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**Family friendly entertainment venues: To whom are their web-sites marketed?**

This article reports on an examination of family friendly entertainment web-sites. The Internet is increasingly used by consumers to find pre-purchase information about family friendly entertainment venues. This study found that less than half of the web-sites that were examined were actually targeted toward children and families. Content analysis revealed that the family friendly entertainment company that the web-site advertisements that were examined depicted the costs, types of products/services offered, customer services available, safety environment, and the physical location of the business.

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## **Introduction**

Consumers have an abundant number of choices in family friendly entertainment venues. Family friendly entertainment venues, by their nature, target a specific lifestyle segment. However, the definition of family friendly entertainment venues is broad and encompasses many forms of activities (Helman & de Chernatony, 1999). For example, gambling casinos claim to be family friendly forms of entertainment. Because of an increase in demand for family friendly entertainment venues it is important to examine the types of entertainment services that are marketed as family friendly. It also is important to examine how these venues can be differentiated to better describe the type of family friendly entertainment experience that is being offered.

Increasingly, the Internet is used by consumers for pre-purchase information gathering. Many family friendly entertainment venues are listed through web search engines. However, the range of family friendly entertainment venues includes disparate choices such as Chuck E. Cheeses, birthday party planners, to belly dancers. Moreover, these web-sites are available to both adult and children alike. The information that is provided on these web-sites is often unclear in terms of the product/service market. The purpose of this research was to determine who family friendly web-sites are targeting when marketing their services?

## **The supply and demand for family friendly entertainment venues**

The family environment has changed in recent years because of a series of events that have caused people to focus more on the home and family life (Popcorn & Hanfit, 2001). These events include an aging population, as well as worldwide threats of terrorism. While desire for quality family activities is in demand, there is limited research published on this topic. The Internet provides an abundant amount of information about these venues.

However, the types of entertainment companies that claim to be “family friendly” are vast. For example, casinos target families with activities that either entertain the family, parents, or children alone. Thompson, Pinney, & Schibrowsky (1996) suggest advantages, as well as disadvantages, for these types of businesses. They include an economic gain for businesses in the short term, but a negative long-term impact on the socialization of children taking family vacations at casinos.

## **Method and results**

A search of family friendly entertainment venues was completed in 2003 using the search engine Google.com. It identified 59,800 companies in this category. They included companies, as well as links to family friendly entertainment venue web-sites. From the broad list of companies 453 Texas firms were identified. A random sampling of the 453 firms was used to obtain web-sites for 25 companies classified as offering family friendly entertainment. The 25 family friendly entertainment venues included 15 performers, seven entertainment activities, one special event planner, and two companies with unidentifiable products or services targeted at children. These 25 firms ranged from belly dancers to hypnotic mind shows and were not labeled for content, although several referred to their entertainment as adult-focused.

Content analysis of the web-sites further revealed that only 42 percent of these web-sites were actually targeted toward children and families. These web-sites advertised

products/services such as music shows, the opportunity to socialize, engage in enrichment activities, or a spectator experience. These web-site advertisements appealed to the emotional value of family interaction. Content analysis also revealed web-site advertisements depicting the cost associated with the experience, types of products and services offered, customer services available, safety environment, and the physical location of the business. These web-sites provide the consumer with functional and informative information about products and/or services.

## **Conclusions**

Our study reveals that not all of the advertised family friendly entertainment venue websites clearly explain the types of products and services being sold. This causes consumers to be confused when selecting purchasing alternatives. Secondly, there is a lack of age appropriate categorization of the activities. Some services were specifically targeted to adults such as belly dancing and adult comedy. Which can further lead to consumer dissatisfaction.

There are attempts in other entertainment circuits to construct more family friendly entertainment opportunities. Such family friendly communications include music, movies, and games (Federal Trade Commission, 2000). The FTC administered a survey about the marketing of entertainment ratings in the music, movies, and gaming industries. Not only did their report conclude that children can purchase merchandise rated for adults, but these adult rated materials were marketed to children. At the same time, the home movie entertainment industry currently is attempting to “make movies more family friendly, skipping violent or sexual content and toning down language” (Gentile, 2003). Such technological companies, such as *CleanFlicks*, *ClearPlay*, and *MovieMask*, sell and rent out “sanitized” video and DVD versions. *ClearPlay* is planning to create a DVD player with explicit material editing software (Gentile, 2003). A similar process of labeling family friendly entertainment venues on websites should be considered.

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