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PACKAGING BOWLING WITH HOLIDAY LANES' MARKETING MAVEN

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SHARING THE SECRETS OF HOLIDAY LANES' MARKETING MAVEN

■ By Robin Breuner

To stay on top in today's fast-paced, high-wired world, an understanding of digital marketing is indispensable. In the bowling world, it's a revolutionary concept.

No one understands this better than Robin Williams, not the actor but the self-proclaimed "Marketing Maven" of Holiday Lanes in Bossier City, Louisiana.

"The best way to describe our marketing strategy is that we're really innovative and we're hyperactive," said Williams. "We use a lot of hyper marketing."

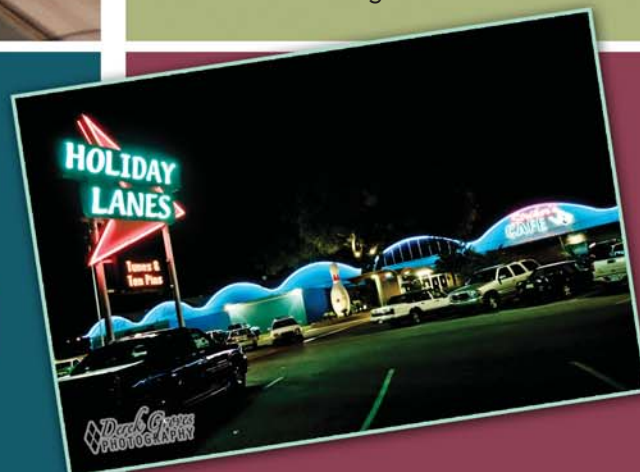
"We don't have a long term plan, but we do have a big, broad picture of what we want to do and where we want to go," she said. "We meet quarterly to see what we're going to do for the upcoming quarter."

Williams was never formally trained in marketing. She started out as a graphic artist but got her marketing experience on the job by learning and implementing advertising and social media, and by just being a go-getter who's unafraid to try anything. She has developed many creative ideas and events for Holiday Lanes, which has put the 44-lane center that has been family-owned and operated since 1960, at the forefront of 21st century innovation. "An artist called me the other day, and he is a big fan of the TV show, *True Blood*. They want to do a big party for the season finale of the show," Williams said. "They got together with the local blood center, and we're going to do a 'True Blood Drive'. It's going to be a season finale speculation party where people come, have fun, bowl, dress up as their favorite character and speculate about what's going to happen with the season finale." She said that it's become a great partnership with the blood center and the artists who came up with the idea. "It's all about having the ability to say 'yes' to things and then trying them. It's about fun, creative energy," she said.

Williams said that in her opinion, the most important thing is not necessarily whether the concept works, it's whether the word gets out into



Robin Williams
spreads the joy
of successful
marketing.





the community.

"If they hear about an event, then they hear our name and that's part of the plan," she said. Another major part of her strategy is to take advantage of social media as much as possible. Facebook is her medium of choice, but she says that Twitter is an excellent way to get people talking about things that aren't necessarily related to bowling.

Her best example of this is how she markets one of their new, weekly events called Tunes and Ten Pins. The event is a collaboration between the bowling center and the local music community. Holiday Lanes invites local bands, some of them as young as 13 years old, to play on

Friday nights in a venue that is smoke-free and family-friendly. For added novelty, the stage is set up in the middle of the lanes and the musicians perform while people are bowling on either side of them. The bands are not limited to younger people. Each week they try to promote a new band that appeals to a different demographic. They recently showcased a band called Bayou Boogie, which is an older band with a bluesy, Cajun repertoire. The next week was a funky, 70s crowd and the week after was a college band. "I'm trying to have a big variety and make it diverse so that every week is different. I'm trying to be intentional without it being obvious," said Williams. "What it's doing is creating a buzz in our community about a place where you can go that's smoke-free that also promotes local music," she said. "We've gotten a lot of people who haven't bowled in years who have come to hear a band, and then they decide to bowl. We've seen so many new people."

Williams said that Twitter has been a great way to promote this by utilizing the fact that their marketing is not all bowling-related. If someone types in 'Live Music' and they are within an hour of the area, they will see 'Live Music at Holiday Lanes'. They can click the link and suddenly they have expanded their targeted

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marketing from bowling to music fans. "We've gotten so many calls from local musicians who've heard about this on Facebook or Twitter," she said.

