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## Back for good!: A marketing proposal for Geauga Lake amusement park

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## Back for good!: A marketing proposal for Geauga Lake amusement park

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**BACK FOR GOOD!**  
**A MARKETING PROPOSAL FOR GEAUGA LAKE AMUSEMENT PARK**

**By**

**Anne Liliias McAlindon Irvine**

**A Senior Thesis Submitted to the**

**Eastern Michigan University**

**Honors Program**

**In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation**

**With Honors in Marketing**

**Approved at Ypsilanti, Michigan on this date \_\_\_\_\_**

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## **THE BEGINNINGS OF THE MODERN AMERICAN AMUSEMENT AND THEME PARK**

Geauga Lake's history reaches back into the 1800's with a humble start, similar to many venerable parks around the country. We will explore Geauga Lake's history after a brief introduction to the history of the modern American amusement park.

In the early days, amusement parks weren't created like they are now: Rather than investing a great deal of capital in creating a "mega park" from the start, parks often became "amusement parks" when picnic areas or swimming beaches added pay attractions for summer guests. (Cedar Point, in Sandusky, Ohio, a favorite of Michigan families, began in 1870 as a bathing beach.) Parks also sprang up at the end of trolley lines as a way to get more people to travel trolley lines during the traditionally slow weekends. When the first roller coaster opened at Coney Island in 1884, "switchback railways" as they were called (referring to the coaster's train simply traveling on one hilly track from one loading tower to another, and back again), joined steam carousels, games, and early spinning rides as prime attractions for these new amusement parks. The idea of a massive amusement park, similar to what we know now, was truly first seen at Coney Island, New York, with the turn-of-the-century construction of Steeplechase Park, Luna Park, and Dreamland, each one bigger and more brightly lit than the last. Small parks around the country tried to emulate these centers of thrills, sometimes even naming the little trolley parks and lakeside areas after the Coney parks. By 1910, over 2,000 parks of this type existed in the United States.

The popularity of the parks increased continually from the late 1870's to the beginning of World War I, which ushered in the death of the early amusement park

industry. Many consider the 1911 tragic fire at Coney Island's Dreamland, which destroyed the entire park in one evening, to be the "beginning of the end" when it came to these early parks. While a period of prosperity came about again during the 1920's, crowds were becoming jaded. Original attractions that once thrilled, like Coney Island's live stage shows of catastrophic events or electrical displays glorifying the incandescent bulb, were now old news. Gentle roller coasters held no excitement for crowds craving a more intense experience. Those parks that survived the initial surge of park closings between 1915 and 1920 (many of which were due to loss of trolley traffic and lines, along with families now traveling to locations out of town, brought about by the invention of the automobile) found another golden period during the Roaring Twenties. Major cities had numerous parks, and the race was on to top competitors with the craziest, most intense roller coaster possible. Crystal Beach in Ontario, Canada, for example, was renown for its *Cyclone* coaster, which opened in 1927. This coaster was known to send riders to the hospital; of course, it drew large crowds desiring the ultimate thrill. When the Great Depression began in 1929, the first golden period had come to an end. Over 1,500 parks closed during the depression years. Those that survived were often popular community parks, such as Kennywood in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; many parks also found profits in inviting 1940's Big Bands to perform or hosting pageants or sporting tournaments.

The true saving grace of the amusement industry as we know it today was the 1955 opening of Disneyland in Anaheim, California. Developers took Walt Disney's idea of a "theme park" that families could enjoy and began to wonder if the concept could be applied to local, smaller parks. The survival of Cedar Point, for example, can be

attributed to Disneyland, as developers chose to revitalize the park in Disneyland's footsteps rather than turn the peninsula of land into a luxury housing development. New developments in amusement attractions, such as the invention of the steel-tube track roller coaster with Disneyland's *Matterhorn* coaster spawned renewed interest in thrill rides. And Disney's theme park idea was the catalyst behind the first Six Flags theme park, which opened in Texas in 1961. With the opening of Walt Disney World in the early 1970's, the idea of the amusement park as an American institution was back.

Growth continued well into the mid 1990's. New parks opened, old ones revitalized and invested millions in the newest attractions, and families flocked to the rides and attractions the parks had to offer. The second golden age had begun. The roller coaster "wars" of the 1920's also experienced a rebirth. Cedar Point's *Gemini*, which opened in 1978, was the tallest, fastest, and steepest coaster of its time. Its creators said they doubted roller coasters would get much more extreme than the *Gemini* at 125 feet and 55 MPH, but the same park debuted the world's tallest and fastest coaster once again in 2003, *Top Thrill Dragster*, which squashes *Gemini*'s record at an astonishing 420 feet and 120 MPH top speed! Truly, the fiery battle to have the planet's most amazing roller coaster has not only been sparked once again but has become an inferno of parks around the globe racing to top one another.

Unfortunately, many smaller parks find themselves trying to stay afloat in a world where multimillions are needed to build the mind-boggling attractions major parks are debuting. Premier Parks, once a small firm holding only a few parks, acquired the Six Flags name and began to buy these smaller parks, investing the tremendous amounts of capital the company felt was necessary to bring the parks up to the standard they felt the

Six Flags name had with the public. The move was not well received in many communities, as some felt the Six Flags renovations eliminated the charm and appeal the smaller parks had or that the Six Flags name brought in crowds the smaller towns could not handle. While many of the original Six Flags parks are still noted for a quality guest experience, these smaller parks struggled under the new image. As you will see, Geauga Lake was one of the community parks that would befall this fate.

Smaller parks also dealt with issues arising from differentiating themselves from the experiences and attractions large theme parks had to offer. As crowds became accustomed to the “hyper,” “giga,” and now “*strata*”-sized coasters many parks had to offer, where would smaller parks fit in? Would they have to build similar rides, which often meant acquiring tremendous amounts of debt, or was there another niche for them? Some parks, like Holiday World in Santa Claus, Indiana, started small by constructing modestly sized but incredibly well received wooden or steel coasters, like the park’s *Raven*, rather than delving deeply into debt for the newest technology or record-breaker. Others remained family parks, meant for those with younger children and never to follow in the footsteps of their massive siblings. Some floundered without a firm grasp on target markets and a specific, *reachable* goal for growth and attendance.

## **GEAUGA LAKE’S HISTORY**

Geauga Lake in Aurora, Ohio, is situated within a two-hour drive of Cedar Point, which is consistently voted the number one amusement park in the world and offers sixteen roller coasters. Kennywood Park, another venerable institution, is three hours away in Pittsburgh and is home to an old-fashioned small park experience. Ohio also

boasts Paramount's Kings Island, in Kings Mills, with many large roller coasters and attractions that only a park of its caliber could afford; the park is an easy day's drive for Cleveland residents. Where could Geauga Lake fit in? Should it stay a small, family-oriented park, or try to emulate (or even match) the experiences close-by competition offered? And no matter what the choice, what part would marketing play in reinforcing the direction Geauga Lake would take? The park faced these issues as the 1990's came to a close.

