

INTERNATIONAL Bowling Industry

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QubicaAMF Takes A Re-Rack

A realigned **QubicaAMF** looks forward to its new-found freedom.

■ By Robert Sax

The owners of the “new” QubicaAMF don’t believe in the maxim “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” If they did, they wouldn’t have changed the structure of the innovative upstart that in less than twelve years had installed its equipment on more than 35,000 lanes in more than 50 countries.

In December 2014, the original partners of Qubica acquired 100% of the ownership of QubicaAMF Worldwide. After nearly a decade as a partnership between Qubica and AMF, the world’s largest manufacturer of bowling products (ranked by sales) will once again operate as a private company.

Judging by the buzz of activity at the QubicaAMF booth at Bowl Expo 2015, the ownership change hasn’t scared away any customers. That’s where IBI sat down to talk with Emanuele Govoni, the company’s CEO, and Pat Ciniello, the chairman of the board, who said the realigned company will stay focused on bowling while picking up the pace of innovation.

“We just want to continue on our path, but now we’re in charge of our own destiny, and we are able to accelerate

things a little bit,” says Govoni. “In the last five years, we developed the best products in the industry. That’s our legacy and what we feel is important for proprietors. Now that we’re in charge of the company, we certainly want to continue on this path of innovation, taking our speed and our business to the next level.”

Ciniello acknowledged that it wasn’t always possible to move as fast as he and Govoni wanted under the prior 50/50 joint venture. “It’s difficult; all parties may not be aligned. So, now that we’re aligned, it’s very simple for us, the original seven people, to call a board meeting or get on the phone and be able to react quickly,” Ciniello says.

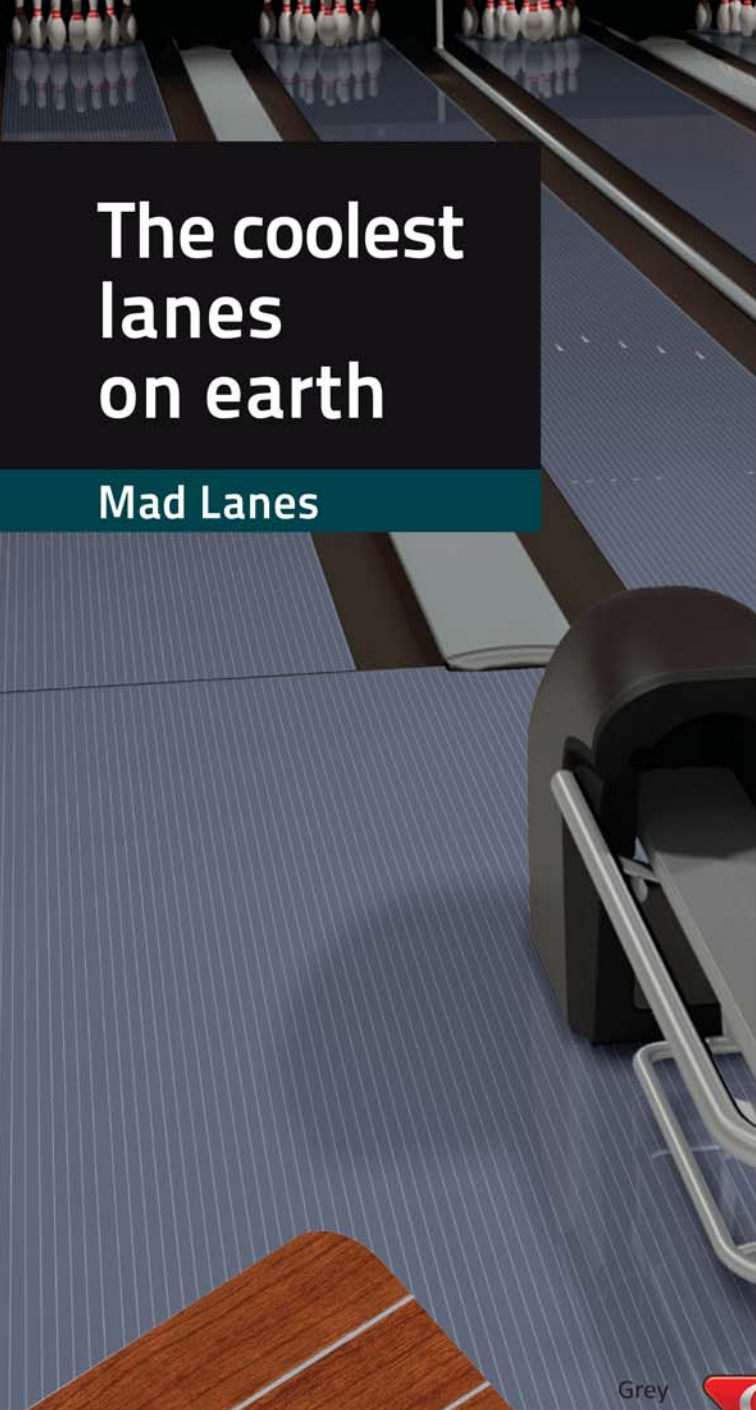
There are plenty of projects on the back burner that can now move forward. “We see a new era for the industry, driven by new entertainment and technology and innovation,” says Govoni. Even if the industry is shrinking, we feel it’s the right space for us to come up with great concepts and come up with things that are very compelling for consumers, which are going to make proprietors more successful; [that’s] what we have done for the last 20 years.”

