

# Solid planning produces solid results

*Big Thrill Factory thrives after building on a strong foundation.*



trampolines



spin cars

**B**ig Thrill Factory opened in Minnetonka, Minn., in March 2013, but it took three years of research and careful planning to make this indoor/outdoor Family Entertainment Center (FEC) an instant success.

Barry Zelickson, President and Co-Owner of Big Thrill Factory, defines success as "Any time you can go from a dream to a reality. To see what we created come to life and become part of our community becomes the bonus."

What began as an idea for a mini-golf venture, turned into a \$4.2 million, 45,000 sq. ft. family entertainment complex. The center features: QubicaAMF bowling; Zone's Nexus



laser tag; a three-story PrimePlay Ballocity™ 'Fun Factory' and black lights rope course; Amusement Product's 'Bump N' Spin' cars; private party rooms; and a 67-game arcade and prize redemption center. An additional 14,000 sq. ft., outdoor attraction mix includes an 18-hole miniature golf course, trampolines, a three-story climbing wall and 25-foot spider climb and slide.

Zelickson, Sr. Vice President at Border Foods and former owner/operator of Spooky World, an award winning Halloween theme park, has always loved the entertainment business. Three years ago he and Big Thrill Factory Co-Owner,

Michelle Lynch, a former marketing specialist at Border Foods, made a commitment to learn everything they could about owning and operating a successful entertainment center.

## EARLY RESEARCH

They began by visiting other entertainment, mini-golf, and bowling centers, initially focusing on the attractions and what they liked about them. Later they realized that they needed to view the centers from a business aspect, asking questions about maintenance and what type of return could be expected from the attractions. The

**By Frank Seninsky and  
Tracy Sarris**





ropes course



spider climb

attractions manufacturers drove many of the locations they visited.

“We would find attractions that we wanted to see first-hand and contact the manufacturers to see where they were located so we could visit the properties,” said Zelickson.

Education was a priority for Zelickson and Lynch so they attended trade shows like Amusement Expo, the International Pizza Expo, and the International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions (IAAPA) Expo, participating in as many educational sessions as possible and doing their homework on the show floor.

They also attended **Foundations Entertainment University** where Zelickson explained they were able to flush out a lot of questions about things they had made assumptions on when starting the process.

“Although I had experience in an area of entertainment,” remarked



fun factory

Zelickson, “I was not in the FEC business and the knowledge the presenters provided was invaluable. If I knew back when we first started to visit other entertainment centers, what we knew after listening to the presenters, we would have looked at the centers in a much different way.”

## EXPERT ASSISTANCE

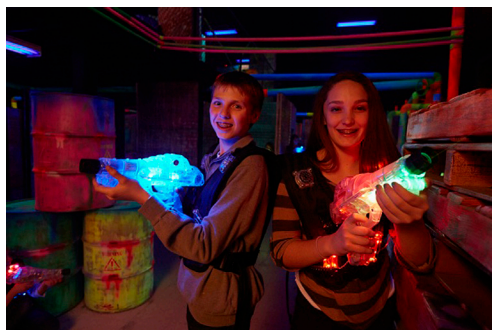
It was during this time that Zelickson and Lynch decided they needed a third-party expert to ‘validate’ their business plan and provide a level of credibility to their project. They want-

ed an iron clad, investment-grade financial package that could be presented to both investors and lenders.

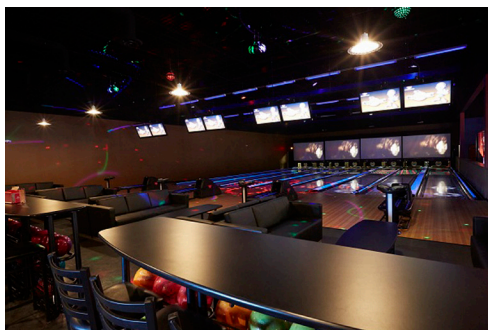
“Jerry Merola, Chief Financial Officer of Amusement Entertainment Management (AEM), was brought on as part of our team to perform our market feasibility study,” said Zelickson. “As a result of that partnership, we were able to raise \$1.5 million in private capital and \$2.7 million in bank financing. It also provided the foundation necessary to obtain backing by the Small Business Administration.”

