac Mini with iPhoto, and every session, we take customer's pictures as they come through the door. We take pictures of them while they're skating, while they're having their birthday parties, when they're just sitting around." One employee, designated as the "paparazzi," spends the first hour and a half of each session taking candid shots of everyone. "Then we download the pictures into the computer and create a slide show."

The slide shows run on the flat panel TV's. "Our customers just go wild," said Alexander. The enthusiastic response spurred him on to add yet more flat panel TV's in the game and party rooms. With four big flat panel TV's in his game rooms, customers can compete – on-screen – playing Nintendo, Play Station Three, Guitar Hero and other games. "We created a whole new party package just to incorporate the games on the screens," he said.

And while skaters – and their parents – are glued to those screens, watching the paparazzi photos of themselves and their friends, they also see promotional slides. "We take our ads and put them in there just like the pictures, so every so many minutes, here comes one of our ads, advertising our birthday parties, events and sessions, even pizza or hamburger sales." And, said Alexander, he sees instant responses to those ads.

Next year Alexander plans to expand

on the ads he now runs. "Small businesses in the community around the rinks who are interested in having access to our customers will be charged a small fee to become part of the slide show," said Alexander. "We already have a number of advertisers lined up."

His customers love the video system, but Alexander doesn't believe that any single factor is responsible for attracting an additional 100 or 200 people on a typical Friday night. "It's the whole experience," he said. "It's the colors on the walls, it's the music we play, the content. It's the prayer we do everyday before we open, it's the training of our employees."

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