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Zoos Profit from Token-Based Rides & Attractions

Cincinnati, OH – Rides and attractions offer increased revenues for zoos of all sizes. Historic carousels offer a unique opportunity to bridge generational gaps, since parents who probably rode carousels as infants may now share this experience with their own children. As guests enhance their zoo visits with ancillary attractions, they spend a little more money. One way that large and small zoos can reap substantial benefits and claim higher profits is by adopting token-based attractions (rather than ticket-based ones which have historically been the norm).

Operationally There's More Than A Token Benefit

Tickets have been used for decades and are not likely to be abandoned anytime soon. However, tokens offer tangible benefits and the opportunity to earn more profits on a per-transaction basis. Tokens are sold through a self-serve token dispenser, so unlike tickets, selling and dispensing tokens does not require an operator. Eliminating a person simplifies scheduling of workers while reducing costs. Even considering the initial cost of the token dispensers, the payback for Seattle's Woodland Park Zoo was "less than a

season” according to Gates Supervisor Scott Mus. In addition to financial incentives for automating the process, there are operational benefits as well. “Taking the actual selling of the ride out of the operator’s hands allows them more control over the ride and better safety response if that were necessary” continues Mus.

Scovill Zoo’s Mike Borders echoes this sentiment, adding “we have a lot of volunteers who operate the rides, and volunteers hate to handle money. This gives us more control, and nobody has to worry about making change.” Scovill Zoo in Decatur, IL has been using tokens for its 1948 Allen Herschel Endangered Species Carousel for years.

Last season marked the first time that Woodland Park began using tokens for its historic 1918 model carousel. Each entity faced some decisions on how to price the ride and how that would impact their token dispensers (or vice-versa).

Mechanics of Dispensing, Making Change & Pricing

Once the decision is made to use tokens, a next question is how to value them. Keep in mind that while token dispensers are available to handle all sorts of transactions (including credit cards and issuing change), the more complicated the transactions become, the more expensive the dispensers.

That’s one reason that Woodland Park valued their tokens at \$1 – to simplify the transaction process. If a customer inserts \$5, he or she receives 5 tokens. A \$10 bill nets 10 tokens and so on. If customers do not want all of the tokens, cashiers can give them change. Tokens are also accepted elsewhere on the grounds. So, for example, if a

customer pulls out some tokens with his pocket change to pay for a cheeseburger at the concession stand, a cashier may say “did you know those are worth a dollar here?”

“This year we also have small information signs near the token machines saying that if they have extras they can use them anywhere in the park” says Mus.

While Scovill Zoo has used tokens for many years, they recently upped the price of a carousel ride from \$1 to \$1.50. With tokens, this is easily accomplished. The token dispensers were reprogrammed to accept two \$1 bills and dispense 2 tokens and 2 quarters. The ride now requires 2 tokens to gain admission.

How Many Tokens Is Enough

Another decision you will have to make is the number of tokens to purchase. One obvious consideration is the quantity of tokens that can be stored in your token dispensers. While this varies by model and size, most token dispensers seem to hold several thousand tokens. You will also want to consider token economics: the more you purchase, the cheaper they are. There are certainly benefits to ordering in bulk, but there may be benefits in ordering smaller quantities, as well, especially if storage is an issue.

In addition to providing operational and financial benefits, tokens are sometimes viewed as a low-cost souvenir. That is one reason why people purchase them but never redeem them. There is also a marketing value inherent with tokens. They can easily be minted to tie in to new promotions or to recognize the addition of a new animal exhibit. Changing

token designs periodically may encourage more visitors to take them home. When the tokens are viewed with pocket change, they offer branding opportunities. In addition to souvenir seekers or collectors, some of us simply lose tokens. Whatever the reason, there are occasions when tokens are sold but never redeemed. These are called “walkaways” because the tokens are sold but they “walk away” before they are redeemed.

So how big is the “walkaway” issue? Decatur’s Scovill Zoo is a smaller facility that hosts approximately 90,000 visitors per year. Director Mike Borders estimates that 5% of their tokens are sold but never returned, an extra profit of roughly \$1,500 per year. Woodland Park, a larger facility with more visitors, naturally has more walkaways. Scott Mus estimates that about 75 tokens a day are sold but never redeemed. That’s an extra \$56 per day of profit after accounting for the cost of the tokens, die charges and freight to deliver them (actual walkaway figures are from -10 to 200 per day - though only 4 days have seen more tokens redeemed than sold). Mus recalls that he ordered an initial supply in May 2007 to start the project and recently placed an order for another 10,000 tokens to replace the “walkaways.”

That’s not a bad increase in profit for a token that also yields operational benefits. Reduced man-hours for ride operations is certainly a plus, and the financial aspects of token-based rides and attractions have zoo directors smiling all the way to the bank.