Various histories disagree on the opening year of Geauga Lake, along with whether the park opened as a "trolley park," as mentioned earlier, or not to expand trolley use but that of railroad travel. Regardless of purpose, Geauga Lake Park originated as a picnicking, camping, and fishing spot for Clevelanders, becoming popular during the 1880s. The lake Geauga Lake Park was built around was known as Giles Pond or Picnic Lake during its early years.

Capitalizing on the popularity of the lake for recreation, Alexander Kent constructed the Kent House luxury hotel on-property in 1888. A year later, the park would see its first amusement ride- a steam-powered carousel. In 1925, the *Big Dipper* coaster was constructed, and elevated the status of the park by being billed the "largest coaster of its time."

While Geauga Lake never achieved the level of growth and popularity some parks did during the early part of the last century and into the 1920's, it did follow a very typical path when it came to its offerings to guests. Swimming pools were a big draw to early park crowds; Kennywood Park added one during the 1925 season, and Geauga Lake followed suit with an Olympic-sized pool in 1927. Publicity stunts involving famous

movie stars, athletes, and other figures were often used by parks, especially during slow periods; the pool at Geauga Lake was the place where Johnny Weissmuller, of *Tarzan* fame, broke the 220-yard free-style swimming world record, drawing publicity to the little park. Geauga Lake also followed many parks' examples when they constructed a dance hall and ballroom, where the sounds of Big Band music kept guests coming to enjoy not only the bands but also what the park had to offer. These dancehalls were often the reason for parks' survival during the 1930's and 40's, when aging attractions failed to attract and war-torn families waited for husbands to come home from the front.

Natural disasters often caused substantial damage to parks. A mini-cyclone during 1941 flattened park buildings and did damage to a portion of the *Big Dipper*. Fire was also a plague for many early parks. The same delicate lath-and-plaster construction of park buildings that rarely survived damage by wind, rain, or ice also made park structures incredibly flammable. Few parks survived the first half of the last century without sustaining at least some damage by fire; some were completely leveled by conflagrations. Geauga Lake suffered the same fate in 1952, causing \$500,000 in damage to the park's bowling alley, theater, dance hall, and roller rink.

The park managed to survive these disasters and continue its life as a family-oriented local amusement park. Change was on the horizon, however. As many parks looked to Disneyland as a model for park expansion and change, developers who owned or purchased smaller parks had grand plans. Cedar Point's continued modern expansion began during this time; down the road in Aurora, Geauga Lake was about to experience the same treatment. During the late 1960's, a group of investors who owned a firm specializing in amusement park advertising formed Funtime, Inc., which would purchase

Geauga Lake from its family-owners in 1969. Their aim was to take the small park to the next level: From local amusement park to a park recognized around the nation. Across the lake from the park, a SeaWorld Adventure Park was built during the 1970 season; a burst of construction followed that would continue for several decades. Antique cars, water attractions, and, of course, roller coasters would be among the many attractions added between the early 1970's to the mid-1990's. Its 100-year anniversary was celebrated in 1988 with the addition of the *Raging Wolf Bobs* roller coaster.

Change was again on the agenda in 1995. Premier Parks, Inc., a firm specializing in theme park management, purchased Funtime, Inc., taking over ownership of Geauga Lake. Premier was known during this period for acquiring smaller parks and investing in new rides and attractions in attempts to revitalize attendance. Premier jumped to the task by investing \$9 million in improvements for the 1996 season, including construction of a new roller coaster, the looping *Mind Eraser*. Geauga Lake still existed as a local draw, perfect for a less-expensive family outing or as a vacation that didn't require a day's drive, perhaps. With the world-renown Cedar Point less than two hours away debuting world record-breaking roller coasters one after the other, it was clear that Geauga Lake existed for a different function than did Cedar Point.

Premier Parks rocked the amusement industry in 1998 by purchasing 100% of Six Flags Theme Parks, becoming Six Flags, Inc. Six Flags itself had been through a number of ownership changes over the years, and while Six Flags was not known for being synonymous with an exceptional theme park experience, its name was and is highly recognizable to most Americans. In a move that would prove to be a downfall for some of its parks, Premier began to change its stable of small parks into Six Flags franchises.

While some cheered the tremendous amount of capital being poured into these parks under the Six Flags name, other bemoaned the loss of uniqueness the smaller parks suffered when they ceased to be simple, locally-oriented parks. Geauga Lake itself became Six Flags Ohio for the 2000 season, and an amazing \$40 million in capital was lavished on the park. An unprecedented four roller coasters were built for the upcoming season, along with children's attractions and a water park, much of which was themed to match the Warner Brothers theming other Six Flags parks already boasted. The name of the park was changed to Six Flags Worlds of Adventure in 2001 to reflect the buyout of SeaWorld, located across the lake from Six Flags Ohio. A boardwalk united the two parks; the rides side was known as Wild Rides, while the pared-down animal portion of the now-defunct SeaWorld was known as Wild Life. Sentiments towards the changes were not welcoming. Aurora residents complained bitterly of increasing traffic that choked neighborhood roads, as the park went from being a local draw to being marketed towards long-distance visitors. As Geauga Lake, the park was a local attraction and did not overburden traffic patterns in the area, which is heavily populated with homes in close proximity to the park. Six Flags launched a marketing attack on Cedar Point, with advertisements and promotions clearly stating Worlds of Adventure was a superior choice to Cedar Point. This strategy only alienated a guest base that considered Cedar Point to be a point of pride for the area and not subject to any form of replacement.

## **THE CURRENT SITUATION**

On March 10, 2004, Cedar Fair L.P. purchased Geauga Lake from Six Flags Inc., who was operating the park under the name Six Flags Worlds of Adventure. Cedar Fair

immediately announced the return of the original Geauga Lake name to the park under the deal, and the park's public relations representative, Lexi Robinson, assured future guests in many articles about the buyout that the park would be recapturing the magic of the Geauga Lake era. Six Flags admitted that the park was a financial burden and was struggling under reduced revenues and attendance; as the company itself was and is still dealing with heavy debt, it has begun to sell some of its lesser-attended parks. Cedar Fair is the parent company of many major theme parks across the U.S.: Cedar Point; Dorney Park in Allentown, PA; Knott's Berry Farm in Buena Park, CA; Michigan's Adventure, near Muskegon, MI; Worlds of Fun in Kansas City, MO; and Valleyfair, near Minneapolis/St. Paul, MN. Cedar Fair is well known for its excellent safety record in the industry and is considered a premier management firm. Its flagship park is Cedar Point and they became renowned throughout the industry for a commitment to constructing world-record breaking amusement rides at their premier gate. (Partnership revenues were \$542 million for 2004) Geauga Lake was purchased for \$145 million from Six Flags Inc. A management overhaul took place in which many key senior Cedar Fair employees were transplanted from other Cedar Fair parks in hopes that their expertise would help guide the park's first season under the partnership. The general manager of the park, William Spehn, is a transplant from Cedar Point who was trusted to guide the park during its first year as a Cedar Fair property. Looney Tunes theming and all traces of Six Flags' logo and name were removed; many rides were renamed. Industry analysts were skeptical that Cedar Fair could pull off a success with the park during 2004, especially considering the final "handing over of the keys" to Cedar Fair took place less than a month before opening day.

