

A Powerful Rainmaker: The Business of Campground/RV Park Recreation

Where else can a family go for \$45-\$65/night ... enjoy action-packed days, and make lifelong memories? You can either let it happen or make it happen. We know our market and we strive to deliver an experience that they will remember,' said Bud Styer of Smokey Hollow Campground



Taking to the air before splashing in the water is just one of the family draws at Normandy Farms Family Camping Resort.

Today's agenda: A morning round of (mini) golf, a park tour on pedal carts, a polar plunge in the dunk tank, an all-you-can-eat ice-cream social, a turn or two on the jumping pillow, a wagon ride, a stop at the airbrush tattoo station, and candy-bar bingo. This is

how camping memories are made at **Smokey Hollow Campground** in Lodi, Wisc., and the two other campgrounds *Woodall's Campground Management* talked to offer lots of insight about how they help their guests make those memories.

"We are about creating experiences for our guests that will keep them coming back to our parks for many years," said **Bud Styer**, owner/operator/consultant, Smokey Hollow Campground and the **Camping for the Fun of It** group of 13 parks.

As he explained, "70% of our business is return/repeat business. Guests come back because they have so much fun. They look forward to our most popular activities and are eager to experience the new, innovative activities we continue to develop."

The activity calendar is packed full of fun every weekend as well as offering the Saturday schedule every Wednesday in July and August to accommodate those who are not available on the weekend. He noted that there is a life cycle to his customer base, typically lasting four to six years, as families mature. The goal is to be the best they can be to continue to attract their target market over their family camping years.

This is the business of recreation. Rec programs are not, per se, moneymakers as stand-alone products; but rather a highly motivational driver during the family vacation decision-making process.

"Where else can a family go for \$45-\$65/night, take advantage of a mostly inclusive wristband-activity program at a minimal fee of \$25 per person, enjoy action-packed days, and make lifelong memories? You can either let it happen or make it happen. We know our market and we strive to deliver an experience that they will remember, talk about at holiday gatherings, and return to again and again. So much is about the perception of value and with the wristband program we offer a lot of value for the money. Perception, value, and experiences are where park owners/operators will find the

payoff," remarked Styer.

It's All in the Wrist(band)

Good for a minimum of three days, Smokey Hollow's wristband program offers access to most of the park's activities and events. By offering a single-fee program, Styer eliminates the nickel-and-dime feeling that most consumers dislike, removing the "mom, can I..." question from the equation and empowering the children to enjoy and explore at will. The wristbands may be used immediately upon check-in and purchase, are good for as many activities and as many times at each one as desired, and remain in play until checkout. As an incentive to extend stays, the wristband may be used for up to seven nights without any further charge other than the additional site fee.

Styer has built in a few interesting twists to the program, as well. Each wristband has three tabs that can be redeemed for one of 12 items such as an ice cream bar, a drink, certain candies, etc.

"The kids anguish over how to spend their tabs, going back-and-forth before making a decision," reported Styer. He also offers promotions and specials during certain activities. For example, occasionally the wagon ride will stop at the store with a special surprise offer for riders, a \$3 ice cream for \$1. The ice cream costs Styer 39 cents and typically a majority of the 40-45 wagon riders will make a purchase. Everybody wins.

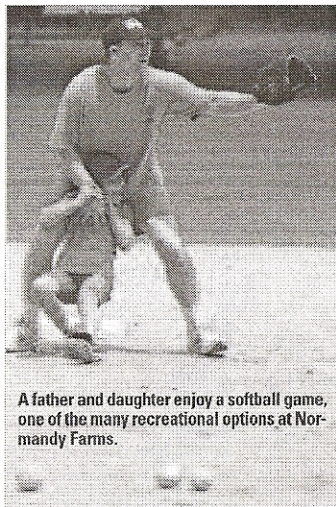
Another enticing event that makes ancillary income is the ice cream social. This is one that Styer does not try to reinvent. Using the KISS theory (keep it simple, stupid), the event takes place every summer Saturday from 2-3 p.m. Serving premium ice cream, Styer charges \$3 per person and it's "all you

can eat." But wait, there's more. Participants can enjoy 35 different toppings in any mashup they desire. Is that a memory maker? You bet it is. Styer told WCM that the kids never forget this and stand in line to get their share. He also revealed that most people can't eat \$3 worth of ice cream and toppings. It's a tidy one-hour profit center that helps fund the rest of the program.

