



YOUR COMPETITION Just Expanded

HOW CINEMAS COMPETE — ON EXPERIENCE

By Mark Miller

The movie theater business is under pressure. Attendance swings with release schedules. Margins are tight. And for many guests, sitting through a two-hour film is no longer enough to justify leaving the house. The result is a shift that should sound very familiar to bowling and family entertainment center operators.

Across the country, cinemas are adding bowling, arcades, food-and-beverage programs, and social spaces in an effort to increase dwell time, smooth out demand, and create a more complete night out. What was once a passive experience is becoming something far more dynamic, and far more competitive.

And they're not competing with other theaters, they're competing for the same night-out dollar as bowling centers and family entertainment centers.

FROM ONE EXPERIENCE TO MANY

For decades, theaters relied on a simple model: sell tickets, sell concessions, and move guests in and out in waves. That model worked when movies were the primary draw. **Today, it's not enough.** Now, many cinema operators are reimagining their space to give guests more ways to spend their time, and their money.

Texas-based Film Alley is one example of how that evolution is playing out. **What started as a traditional theater operation has grown into a multi-activity concept that blends movies with bowling, arcades, and food and beverage.**

"The seasonality of theaters can get pretty bleak," said Nathan Schulman, who oversees finance and film buying for Schulman Theaters. "Bowling and food help cover those gaps." When one part of the business slows, another picks up. Instead of relying on a single revenue stream, they are building systems that support each other.

That hybrid model offers guests more to do and more reasons to stay. Longer visits lead to higher spend, while multiple attractions help balance demand across the week.

A NEW COMPETITOR ENTERS THE MARKET

For bowling and family entertainment centers, none of this is new. The industry has already moved beyond being defined by one activity. What's happening in cinemas is essentially a mirror of that evolution.

These venues are no longer operating in a separate category. They are competing for the same discretionary dollars, the same group outings, and the same "what should we do tonight?" decisions.

It is no longer bowling versus movies. It is **experience versus experience.**

That shift changes the competitive landscape. A guest deciding between your center and a hybrid cinema isn't choosing an activity. They're choosing the environment, the energy, and how the entire experience fits their group.

That's where the pressure, and the opportunity, starts to show. Venues that offer variety have a clear advantage.

WHERE IT SHOWS UP IN THE BUILDING

At Film Alley locations, traditional theater space is being reimagined. Some auditoriums have been replaced with bowling lanes, arcades, and other attractions. Food and beverage programs have been expanded to support longer visits. Technology is being used to track traffic patterns and refine the guest experience.

"The movies are still a draw," said Jacob Schulman, vice president of operations and construction for Schulman Theaters. "But now they're part of a larger experience." Instead of competing with other attractions, movies become one option within a broader offering.



STUDY YOUR COMPETITION

If a hybrid cinema concept is operating in your market, it's worth a visit, not as a guest, but as an operator. Watch how people move through the space. Notice where they spend time, where they hesitate, and what pulls them from one activity to the next.

Pay attention to how food and beverage is positioned. Look at how the venue handles wait times and transitions between experiences. Observe what groups do when not everyone wants to participate in the same activity.

WHERE BOWLING CENTERS STILL WIN

While hybrid cinema concepts are gaining traction, bowling centers still have inherent advantages. Bowling is naturally social, active, and repeatable. It creates built-in interaction, encourages group participation, and keeps guests engaged in a way that passive entertainment cannot.

That foundation is hard to replicate.

At the same time, hybrid venues are closing the gap by layering in more ways to engage. They're not replacing bowling, they're surrounding it with additional options, and that's what makes them competitive.

WHERE TO FOCUS NEXT

The rise of hybrid cinema concepts reinforces a few priorities for bowling and FEC operators.

- Look at how long guests stay, and where the drop off happens.
- Evaluate how your attractions connect. The strongest venues create a natural flow from one experience to the next.
- Make sure non-bowlers are just as engaged as those on the lanes. Seating, sightlines, and nearby activities all play a role.
- And most importantly, the expectation of a complete night out is only getting stronger.

THE BIGGER PICTURE

The lines between entertainment categories are blurring. **Guests aren't choosing activities, they're choosing experiences.** Cinemas are adding bowling. Bowling centers are expanding food and

beverage. Arcades are becoming more immersive. Across the board, operators are building environments that combine passive and active experiences.

The common goal is to give guests more ways to engage without leaving the building. For bowling operators who have already embraced that model, the shift in cinemas is validation. For those who haven't, it's a signal. This isn't a future trend, it's already happening, and accelerating. As that becomes the norm, the comparison becomes clearer.

How does yours compare?

THE HYBRID ENTERTAINMENT BOOM

- **The family entertainment center market is projected to nearly double in value between 2025 and 2032.** (Source: 360iResearch)
- **North America's location-based entertainment market is expected to grow from \$39 billion in 2024 to more than \$149 billion by 2030.** (Source: Mordor Intelligence)
- **Multi-activity venues in the U.S. have grown at an estimated 12.8% annually over the past five years.** (Industry estimates)



Mark Miller is a freelance writer, editor, and public relations specialist from Flower Mound, TX. He's the author of "Bowling: America's Greatest Indoor Pastime," available at Amazon.com or directly from him at markmywordstexas@gmail.com.