One of the most interesting portions of the buyout was taking into consideration that the wildly successful Cedar Point is under two hours from Geauga Lake. Industry experts wondered how Cedar Fair would handle having their most successful park as “competition” for Geauga Lake. Cedar Fair immediately added the phrase “Family Amusement Park” to the Geauga Lake name; it soon became clear they were going to differentiate Geauga Lake from Cedar Point by focusing on a lower-key family clientele than the gigantic and dynamic Cedar Point attracted. Interesting, too, was the change in advertising firms for Geauga Lake at the end of the 2004 season. The park had employed Cedar Point’s firm, Liggett-Stashower Inc., for its advertising. Ms. Robinson had this to say of the change to Hitchcock Fleming & Associates in a *Crain’s Cleveland Business* article-

“This new face must be clearly differentiated from that of Cedar Point. While we market ourselves more as a family park and Cedar Point is much more of a destination resort, there must be a clear delineation between the two parks in terms of advertising.”

Clearly a departure from the angle Six Flags took with the park. I applaud the park’s decision to make proactive moves in differentiation but cannot help but believe that it will take more than a change in firms to truly differentiate the park; hence my stance in this project that a more hands-on approach is necessary to set Geauga Lake apart.

Unfortunately, the 2004 season was a disappointment for both Cedar Fair and Geauga Lake’s guests. For a park that made average revenues of \$64 million in the three years prior to the buyout, the park lost \$1.8 million in July, August, and September. Attendance was only 700,000- this number is shocking considering the park was pulling in a million-plus guests during its Funtime Inc. management and also when compared to

Cedar Fair's hopes to bring in those same kinds of attendance numbers. It is even more shocking when considering that Geauga Lake had many less attractions and roller coasters during its most attended years! Guests complained of poor customer service and policy as employees were confused on Cedar Fair's employee protocol and proverbial balls were dropped when dealing with how to translate Six Flags promotions and season passes into the Cedar Fair agenda. Cedar Fair's other parks enjoyed financial success while Geauga Lake left the 2004 season with the tag "failing" added to many articles on the park.

Now the park is facing 2005, a season where, all else aside, employees have had a full, normal off-season to establish marketing plans, make changes to the park, and hopefully arrive as a comeback for the season. A \$24 million water park, Wildwater Kingdom, has been added to the former SeaWorld location; phase one will open this season while phase two is slated to open in 2006. The water park will be included in park general admission, the price of which has been lowered \$10. General Manager Spehn noted in an *Akron Beacon Journal* article that the park intends to focus this season on a commitment to customer service, a lack of which is blamed for the park's poor attendance. Spehn feels that guests expect the experience they have come to know from Cedar Fair and the park will have to work "twice as hard" to not lose guests considering the park's poor performance. Whether this commitment will help the park meet its goal of 1 million guests remains to be seen.

This is where my project comes into play. It has been obvious from the first word of the Cedar Fair buyout that differentiation is the key issue in Geauga Lake's immediate success. By differentiation, I am referring to setting Geauga Lake apart from Cedar Point

in terms of the experience it provides and actions taken to improve and promote the park – not that one park is superior to the other. In addition, guests must be shown not only why a trip to Geauga Lake will be different than one to Cedar Point but balance that with the idea that the two parks are not substitutes for each other. One park may be more suited to a particular family’s needs depending on the ages and interests of their children, but since both parks provide entertainment for young children, keeping cannibalization from occurring if Geauga Lake becomes more successful under the “family amusement park” moniker will be the delicate balancing act ahead. Skillful marketing is, I believe, the key achieving this goal and smoothing the continued transition of the park into a Cedar Fair property.

## **MARKETING PROPOSAL SUMMARY**

This proposal is not meant to be a complete plan to be presented to marketing personnel or management; instead it describes the measures I propose Geauga Lake could incorporate in efforts to rebuild a strong and loyal guest base. The ideas following focus on promotional tactics to be used within the city of Cleveland and its outlying suburbs. I propose that Geauga Lake will need to return to its roots as a locally-oriented amusement park, known for its hospitality to the communities of Cleveland and as a place for families to enjoy quality and leisure time, rather than continue as a thrill park on the same caliber as Cedar Point or other Six Flags parks, as Six Flags, Inc. was attempting. The core message behind this plan is “Gauga Lake: Back For Good!” which is supported by three values- Accessibility, Hometown Pride, and Family Values. The goals associated with each value can be reached through methods such as changing admission price structures, specific promotional messages, examining public opinion, and sponsorship.

Cedar Fair has already established Cedar Point as a flagship park and will continue to invest significant amounts of capital in record-breaking and unique attractions to draw guests from across many regions, if not around the nation and even the world. Rather than risk cannibalization by creating a “mini Cedar Point,” the park must be positioned as a destination that would supplement a large-scale family vacation to Cedar Point rather than a replacement; ideally, the park would be seen as a destination a family could visit more than once a summer due to its accessibility in both location and price. Geauga Lake must extend itself to the community rather than expect the community to embrace the park as it once did. By sponsoring youth and family events across the Cleveland metropolitan area, working with area schools, creating positive publicity and “feel-good” stories for the media to pick up, and promoting the park using different methods than used for Cedar Point, for example, the park can bring itself back down to the community level, something lost when the park changed to a Six Flags franchise. By exploring what guests loved about Geauga Lake in its days before the Six Flags era and understanding what they are looking for when coming to the park versus visiting Cedar Point, an idea of what to return to and what to plan for in the future can be determined. I also propose that marketing itself be brought to a simpler, more personal level. Rather than invest in expensive media campaigns, rely on less expensive methods that foster feelings of community pride and family fun. Focusing on more inexpensive, community-based promotions will also keep marketing costs from skyrocketing in an attempt to promote on the same level as Cedar Point.

Geauga Lake will never be, and was not *meant* to be, another Cedar Point. Instead, it must return to its foundations as an excursion for local families, reaching for

an image of wholesome family entertainment rather than that of a Mecca for thrill-seekers. Marketing is often know as an agent of change; more than any other capital addition or management turnover, the marketing function plays the most important role in the future success of Geauga Lake as I see it.

