



PALACE ENTERTAINMENT
Safety First



The first thing that usually comes to mind when thinking about amusement parks is fun. But for Michael Baroni, it's safety. A year and a half ago, when Baroni took over as general counsel of Palace Entertainment—a company that owns and operates theme parks, water parks and family entertainment centers nationwide—he made instituting clear safety initiatives throughout Palace's 40 locations his top priority.

"You read newspaper headlines and you hear about accidents," Baroni explains. "Safety was something I wanted to jump on very quickly. So I had to size up the situation."

Baroni, the sole in-house lawyer at Palace, immediately got to work launching the company's Safety First initiative, a liability-prevention campaign that aimed to decrease the number of accidents at Palace parks and lower legal costs.

His first order of business was to start conducting secret investigations of each of the company's locations. But without a budget, he had to get internal staff involved—recruiting some of the company's other managers to show up at the parks as regular customers and take notes and pictures of clear safety concerns. Baroni himself also conducted nearly a dozen of these investigations. "To the normal person, a lot of things we would find wouldn't seem like safety issues, but oversized tree roots and grease on the floor, for example, may pose a serious risk," he says. "I also tested employees—telling an operator, for example, that I had a heart condition before getting on a ride to see how he would respond."

Within the Safety First program, Baroni also began requiring managers at each location to file daily incident reports. These reports included everything from a complaint about a menu item that the park's food vendors serve to mechanical issues with ride equipment. "I am able to track issues. If I see slips and falls in a specific area of a park or certain types of injuries from one of our rides, I notice it in the report right away," he

explains. "In the past, we were just relying on memory."

The program is far-reaching, affecting every company employee. Under the initiative, park employees partake in refresher safety training workshops. Baroni also instituted signage, directed to both park employees as well as customers, to address each park's specific rules and regulations. Management is even more involved. Baroni conducts safety meetings every month with park general managers and presents a weekly safety review to the executive team.

With costs another ongoing concern, Baroni also instituted best practices around reducing them. First, he reached out to his law firms and asked for 20 percent off of any claim they handled for Palace. Most firms agreed, and the ones that didn't no longer do work for the company. Secondly, with the support of the executive team, he put an end to settling any frivolous cases, instead opting to take all of them to trial.

The Safety First initiative took three months to fully get off the ground, and it has made a remarkable difference in the past year—substantially reducing both Palace's safety incidents and associated legal costs.

"While shaving thousands of dollars off legal bills, there also has been a steep reduction in the number of safety incidents and, as a result, claims," Baroni says. Additionally, the company's insurance broker, Marsh, has deemed Palace "extraordinary" in the area of safety.

What's particularly impressive is that Baroni was able to accomplish these goals as the company's sole attorney, and one of only three members of the legal department. "The amusement park business is all about family fun, but we must provide the absolute safest environment," he says. "Above everything else, my ultimate goal is to make sure Palace never has a bad incident."

—CATHLEEN FLAHARDY

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