

Interactive Inflatables: A New On-the-Job Experience

by Kim Seaman

Imagine sitting in your office and your boss drops by, tosses you a loaded squirt gun and tells you to join the rest of your co-workers out back in a company-wide water tag game on an inflatable maze.

In today's fast-paced, constantly changing corporate work environments, playing on the job sounds frivolous. But more and more companies are looking for creative ways to teach their associates team building and problem solving skills and they're finding answers in the inflatable games industry.

Experts at inventing fun, the makers of inflatable games, have come up with the perfect formula for bringing play into the work place and making it productive. The newest product additions to the inflatables market, interactive games, are designed specifically for multiple users to interact with each other on the game. Obstacle courses, human bowling, mountain climbing walls, joust games, boxing and sumo wrestling rings, basketball and water games are all examples of interactive games. Corporations are renting these games, blowing them up out back, or taking them to hotels and conference centers for team building retreats.

"Our obstacle courses encourage people of all ages to play," said Gary Moore, Ph.D., President of Adventure Education Center, Super Games Division in Columbus, Ohio. "Everyone gets involved, everyone is on an equal playing field and they're having fun. They're not only challenging themselves, but they're challenging each other or they're challenged together toward some higher standard, like beating the clock."

The Adventure Education Center was founded in 1982 to provide children and adults with educational and adventurous experiences through ropes courses, summer camps and special school programs. Moore added the first inflatable game to his business three years ago, and since then he has served an additional 50,000 participants. He now has 48 inflatables and recently launched the new "Super Games" division of his business for team building programs for corporations and schools.

Seaman Corporation, a producer of high performance fabric, including styles for the inflatables industry, com-

pleted a study of the inflatable games market in 2001 and found that the market has enjoyed exceptional growth in recent years.

The American Rental Association (ARA) reports a tremendous increase in inflatables exhibitors at its annual ARA trade show. While there were just four in 1997, the ARA registered 25 in 2002. Several Seaman customers who fabricate inflatable products enjoyed double-digit sales growth (between 10 percent and 20 percent) in the past two to three years. Seaman Corporation also experienced its highest increase in sales growth in this market between 1999 and 2001, stretching beyond 30 percent.

This growth coincides with the introduction of new interactive games in the inflatables market. While inflatable bounce and slide units have been on the market for about 30 years, the first interactive games showed up more recently. According to Bill Rutledge, President of Fun Equipment Sales, Inc., in 1991 England introduced the first interactive unit to the U.S.—"The Spider's Web"—at the IAAPA trade show in Orlando, Fla. Inspired by its popularity, U.S. game manufacturers opened their minds and since then they've flooded the market with new, more

elaborate versions of crazy mazes, obstacle courses and competitions.

According to Gary Moore, one reason interactive games are such a hit is because they give people of all ages new and different experiences. Today, people are as interested in collecting new experiences as they used to be in buying or collecting new things. Traditionally people would go to festivals to 'ride' the games. But these games—you experience. And even if you're on a game just bouncing, you're sharing the experience with a friend."

The Baby Boomers sold American companies on the concept of the team building management style. Today, they're the people in the lead and they're using interactive games to challenge people to meet each other, communicate, set common goals and work together. As manufacturers of products for this industry, we're challenged to stay focused on making products that are safe, dynamic, durable, and attractive enough to make people want to keep tossing off their shoes to try a new experience.

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