I asked for assistance from the marketing department at Geauga Lake in the creation of this project. The department declined to discuss any marketing-related issues for a number of proprietary reasons. Therefore, my plans are based on my own assessment of the situation and materials used in the creation of this project were not provided directly from the park.

## **MARKETING PROPOSAL**

### ***Geauga Lake: Back For Good!***

I believe that any successful business proposal should be backed with a written set of goals and values that serve as a basis for the creation of the plan as well as guidelines for implementation. Having these values within sight as the plan is shaped and put into action keeps all involved on the same page and can help keep focus as the implementation is taking place.

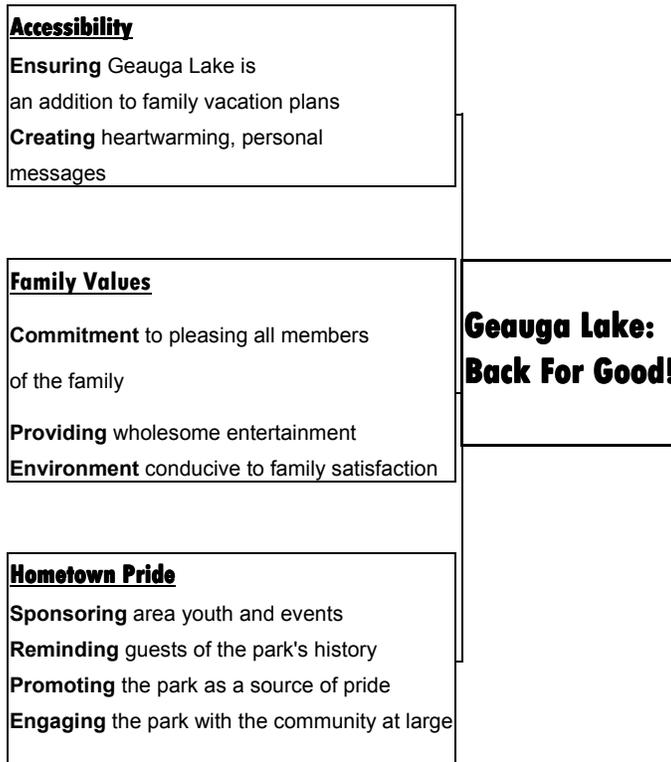
My proposal is backed with the core mission of “Gauga Lake: Back For Good!” which refers to not only the reinstatement of Geauga Lake as it was originally named and known but also to the idea that the park is dedicated to the betterment of the community and of its families. Within this mission are three values: Accessibility, Hometown Pride, and Family Values. The ideals maintained within each value are:

**Accessibility:** Ensuring that families can consider Geauga Lake a frequent addition to their summer plans and reinforcing that idea through marketing.

Creating personal, heartwarming promotional messages.

**Hometown Pride:** Sponsoring area youth and events. Reminding guests of the park’s long history in the Cleveland area. Promoting the park as a source of pride for Clevelanders. Engaging the park with the Cleveland area at large.

**Family Values:** Making a commitment to pleasing all members of the family. Providing wholesome entertainment families can feel good about. Creating an environment conducive to family satisfaction with emphasis on unparalleled customer service and a clean, inviting, and safe in-park experience.



*Ill. 1: "Back For Good!" Structure*

By providing these guidelines to other functions within the business, synergy can be achieved. Management's awareness of the values the marketing function is seeking to emphasize and promote means their own functions can strive to back up the values in their own positions and through their function's employees.

One point to note is that I do **not** propose that marketing to those outside of the Cleveland area be abandoned. Marketing to areas such as Cincinnati and Toledo, for example, would continue. My proposal is that a distinct focus be placed on engaging and drawing from the market already on the park's doorstep. The greater Cleveland area is full of families already used to placing parks like Paramount's Kings Island and Cedar Point on their summer agendas; the task will be winning back and creating loyal and satisfied customers to Geauga Lake from the immediate market. These will be the guests who will visit the park more than once a year, due to affordability and ease of access, and find it a destination of choice for a child's birthday, to reward an accomplishment, or for simply a break from the daily grind, rather than a costly family endeavor to be attempted once a year. Favorable opinions towards Geauga Lake also have a small, but worth mentioning, perk: building goodwill in Cedar Fair itself. With its flagship park a mere hour's drive away, it would be in Cedar Fair's best interest to put its best face forward in its management of Geauga Lake.

### ***Basis for Plan- Kennywood's Marketing***

Kennywood Park, in West Mifflin, Pennsylvania, is the shining example of a park closely tied to its community. And the community returns the favor with tremendous amounts of goodwill towards the park; generation after generation returns each summer

in a cycle not soon to end. There are very few Pittsburghers whose childhood did not include many trips to Kennywood! Kennywood is located just a short drive from the city of Pittsburgh; close enough that many consider it a part of Pittsburgh. One key aspect of Kennywood's success has been their school picnics. During a school's picnic day, staff, faculty, and students are invited to spend the day at the park with discounted admission and a special picnic area set aside for the school to assemble at. Not only is school picnic day a significant event in a Pittsburgh child's life but it's also an incredible way to build loyalty young and foster a strong sense of community pride in the park. Geauga Lake can capitalize on this idea with the same school picnic days for Cleveland youth.

Focusing on the younger grades, the park can set aside specific days for Cleveland area schoolchildren to enjoy the park with the rest of their classmates. Picnic areas can be built and upgraded to accommodate the schools. An emphasis will be made on the idea that the particular day is the school's own **special day** and the students and staff will be warmly welcomed to Geauga Lake. Loyalty and excitement regarding the day will increase in the children as the promotion continues over the years.

Kennywood's website shows more of its tie to the community and the emphasis made on celebrating memories- a direction I believe Geauga Lake should take with its promotional efforts. A special section of the website, entitled "Memories," encourages guests to tell their stories (or their grandparents' stories!) to be celebrated and posted on the "Memories" page. This is unusual for most amusement parks; Walt Disney World and Disneyland Resort often focus on guest memories in promotional tactics but it's rare outside of those examples. Since Geauga Lake's history extends far into Cleveland's past, the park should make moves to gather these memories to be used in promotional

literature, messages, advertisements, and on the park's website. The community may have forgotten what a long history Geauga Lake has with the Cleveland area, and it's up to the park's marketing team to remind its guests of that past! Doing so will help rebuild guest loyalty and satisfaction, as well as erase negative sentiments built towards the park in its darker days.