QubicaAMF says it is now essential to customize the bowling experience to suit diverse types of customers. “Bowling is a great game and it’s got great fundamentals, but it’s not necessarily perfect for every customer segment,” says Govoni. “The idea is to totally understand each customer segment and to change a few things in the bowling experience... so that every segment is thoroughly fulfilled and thoroughly satisfied.”

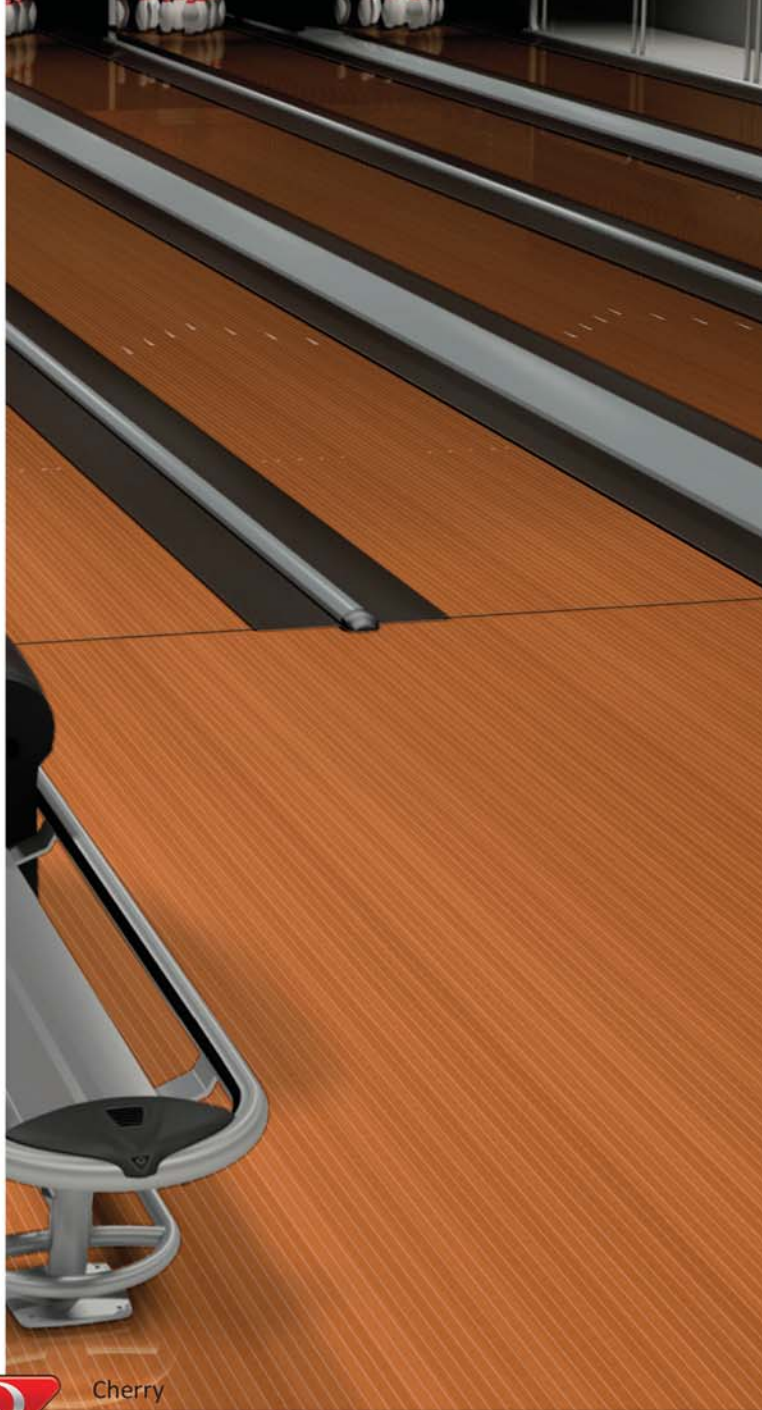
QubicaAMF’s BES-X bowler entertainment system represents the company’s most technologically-sophisticated and ambitious

