

Funovation

Abstract

Erick Mueller was thrilled! The fledgling company that he and two friends had started a few months earlier had been the widely acknowledged 'hit' of the 2007 IAAPA Attractions Expo, a trade show in Orlando, Florida that brought together more than 1,100 exhibitors and nearly 20,000 buyers from most of the world's amusement industry, from companies large and small. From Disney to Ripley's Believe-it-or-Not to Madame Tussauds, a who'swho of the industry had blessed Mueller and his small team with more than 100 leads.

"That's the good news," thought Mueller, "but where should I start?"

Funovation's basement beginnings

Over several weeks in 2005, Ted Ziemkowski cobbled together some lasers, some sensors and a few other electronic gizmos in his basement in Boulder, Colorado to create what he figured was the first-ever laser maze outside a movie lot. In fact, if you were to stop by Ziemkowski's house back then when there was a party going on, you could have challenged the maze and had some serious fun.

Then, in 2007, he and a couple of Boulder friends decided that his maze was cool enough to be marketed commercially. One of them, Erick Mueller, went online and started calling entertainment venues to see if he could sell one. After all, he surmised, if you've got a paying customer, maybe you've got a business, too! Before long, the owners of Oasis Fun Park in Pennsylvania expressed interest.

Encouraged, the trio decided they would invest a few thousand dollars and get a booth at an upcoming annual trade show, the IAAPA (The International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions) Attractions Expo, in Orlando, Florida, that served the global amusement industry. They built a maze in a trailer and four of them, plus two helpers, hit the road for Orlando, taking a small booth inside the huge trade show and parking their trailer at the show's entrance.

"We were so busy from open to close every day," recalled Mueller, "that we couldn't even find time to go pee." The results of the show and the "world debut of laser mazes" surpassed their wildest dreams. They left with some great press coverage in the trade magazines, a signed contract with Oasis Fun Park accompanied by a \$20,000 cheque (the down payment) that soon cleared, and more than 100 leads from all over the world that Mueller, the commercial guy, could pursue.

John Mullins is Associate Professor of Management Practice, London Business School.

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