### ***The Differentiation Issue***

Cedar Fair LLP, the new parent company of Geauga Lake, considers its flagship park to be Cedar Point, and invests a great deal of capital in creating attractions that make news headlines around the world. The park has a string of creating world record-breaking roller coasters, truly erupting with the creation of *Magnum XL-200* in 1989- then the world's tallest, fastest, and steepest coaster. Soon after came *Mean Streak* in 1991 as the world's tallest, fastest, and steepest wooden coaster; *Raptor* in 1994, the tallest, fastest, steepest, and most-looping inverted coaster; and *Mantis*, the tallest, fastest, steepest, and most-looping stand-up coaster, built in 1996. The park pushed the limits to new heights with the 2000 opening of the world's tallest and fastest coaster, *Millennium Force*, standing 310 feet tall. Three years later, the park blew its own record away with *Top Thrill Dragster* at 420 feet tall and speeds of over 120 MPH! The park has been voted the world's best amusement park for close to a decade by *Amusement Today*, a publication for the amusement industry. Clearly, visiting Cedar Point is a much different experience than visiting Geauga Lake. So why would a family choose to visit Geauga Lake when Cedar Point is less than a two hour drive for most Cleveland residents? For that matter,

how will Cedar Fair ensure that families don't forgo a trip to its flagship park in favor of a visit to Geauga Lake?

This brings about the issue of differentiation of the two parks. Marketing must take a much different direction than it would take for Cedar Point to truly set the two apart as compliments rather than substitutes. The following subjects present ideas on how Geauga Lake's marketing team can make this possible and are described in more detail later on.

### Pricing

One way a firm may differentiate its products from others produced by the company or by competitors is through pricing. Customers will readily value the quality of a product or service by the prices assigned to them. For luxury goods, the price premium may be in part due to more expensive materials or an increase in labor costs, but both firms and customers alike are aware that "paying for the name" is a reality. In other cases, firms may price their products at various levels to provide price points appealing to all of their target markets. While the impressions of quality, performance, or other such attributes may play a role in what a consumer prefers, pricing plays a much larger role in the brand identity of a good or service than simply being the price of a good.

Under the Six Flags name, prices for adult all-day admissions were comparable to that of Cedar Point. To a consumer used to the attractions provided by Cedar Point at its own price point, placing the Six Flags admission close to that of Cedar Point's easily invites the guest to closely compare the parks and the value they are receiving for their money. It also places the park as a substitute to Cedar Point, dangerous when the park is

not comparable to Cedar Point in terms of the number (and, some might argue, the quality) of attractions provided. For many families, this factor would make them decide between visiting the two parks rather than planning for a longer family vacation to Cedar Point (which is actively marketed as a resort rather than as a simple day-visit theme park experience) along with a day-trip to Geauga Lake. Under the Six Flags brand, the park was aggressively compared to Cedar Point and efforts were made to assert that Worlds of Adventure was even superior to Cedar Point. To a guest base already wary of Six Flags' management of Geauga Lake, this was considered almost sacrilege and served to alienate the guests. Clevelander sentiment towards Cedar Point is high, as they consider it to be a crown jewel of local attractions and part of Cleveland's draws, despite it being located approximately an hour west of the city. Having already lost a Cleveland family tradition to the Six Flags name, now being told that a park considered inferior to Cedar Point was actually superior only acted as another reason to not patronize the park. With the purchase of the park Cedar Fair was back to the drawing board, in some sense, free to reshape guest opinions towards the park and also to mold consumer opinions of the way Geauga Lake would fit into family vacation plans. A wonderful way of reshaping these opinions is through changing the admission price structure in relationship to Cedar Point.

Geauga Lake's admission price for an all-day adult admission in 2004 was \$34.95- approximately \$10 less than an admission to Cedar Point. While this is still relatively inexpensive in a business where all-day admissions are rarely below \$40 for major theme parks and much closer to \$50 for the majority, for a family of four the price difference between a trip to Cedar Point and Geauga Lake would have only been approximately \$40 (not including parking). For many families, a trip to a theme park is

something that takes place once a year, with planning prior to the visit beginning perhaps months before. They would have to choose one or the other due to price.

Geauga Lake has actually moved to reduce their admission prices by \$10 for the 2005 season, placing them at an affordable \$24.95 for an all-day adult admission. (A Junior admission for children is \$14.95, \$10 less than a Junior admission to Cedar Point) This is a wonderful value for the money as the park is introducing a new water park, Wildwater Kingdom, for the season, which will be included within the all-day admission price. (Wildwater Kingdom will be completed in two phases, ending in 2006. Phase 1 opens for the 2005 season.) Cedar Fair CEO, Richard Kinzel noted in the Partnership's press release regarding the addition that the move was made in "effort to further increase the value to our guests of a visit to the park." I applaud this effort, since it serves a two-fold purpose in my eyes. While the reduced price along with the addition of the water park does, as Kinzel points out, increase the value of the admission to the guest, it also serves to differentiate Geauga Lake from Cedar Point. At this lower price point, it is much clearer to the guest that this park is meant to be accommodating to multiple visits as well as an addition to a vacation agenda that *already* includes Cedar Point. Now a family of four can visit Geauga Lake in 2005 for approximately \$80 (not including any additional discounts that may be available) as opposed to \$140 for Cedar Point! With a difference like that, even though some families may still have to choose between the two parks, visiting both becomes much more possible than before. A family comparing admission prices will also be able to differentiate the experiences to be expected at the parks through the difference in admission costs. This is a superb move in the efforts to reposition Geauga Lake!

### *Advertising and Promotion Methods*

If you ask a member of the general public what kind of advertising Cedar Point does, I would hazard they'd mention television and radio advertisements first. Throw in some billboards and magazine spreads for good measure. So how do you reach potential guests when your sister park a short drive away is advertising on the next page or during the next commercial break? I suggest that Geauga Lake focus on advertising and promotion methods that Cedar Point overlooks or does not emphasize. Rather than focus on broad methods like radio and TV advertisements, why not come down to the community level with sponsorship, contests, and special in-park promotions locals will enjoy? And these tactics will help differentiate the major media channel advertising. Cedar Point's advertisements may feature how many thrilling roller coasters the park boasts, but Geauga Lake's could focus on its "My First Coaster" promotion or Cleveland Sports Fan Day. Other commercials will give glimpses into the park's history in the area. Advertising like this shows guests reasons to set apart and visit both parks. Geauga Lake will continue to advertise on major media channels but will need to take an entirely different (and local!) slant on its messages.

### ***Getting Back to Community Roots***

Now what about the community ties I propose enhancing? I suggest a number of methods of achieving that goal. Special days within the park will celebrate Cleveland sports fans or provide a meet-and-greet with Cleveland celebrities. In-park radio and TV

broadcasts will excite guests. Hotel packages will give area families a chance to have “mini-vacation” with a night away from home. Contests will not only draw interest but also provide sources of heartwarming stories for PR personnel. Drawing on memories of guests to remind the market what an important park of Cleveland Geauga Lake has been for over a hundred years will help to erase the impersonal image the park was tarnished with during the early part of this decade and much of the last. And key to this idea is the idea of sponsoring youth sports and events. Geauga Lake must show interest in fostering the well being of local youth and become known as a positive contribution to the lives of Cleveland’s children rather than “just” an amusement park. While most parks focus on the thrills a trip to their facility will offer, Geauga Lake will look past just the rides and attractions to offer more to the community.