The economic climate made obtaining financing a major hurdle. Many financial institutions were not writing new business. It took over nine months for the team to find a lender and get a deal that was agreeable. Although they had a strong business plan, having a third-party industry consultant present a feasibility study that backed up their plan clearly made a difference with the lenders and be-





laser tag



bowling



arcade

came instrumental in obtaining the funding.

"I don't think the results would have been the same without AEM and Jerry as a resource," explained Zelickson. "Having had no history in the industry, it was important to have someone with knowledge and years of experience to verify what we could only assume up to that point."

Zelickson decided to continue the partnership with AEM through a Development Service Program that would take them from project concept to completion and through opening and beyond. Merola worked side-by-side with the owners through the lease negotiations, equipment procurement, design and integration, and development of the early stage operating plan.

## ADVANCE MARKETING

Big Thrill Factory opened on March 1, 2013, but just like the strong foundation Zelickson and Lynch were building for the business, marketing and creating a presence in the community began months before opening.

Big Trill Factory began posting to its Facebook page in September 2012. Fans were able to view the progress from

the initial site selection and approval of the space/location, to the start of construction one month later. By November 2012, they were already selling gift certificates for the holidays and in December they launched the Web site. Birthday party reservations were being taken in January for the coming year and the chef was busy testing recipes in the kitchen.

Hiring announcements began running in December and the facility held its first job fair in mid-January. The local high school even dedicated a feature article in their newspaper to announce the new center and invite the students to apply for employment. The center now employs on average 80-100 individuals depending on the season, most of them being part-time high school and college students.

Big Thrill Factory continues its social media marketing campaigns through Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. The facility offers coupons, special events, and utilizes cross promotions with local business as often as possible. It began implementing a direct advertising campaign in October 2013 as well.

## PARTIES AND EVENTS

Parties and group events have been very successful since opening. Big Thrill Factory has a special events team that has been specifically trained to manage its party and event business. All of its party hosts are trained so that every party is a turnkey event.

"From our 28" Mega Pizza to the 'Build Your Own Cupcakes,' each birthday party is

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**Amusement Entertainment Management, LLC**

Amusement Entertainment Management, LLC is a worldwide industry consulting group specializing in the feasibility, design, layout and operation of Family Entertainment Centers and Leisure-Based Entertainment venues.

To learn more about AEM, contact Frank Seninsky at FSeninsky@aol.com or Jerry Merola at ProfitWizz@aol.com.

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a unique experience,” said Zelickson. “We make each birthday child or guest of honor know it is their special day. Plus, all party guests get a special Big Thrill Factory backpack to take home and the guest of honor gets to play at the Celebration Station for a prize of redemption points.”

The three-person special events team also handles corporate events, fundraising, sports teams, school field trips, and is currently focusing on holiday parties due to the season.

In addition to their parties and variety of attractions, the food quality continues to be an item that stands out to the facility’s guests. The café boasts a chef-driven menu that includes salads,

handmade pizzas, wings, sliders, signature sandwiches, sweets, and beer and wine. The café seats 50-75 inside and another 120 outside. Food is ordered at the café and delivered to your table. The café also serves the bowling area where up to 40 people can be seated at eight lanes.

Laser tag is the leading indoor attraction for teens and adults. Designed by Daniels Woodland, Inc., a full service theming company out of California, this one-of-a-kind multi-level arena has interactive targets, strobe lights, blasting horns, pipes bursting steam, and more. The arena can accommodate up to 30 players per session.

The younger guests find the Fun Factory to be their favorite attraction with its three-level climbing maze, places to jump and slide, and blasters and cannons that shoot foam balls at other unsuspecting players.

“We wanted to create an entertainment venue with activities for all ages,” said Zelickson. “We continue to enhance what we have built upon and embrace new opportunities that present themselves.”

For more information about Big Thrill Factory, visit:

[bigthrillfactory.com](http://bigthrillfactory.com)  
[facebook.com/BigThrillFactory](https://facebook.com/BigThrillFactory)

## Written By



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