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bet on segmentation so far. It offers a variety of customizable on-screen games and social media features designed to appeal to such key groups as families, teens and young adults, casual competitors, corporate and group events and birthday parties.

"We came up with some totally new categories and new ways of playing, like Mad Games and YouToons, and all of the things are working," says Govoni. "Proprietors are enjoying double-digit growth after installing the system, so we are going to capitalize on this momentum and make sure we continue to [focus] on lane entertainment features to attract more consumers and to drive revenue for proprietors."

Ciniello sees great opportunity in FECs, which will have to add additional entertainment options to remain competitive. "We are very aggressively going after that business," says Ciniello, "because we feel that what works for "big bowling" is a perfect fit for family entertainment centers." He recommends that FEC proprietors add activities that meet the growing customer preference for socialization over basic bowling.

The trend to socialization is the idea behind "Suite Spot," a combination of mini-bowling and modular furniture. It frees the small game from the arcade and creates a more appealing social space for customers to relax, bowl longer and order more food and beverages.

Ciniello remains bullish on bowling and is currently developing two bowling entertainment centers including a 48,000-square-foot FEC in South Florida. He has studied the demographics there and says the expectations of bowling patrons are much different from those of 20 to 25 years ago. "They want that Disney-type of experience with customer service, so that's what we preach. We built our company on customer service... you have to reinvest and train your employees to give that outstanding customer service."

Accordingly, they will offer more training options to its customers. In addition to initial training sessions where company trainers teach center employees how to use the systems, there are also marketing materials, webinars and consulting services available.

QubicaAMF also has the coveted 20- 35-year-old millennials in its marketing sights. More than 80 million strong, these Americans born in the 1980s and 1990s may be the largest and most influential generation of consumers yet.

"It's an underdeveloped market segment and we are creating customers for the future," says Govoni.

"It's really important for bowling not to lose an entire generation, so it's important for manufacturers and for proprietors to focus specifically on going after that crucial demographic rather proactively because we need it."

Ciniello believes the millennials will take to such innovations as MadGames, because they allow for new types of scoring, shorter games and more relaxed social play. "The millennials want a quick entertainment,



Pat Ciniello



Emanuele Govoni

an hour and a half [to] two hours, and we're a perfect venue," says Ciniello. "Our company is really geared toward that same type of thing."

Govoni sees the American and international markets as influenced by the same trends, with the difference being a slower European economy. "Things are bright in the USA. Europe is a bit [behind] because the crisis in Europe started later, and we feel we probably need one or two more years to see a better economic situation with Europe," he says. "Things are not bad, but people are still a bit in 'wait and see' mode."

In the next five years, QubicaAMF predicts that more traditional bowling centers will move toward the family entertainment model. They will add more attractions and maybe reduce the number of lanes as they adapt to changing consumer tastes. "Bowling is a great sport... which has lasted all of these decades [and it's] recession-proof," says Ciniello. "I think those that want to stay in the business will change and will adapt."

With its technological wizardry and creativity, will a now more nimble QubicaAMF expand into other categories? Govoni says no. "We feel there are great opportunities for us in the bowling and family entertainment industry. We are going to remain very, very focused on bowling for quite a bit of time, because we feel focus is important," he says. "We will work hard to contribute to the creation of a revitalized and re-energized industry where fun, innovation and transformation will spur new economic growth for our customers around the world." ❖



Robert Sax is a writer and PR consultant in Los Angeles. He grew up in Toronto, Canada, the home of five-pin bowling.

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