### ***Determining and Adjusting Guest Opinions***

One might often see guest opinions being gathered at amusement parks by way of surveys given to guests, usually through an interview requested of guests entering the park during the first few hours of the park’s operation. Families, couples, and groups are intercepted by marketing personnel usually within several hundred feet of the entry gates and asked questions regarding their demographics, reasons for visiting, and opinions on park attractions, for example. Their answers are most often recorded electronically during the interview. While this is a fine way of gathering information about guests already at the park, what I believe is key for Geauga Lake’s success is finding out guest opinions in-depth *before* they step foot on park property. Opinions on the park are varied after the damage Six Flags did to the park’s image. Going above and beyond what a successful

park may do to gather opinions will give insight as to what the community really thinks about Geauga Lake at this point in time; this is crucial in moving past bad feelings from the Premier days and entering into a new period where public opinion can be reshaped.

A recent example of a park struggling under negative public opinion is that of Lake Compounce in Bristol, Connecticut. The small community park was burdened with a host of events that marred public thought. A promoter conned many guests out of ticket sales funds gathered for a concert that was never scheduled to begin with. The park was known to only open on Labor Day, functioning with understaffing and little to no promotion behind it. Tax evasion caused foreclosure threats. When Kennywood Entertainment took control of Lake Compounce from former management, it realized it needed to understand and change the current opinions towards the park. It hired Cashman & Katz, an integrated communications firm in Glastonbury, Connecticut, to help mold a new identity for the park. The firm conducted several focus groups; it was discovered that locals had fond memories of the park but felt those memories were marred by the constant scandals at the park. This insight discovered, the firm decided to position the actual experience of a visit to Lake Compounce as a positive, uplifting family event that had returned after years of turmoil, using the theme "Happy Days Are Here Again." PR was combined with a multi-media effort to reinforce the fact that the park's new management was backed with years of success behind Kennywood Park, along with frequent media coverage of the park's renovations and improvements to combat skepticism. As a result, over 235 favorable news features were generated in regards to Lake Compounce, along with many radio interviews and constant media coverage over a widespread area. The important fact to note is that although the park's closest competitor

outspent Lake Compounce 5-to-1 on advertising, the park hit capacity on the key July Fourth holiday and attendance goals were exceeded by 25%! This proves that engaging the community in the “recovery” of a local, smaller park results in attendance jumps and the reversal of previous negative emotions towards the park, as well as reinforces the fact that it can be done without a large-scale marketing budget. Examples like Lake Compounce reinforce my feeling that Geauga Lake must engage the community actively while promoting an improved experience. Some may still feel a visit to Geauga Lake is not worth the time or money spent- emotions leftover from Six Flags/Premier days.

Provided within this plan is a sample questionnaire that would be sent to guests. Names would be gathered via promotional discount coupons that provide an opt-in space to participate in the survey, with incentives offered for completion. As guests redeem the discount coupon, they would be informed by admission personnel that providing an address on the coupon would put them on the list to receive the survey, and for completion they would receive exclusive discounts to both Geauga Lake and Cedar Point valid for any day during both the 2005 and 2006 seasons. To avoid bias in the survey towards only those who took the time to fill out the coupon, it could also be provided to guests as they leave the park with the same incentive offered (to be mailed at a later date). Surveys would be numbered discreetly and the addresses to which the surveys were sent would be entered into a database to retain address for mailing of incentives. A postage-paid envelope would be provided. The objectives of the survey are to examine current guest opinion of the park, their reasons for coming to the park, most and least important attractions, and gain deeper insight into guests’ past feelings on Geauga Lake and Six Flags. The survey would be used to examine why guests visited the park in the

past and what they enjoyed (or missed) the most, the reasons why they are visiting the park in the present, and current sentiment towards the park in light of its many changes in recent history.

To get a better view of *general public* sentiment towards Geauga Lake, focus groups could be conducted with questions asked regarding past reasons for liking or disliking Geauga Lake, feelings towards the changes that have taken place over the past few years, and how group members feel about the park with Cedar Fair at the helm. Examining both those who have already visited the park through the in-park and mailing list assigned questionnaires and those who may or *may not* have visited the park recently gives a view of both what can be done to satisfy current guests and to draw new guests. Geauga Lake must gain back guests that it may have lost due to the ill will generated during the past five years, and to do that it must reach out to those that have not recently visited the park.

I would propose that the park plan to isolate three main issues that prevent guests from visiting or continue to contribute in generating negative opinions. The three answers that reoccur the most would be determined. Once these issues are isolated, steps could be established to reduce or eliminate the impact of these problems. Rather than prompting answers through providing possible answers in regards to negative points, open-ended questions would play a key role. Recording responses to open-ended questions is time-consuming but allows the respondent to answer through their own words and provide answers questionnaire designers may have missed. For exploratory research, this would be a perfect option for seeking trouble spots.

A secondary survey could focus entirely on guest feelings regarding Geauga Lake, to be distributed much the same as the questionnaire enclosed with this report would be.

### ***Evaluating Success of Plan***

It is often difficult to find proprietary information regarding issues such as marketing budgets and anticipated attendance within the amusement industry. A report by Candace Goforth in the *Akron Beacon Journal* mentions that attendance was 700,000 in 2004- “a little more than half of what the company hopes to attract to the park [during 2005].” Using this report, I estimate that Geauga Lake management is hoping for attendance figures at or near 1 million for the 2005 season. Meeting this goal is one traditional way of determining the success of the plan.

Surveys can also be a part of determining success. If a secondary survey or focus group is conducted entirely regarding public opinion of Geauga Lake at the beginning of the 2005 season, the survey can be given again at the end of the 2005 season to determine if public sentiment towards the park has changed. I suggest the park keep its finger on public sentiment for at least the next three years to evaluate how effective its marketing efforts have been in changing public opinion. It is one thing to add new attractions as the public favors but it is another to be aware of what the public **thinks** of you. I believe Geauga Lake will need to keep an extremely close eye on public opinion for years to come.

## 4 P's – PRODUCT, PRICE, PLACE, AND PROMOTION

### *Industry Outlook*

It is quite difficult to obtain industry outlook reports without paying considerable amounts or being privy to proprietary information. Since the amusement industry is extremely small, keeping this kind of information within tight circles or accessible only to interest group members is normal. Despite this problem, I was able to obtain a few pieces of information regarding industry outlook.

