

VISITING OTHER FACILITIES

by Michael Horn

Whether you're a startup or a long-time facility operator, you should be in the habit of visiting other facilities. Seeing other facilities can spur thought about what works and what doesn't. There is no need to "reinvent the wheel" if it is already being done well.

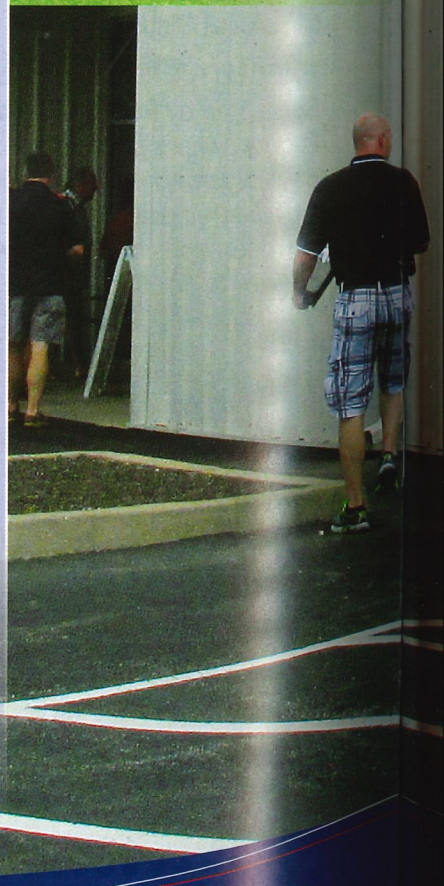
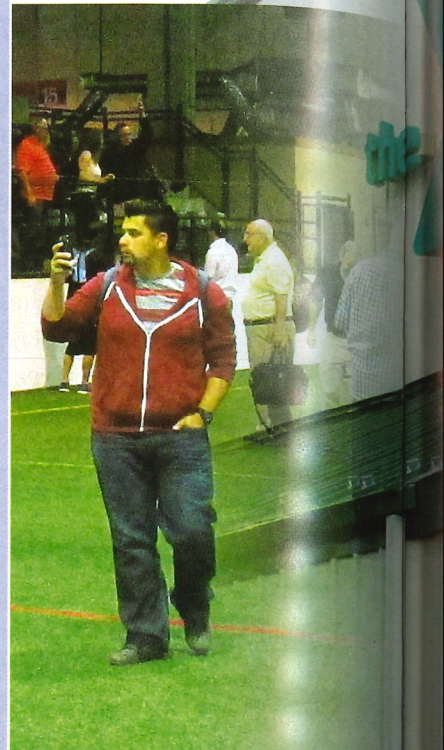
Startups should be visiting other facilities "as soon as it's an idea," says **Eric Sullivan**, partner at **The Sports Facilities Advisory**. "Every time they walk into a sports complex, whether it's indoor, outdoor, community rec, YMCA, or ice rink, they should start thinking about not just the bricks and mortar or the experience they're going there for, they should start thinking about the business."

Startups should visit facilities as often as they're able to gain comfort with their own concept, borrow additional ideas that match their vision and gain confidence over how to be successful.

Existing facility operators may feel they don't have the time or the need to visit facilities so often, but it's still a good idea to do so when opportunities arise. "I think when you're in different part of the country or you find a facility that's interesting," says Sullivan, "you should take those opportunities when you can."

Facility operators planning an expansion should consider doing facility visits, especially if expansion is considerably different from what the facility already offers.

"If you're looking to expand your business and go into something you haven't been in before, I would make visits early and often to see as much as you can see and learn as much as you can learn before going too far down that path."



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Choosing Facilities to Visit

Eric advises that the best facilities to tour are those whose programming or facilities are similar to your own. For example, you may find from a facility's website that they do tournaments well, where you may struggle or want to do better.

"I want to call, see how they do it, see if I can get a peek at their operation, and see if I have the ability to do something like they have done at their facility," he says.

Sullivan also says he likes to check out facilities when he's traveling. Because of the regional nature of the industry, it's a great way to see different facilities. "Do some Google research and see what facilities are in the area. Facilities in the Northeast versus Midwest versus Southwest versus West Coast all operate with different focus."

Taking the Tour

A facility tour should take you through as much of the facility as possible: program spaces, concessions and restaurants, and any other amenities and profit centers. Sullivan says a non-guided tour should take between 10 and 30 minutes.

A guided tour make take longer but should also include time to sit down with the owner or manager about the business. Personally, I would not ask for more than an hour of anyone's time," Sullivan suggests. "If they're willing to give me more, and I can take more, great. I'll take the time I can."

A background photograph showing several people on a soccer field. In the foreground, the back of a person in a blue polo shirt and khaki shorts is visible. To the left, a man in a red shirt and blue jeans is looking towards the center. In the background, a soccer goal is visible on a green field under a clear blue sky. The overall scene is bright and sunny.

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When asking questions, Sullivan says you need to build the relationship with the person – you will only get as much information as they trust you to have.

“Start to talk to them – why’d you get into this? Is operating a facility everything you expected it to be?” Ask about their successes and their challenges. This macro-level conversation will show you are genuinely interested and can lead to opportunities to ask about specifics. Do that prior to asking for anything, whether it be program schedules, financials or advice.”

USIndoor’s Facility Bus Tour

The Facility Bus Tour at USIndoor’s Annual Facility Operators Conference and Tradeshow is an ideal time for existing operators and startups to visit facilities, especially ones that are in a different part of the country. Sullivan, who has led the Tour with his SFA colleagues for several years, sees it as a valuable experience, not just for others, but for himself.

“It’s the ability to go into a market and see different types of facilities that are serving the same or similar communities in somewhat close proximity to each other. It’s always good to not just see how one facility does it in a market, but see how different facilities succeed and even compete.”

He also appreciates how the Bus Tour, and the Conference as a whole, creates natural dialog between participants, who gain common reference points to network, get to know each other, and talk about their businesses.

“You’re taking a group of like-minded people and operators in one industry that have common ties and bringing them all in at one place and time.”



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Community of Operators

It may seem odd that facility operators across the continent are willing to share information about their businesses with others, but to Sullivan that's part of what makes this industry unique.

"People actually are really willing to share information, share best practices, tell their stories of success, and tell their stories of challenge. I don't think every industry is as open and honest in dialog as what we are and have the ability to be."

As business owners, facility operators will still compete for customers and sales. Through individual facility tours, the USIndoor Conference, and USIndoor as a whole, collaboration and the exchange of knowledge can improve the industry far beyond what each person can do individually.

"We all become better facilities that are more sustainable, have better profitability, and serve our clients with better guest experience, if we collaborate on this and learn from each other's trials and successes versus each one of us go out and try to learn this on our own," says Sullivan.

"The more that we all share, the more that we all collaborate, the better we're all going to be for it."