Daily Activities Draw Attendance at Normandy Farms

Open and conducting themed camping 33 weeks of the year, with a 10-week peak summer season, activities are alive and well at Normandy Farms Family Camping Resort in Foxboro, Mass.

The shoulder season is filled with holiday-specific theme weekends including Easter and Mother's Day; New England states camping weekends — where residents of the specific theme-state receive a 25% discount on camping fees, RV supplies and gift merchandise — and a salute to armed forces and public service providers such as EMTs, firefighters, police and teachers. The end of June ramps up the regular daily schedule offering campers an array of activities and events from 8 a.m. to 7 p.m., all in concert with the week's theme.



A father and daughter enjoy a softball game, one of the many recreational options at Normandy Farms.

"With more than 30 activities including everything from a Slip-n-Slide to disc golf to team sports, arts and crafts, and a full rainy-day contingency plan, guests return for the family fun year after year," said Assistant Activity Director Sharon Beaumont.

"In addition to guest feedback via comment cards, we track activity statistics including number of participants and any guest comments during the activities," she added. "This helps us identify the most and least popular activities and adjust our program accordingly." While most activities are complimentary, Beaumont charges \$1 to participate in the themed arts-and-crafts activities. This small fee covers the cost of the supplies and adds a small amount to the program funds.

One of the most-popular daily summer activities is what they call "Just Won It." With a different activity each day to keep it fresh, guests participate in ping-pong, shuffleboard, ladder golf, darts, Texas Hold 'Em, bocce ball or other events with an eye on the prize, a Just Won It t-shirt. These highly sought-after t-shirts have a different design each year, are a point of pride, and are collectors' items.

Scary Sells the Shoulder Season

After the late Philip Koch, owner/operator of Lake Rudolph Campground & RV Resort Santa Claus, Ind., heard about the success other park owners were having with shoulder season Halloween-themed weekends, he decided to give it a try.

What used to be a fall full of 10-15% occupancy weekends at Lake Rudolph is now a string of seven extremely profitable Halloween Weekends that sell out before the big holiday weekends such as Memorial Day, July 4th and Labor Day. As a matter of fact, "90% of our guests in October are repeat customers and, surprisingly, many of them are locals, from within one to two hours from the park," shared Dave Lovell, marketing director at Lake Rudolph.

Lovell noted that the weekends are much like the movie "Groundhog Day" — the same format and schedule is repeated each week. Several of the more popular activities are easy to facilitate, such as the site decorating contests, trick-or-treating and ghost stories around the campfire. Other events including pumpkin decorating are somewhat labor-intensive.

Most activities offered are self-support-

ing. For example, pumpkins cost guests \$1.25 (in carnival tickets) but are purchased wholesale for 50 cents each. While they go through about 700 per weekend, they have to source the pumpkins (and have gone through several farms), haul them, store them, manage the sales, accounting, etc. After a couple years' success with the carnival, Lake Rudolph purchased a bounce house and blow-up slide rather than renting this equipment at \$500 a weekend — and it's paid for itself over the years.

Annual Halloween Weekend t-shirts have become collectables over the years and a nice source of ancillary income, as well. The campground reports selling up to 1,200 shirts during the seven weekends. The camp store also reaps a tidy profit during this celebratory period — busy from open-to-close all weekend.

A remarkable amount of ancillary income during these weekends is derived from Lake

Rudolph's golf cart rentals. All 200 of Lake Rudolph's carts are booked and they have a waiting list 30-50 people deep each weekend. Their six-passenger carts are \$60 a night and their four-passenger carts for \$40 a night.

Recreation a Roundabout Way

Whether parks are large and well-staffed or small mom-and-pop operations, the bottom line is how a stay at your property makes the guest feel, both during their visit and once they return home. Each one of these park operators will tell you it's all about understanding what your guests want, making a detailed plan and delivering a product that will have them talking about their stay. Put a new twist on an old concept, introduce a new activity or theme, create value — and you will be rewarded by welcoming them back year after year. That's money in the bank. —Evanne Schmarder WCM

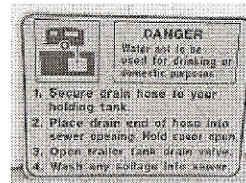


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