Following is an International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions' (IAAPA) chart describing attendance figures since 1990-

| <u>YEAR</u> | <u>ATTENDANCE</u> | <u>REVENUES</u> |
|-------------|-------------------|-----------------|
| 1990        | 253 million       | \$5.7 billion   |
| 1991        | 260 million       | \$6.1 billion   |
| 1992        | 267 million       | \$6.5 billion   |
| 1993        | 275 million       | \$6.8 billion   |
| 1994        | 267 million       | \$7.0 billion   |
| 1995        | 280 million       | \$7.4 billion   |
| 1996        | 290 million       | \$7.9 billion   |
| 1997        | 300 million       | \$8.4 billion   |
| 1998        | 300 million       | \$8.7 billion   |
| 1999        | 309 million       | \$9.1 billion   |
| 2000        | 317 million       | \$9.6 billion   |
| 2001        | 319 million       | \$9.6 billion   |
| 2002        | 324 million       | \$9.9 billion   |
| 2003        | 322 million       | \$10.3 billion  |
| 2004        | 328 million       | \$10.8 billion  |

Sources:

*Amusement Business*; Harrison Price Company; Economics Research Associates; U.S. Census Bureau; International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions

### *Ill 2: Table of attendance since 1990*

While attendance can fluctuate due to economic conditions, weather, changes in consumer travel habits, and a myriad of other factors, one can note a steady increase in attendance since 1990. Just between 2001 and 2004 an attendance jump of 9 million is

noted; impressive considering the hit much of the tourism industry took due to the 9/11 attacks. There seems to be a balancing effect in the industry: While increasing gas prices or economic downturns may affect attendance, it seems to only shift attendance from “destination” parks such as Walt Disney World and Universal Studios’ theme parks to local parks rather than seeing those guests stay at home. Indeed, the major factor in poor attendance mentioned in company annual reports is most often unusually foul weather! Family vacation plans continue to keep amusement parks in the agenda despite other negative factors. In addition, the International Association of Convention and Visitor Bureaus’ 2005 Annual Report states an IAAPA figure that 2004 revenues were expected to rise 6% and increase 4.5% annually for the next ten years. The customer base is there and is eager to visit parks, but Geauga Lake cannot count on the idea that simply being an amusement park equals a being a destination for families. These families must be shown why a visit to Geauga Lake is a valuable addition to their busy summer schedules when so many other options exist.

### ***Cleveland Metro Area Snapshot***

The population of the metropolitan Cleveland area (Ashtabula, Cuyahoga, Geauga, Lake, Lorain, Medina, Portage and Summit counties) is 2.9 million. The median household income in the metro area is \$42,215, slightly above the U.S. median of \$41,994. Population growth was 6.7 between 1999 and 2000. Job and salary growth percentages are below the U.S. average at 12.5% and 46.6% respectively. 21% of the population is between the ages of 5 and 19- a little over 600,000. Job and economic outlooks have been mixed for the area. Tourism reports from the Federal Reserve’s Beige

Book report sluggish growth and disappointing returns over the past year, blamed in part to unseasonably cold temperatures and soaring gas prices. Financial and job outlooks are not particularly cheerful for the Cleveland area, pointing to a need for marketing to stress value for the dollar to area families. Promotional discounts will be especially valuable to families struggling to make vacation plans with high gas prices and tight budgets.

### ***Competition***

There are several theme parks within a three-hour drive of Geauga Lake-

***Cedar Point; Sandusky, Ohio:*** This is Geauga Lake's sister Cedar Fair amusement park. Its major boast is its world-record 16 roller coasters and a resort atmosphere. Emphasis is placed on record-breaking roller coasters. Large new attractions are added to the park almost every year. It also has a large water park- Soak City. Camp Snoopy children's area features many small versions of popular carnival rides. The park is a destination point for families within a large radius of the park; advertising is seen six hours west of the park in Chicago, for example. Families often stay multiple days. It is approximately an hour and a half west of Geauga Lake. Known as the dominant park in the region.

***Paramount's Kings Island; Kings Mills, Ohio:*** Located about two and a half hours south of Geauga Lake, this theme park holds 13 roller coasters and a newly-added water park. It relies on theming to a much greater extent than Cedar Point. Themed and theatrical rides are emphasized over record-breaking rides. Large new installations do not happen as often as at Cedar Point. Its children's area is award winning with many unique children's rides and roller coasters. Kings Island has one of the largest season passholder bases of any amusement park and is heavily visited by locals in Cincinnati and Dayton. Usually considered a one-day visit park or multiple visit destination by passholders.

***Kennywood; West Mifflin, Pennsylvania:*** Located about three hours east of Geauga Lake. This is a local, very traditional amusement park that does not install large new rides often. Focus is placed on keeping an atmosphere and experience remembered by generations and "keeping things the same." Large children's area especially great for the smallest children. The park possesses 6 roller coasters, many of which are older wooden coasters loved for their tradition and memory over record-breaking statistics. Usually considered a one-day visit destination or multiple visit by locals.

None of these parks have shown attendance drops or financial troubles within recent history. Cedar Point and Kings Island will both debut major attractions for the 2005 season; both are extreme thrill rides. Cedar Point and Kings Island are both destination parks to be visited by guests within a large radius, while Kennywood is the

kind of “local” park I believe Geauga Lake will need to become. As for any other “local” parks within the area, Geauga Lake has no competition, signaling a niche that the park can fill.

Museums and zoos can also be considered competition for a local park to a small extent and are worth noting. Within the Cleveland area is the enormously popular Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, the Cleveland Museum of Art, Great Lakes Science Center, Cleveland Museum of Natural History, Cleveland Metroparks Zoo, and the Pro Football Hall of Fame. Many amusement parks work in conjunction with area attractions such as those listed above with combination tickets to the park and another local attraction or offering a discount if one brings proof of admission to the gate of another attraction. This could be another tactic for Geauga Lake to consider and is mentioned further within the Promotions portion of the plan.

### ***Target Market***

For this proposal, the target market for Geauga Lake guests is young families with children under the age of ten. Focus will be on attracting families within a three-hour radius of the park (Toledo/Cleveland/Columbus/Pittsburgh) with a concentration on attracting return visits from families within 45 minutes travel time of the park (Cleveland and its suburbs). These families will have annual single incomes over \$30,000 or double incomes over \$45,000 and will make more than one visit to an amusement park during 2005: one to two major planned visits to large theme parks and one to three visits to local smaller parks. Visiting amusement parks during the summer is a valued family tradition. These families will visit a large theme park as a longer planned family vacation and will

visit Geauga Lake as a day trip or overnight stay. They desire a safe environment for their children with a large children's area and/or many children's attractions available; less focus is placed on large-scale amusement attractions. Their children are active in youth events and sports and will be accessible to Geauga Lake's youth sponsorship. These families located within a 45-minute travel time to the park have pride in Cleveland, Cleveland sports, and the community in which they live.