"One of the things that's really interesting to me is that whenever I hear about a band, I ask them to send me a promotional photo so that I can create a poster for them. What I do is print one that they can hang and one that they can use to promote themselves on Facebook and Twitter and Reverb Nation," she said. "On our Facebook page, we have a link to Reverb Nation that you can click and see all of the upcoming gigs. That is in itself a whole other social media outlet that is music-based."

Once Williams creates these custom electronic posters, the bands post them on their Facebook pages. Instantly, Holiday Lanes' Tunes and Ten Pins event goes viral on those pages, and the center suddenly has a whole new following of fans that may not have known about it otherwise. She said that the minute that the band posts the information on their Facebook wall, she starts seeing new people checking out the Holiday Lanes' page and 'Liking' it. Williams said that by creating these posters, she's gotten 100 new followers in the past two months.

"Every time I do an event, I always do the same thing that I do with Tunes and Ten Pins. I create the image that I want to



project," she said. "For instance, Bowl for the Cure is coming up, and I got in touch with the local Susan G. Komen foundation and provided them with all the digital information and asked them to partner with us. The minute that I gave it to them, they put it on their Facebook page, and it created a buzz within their following."

She said that the more a marketing person can do to promote their center or an event at the center by giving a partner or a community organization the tools that they need to make it viral, the more success they will have. By giving them a jpeg image of a flyer in a small size that's optimized for their

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web site, they will post on their Facebook page and people will instantly start 'Liking' it and creating a buzz within both communities.

Another example of this is a program that Williams started called Friday Night Lights. It's an unlimited bowling and glow show special for high school kids on Friday nights after the local football games. She created a flyer and put it on the Holiday Lanes' Facebook page and then looked up every high school in the area and posted it on their 'Walls'. When she checked her Facebook page in the morning, she was surprised to see that one of the high schools had already forwarded her message to all of its fans. It came full-circle when she realized that one of the high schools had forwarded the message back to her about her own event!



An on-line reservation system is another avenue for free marketing that generates a buzz on both Facebook and Twitter. It's been good to create a sense of urgency, and it also guarantees a partial payment if there are no-shows. Holiday Lanes was one of the first bowling centers in the country to implement the use of it, and it's been very effective.

Williams serves as a diplomat for the Chamber of Commerce where her job is to promote local businesses in the community. It's somewhat of a 'you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours' kind of an agreement. When businesses find out that she's helping to promote them, they are happy to do the same for her. "Everywhere I go and talk to people about bowling, I give them a free game coupon," she said. "We also have free game coupons on our web site. We sometimes have them on our Facebook page and sometimes I put them on



Twitter. Any time I put an ad in a magazine or newspaper, I always put a coupon in the ad. It lets us know where the coupon came from and if the ad is effective."

Whenever there is a ribbon cutting in town, Williams writes a web blog about the new business for the community and posts it on her personal page and also on the Holiday Lanes' page. "The thing about Facebook is that it's okay to promote your own business, but it's important to make it about other people too because people like to read about themselves," she said. "Every time I do a blog about a new store, I do a tag of it on our Facebook page, and then the followers of the new store come to our page after they've checked out the blog."

Beyond the digital marketing, the biggest goals both for Williams and for Holiday Lanes are to create a sense of community and to teach students to bowl, because they

understand that the kids are the future of bowling. "It seems that bowling went out of fashion for awhile, but it's our intention to make bowling a priority. We're really committed to making sure that every student in the state of Louisiana learns to bowl in P.E. class. We've developed some things that we try to promote to help reach that goal," said Williams.

Geaux Beauxling Louisiana is a plan that she created to promote bowling as a fun activity throughout the state of Louisiana. The idea is to generate funds to help purchase bowling equipment for schools that may not be near a center. Part of the program includes selling t-shirts with a colorful, Mardi Gras motif. Currently, only a few centers throughout the state have equipment available to loan to the schools. Holiday Lanes has 22 lanes that they loan out regularly. They use the in-school bowling program that's provided by the BPAA that provides free curriculum to the teachers on-line. They are able to check out the portable bowling lanes for two weeks and use them in their schools. Each lane consists of a carpet and rubber pins. After the kids have learned on the portable lanes, they come to the center and try out their skills on the real thing.

Williams understands that kids who learn how to bowl will come back and bring their families with them, both now and in the future, and by continuing to market her center with eyes on the future, the 'Marketing



Maven' will always be one step ahead of the competition. ❖

Photo courtesy of Derek Groves



Robin Breuner is a freelance writer and a frequent contributor to IBI. She lives in Marin County, California.

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