### ***Product***

Gauga Lake & Wildwater Kingdom is a 690-acre amusement park located in Aurora, Ohio, featuring over 50 rides and attractions ranging from children's rides and live shows to large-scale roller coasters. (The acreage figure includes the large spring-fed lake that divides Geauga Lake and Wildwater Kingdom) As the park returns to its former Geauga Lake name after being purchased from Six Flags Inc., the park focuses on entertaining families with children under the age of ten with its ten roller coasters, twenty-four amusement rides, thirteen children's rides, and eleven water rides. The park has constructed Wildwater Kingdom, a \$24 million water park slated to open in two phases, the first of which occurs during the 2005 season with five attractions. The park also has twenty-nine food service locations and will offer two live shows to guests in 2005.

### ***Price***

Park admission will be offered in two standard price and height levels- Regular (adult) admission for guests over three years of age and 48 inches in shoes priced at \$24.95 and Junior (child) admission for guests over three years of age and under 48

inches in shoes. (Children under two years of age are admitted free) Starlight admission, offered after 5 pm on 10 pm close nights and 4 pm on nights when the park closes before 10 pm, is priced at \$17.95. Early Season Admission, valid May 7, 8, 14, 15, 20, 21, 22, and 27 for those over three years of age and 48 inches in shoes, is \$19.95. As mentioned earlier in the proposal, I do not suggest a change in these pricing strategies set by the park due to changes already taking place for 2005; please refer to the “Pricing” portion of the “Differentiation Issue” segment of this report for more details.

In comparison, Cedar Point’s Regular admission for 2005 is priced at \$44.95; Junior admission is \$24.95.

Group Sales and Season Pass pricing structures and strategies will not be discussed in this proposal.

### ***Promotion***

#### ***General Budget Figure***

Specific details on marketing and advertising expenditures are often hard to come by in the amusement industry, where proprietary information is kept close. The same holds true for Geauga Lake. A typical figure for the average percentage of annual revenues to be spent on marketing and advertising is 10%. Average revenues for the years 2000 to 2003 are reported to have been \$64 million for the park. Using the standard figure, I estimate Geauga Lake’s marketing budget at \$6 million for 2005. This figure may be higher in reality as the park has increased its promotional efforts to compensate for a disappointing 2004, but since I have decided to focus on less-costly methods than traditional advertising media, I have kept the budget conservative.

### ***Theme***

Underlying the promotional strategies will be the “Geauga Lake: Back For Good!” concentration; hand-in-hand with this will be a focus on promoting the park to the public as “Cleveland’s Favorite Family Tradition.” This emphasizes the park’s long history in the Cleveland area and reinforces the idea of Geauga Lake as a long-standing family tradition not to be missed.

### ***Public Relations***

The PR tactics used for Lake Compounce, described earlier in the proposal, were inspiration for my proposal. The goals of the PR function will be focused on creating positive and, most importantly, free publicity for Geauga Lake. This publicity will be focused around the benefits Geauga Lake provides to the community and its youth. For example, media will be invited to view and report on additions and changes made to the park with an emphasis made on those that will greatly benefit the target market. PR representatives will be sent to youth events that Geauga Lake sponsors to interview participants and parents; press releases will be created that describe the park’s pride in contributing to area youth. Promotional photographs of children receiving their “My First Coaster” certificate will be sent to Cleveland newspapers and publications. The PR function is crucial in the success of this plan, as the positive image generated by focusing on Geauga Lake’s devotion to the Cleveland area will draw local families back to the

park and reinforce the park as a wholesome, exciting destination for children and their parents.

### ***Media Channels***

While many amusement parks go straight to the “heavy-hitter” traditional media of television and radio, this proposal focuses less on those channels and more on promotional efforts such as sponsoring and PR. Despite this fact, the popular channels will, of course, still be a focus of the plan. The idea of Geauga Lake as “Cleveland’s Favorite Family Tradition” will be promoted through channels such as these-

**Cleveland television stations:** WEWS, WOIO, WKYC, WBNX (advertisements shown during afternoon programming, news hour, and children’s programming, for example)

**Cleveland newspaper:** *Cleveland Plain Dealer*

**Cleveland/regional magazines:** *Cleveland Magazine, Family Fun, Cleveland/Akron Family Magazine, Home & Away*

**Outdoor advertising:** Showings on both expressways and city streets

The content of the messages promoted through channels such as the examples shown above will concentrate on emphasizing the park’s long history in the Cleveland area along with changes made to the park for the new season and how they will benefit families. Historical images and statements will reintroduce the target to a Geauga Lake that was lost during the Six Flags era and invoke sentimental feelings. Images will show the target market participating in bonding moments: children riding rides with parents,

winning games, and sharing food, for example. Much advertising for amusement parks focuses on the thrills the park has to offer, but for Geauga Lake, the focus is on *memories* and the moments that make them.

A rough creative draft full-page advertisement outlining the types of messages and images I suggest for print advertisements follows in the appendix.

### ***Promotional Discounts/Coupons***

Amusement park discount coupons usually offer deep discounts for a limited redemption period or lesser discounts for a longer redemption period. Geauga Lake's reduction of admission costs points towards a penetration pricing strategy to gain back guests lost over the past five years. Coupons are still a popular promotion even for parks with gate prices well under the prices of the large parks.

Coupons printed on soft drink cans are very popular, but this strategy is widely used by Cedar Point in the Cleveland area via their partnership with Pepsi (it was noticed that a Cedar Point commercial was playing on a radio station broadcast heard while staring at a soft drink can with a Cedar Point coupon at a grocery store less than a mile from Geauga Lake- with not a mention of the park to be seen within the store!).

I offer some alternative distribution methods to promotional coupons. These coupons would feature \$5 off adult and \$3 off child admissions for a limited redemption period or \$3 off adult or \$2 off child admissions for a longer redemption period (such as during the busier summer months)-

*Affixed to pizza boxes at area pizza chains*

*Printed on partners' food products that do not also promote Cedar Point*

*Offered to children completing phases of summer reading club*

*Placement in coupon mailer paks (Valpak, etc)*

*Stand-alone promotional insert in Cleveland newspapers/publications*

*Printable coupons sent via email*

*Stand-alone displays in supermarkets (combined with product partners)*

*Handed out/offered at Geauga Lake-sponsored events*

*Printed in promotional vacation mailers for Cedar Point*

Cedar Point uses many of the tactics first thought of to distribute coupons; distributing Geauga Lake's through different tactics helps them to stand apart from those for Cedar Point

### ***Celebrity Visits***

Many Cleveland sports and entertainment stars are extremely popular. Offering meet-and-greet opportunities for guests to meet stars will bring guests to the park on less-crowded weekdays and will provide human-interest stories and photo opportunities for the PR function. Positive comments made towards the park by the stars can be used in press releases describing the day's events.

### ***Hotel Getaway Packages***

The Geauga Lake Hotel is located just a short drive from the park and is also operated by Cedar Fair. The Hotel offers wonderful promotional opportunities. I suggest a promotion to Cleveland-area residents for families who just need a night away from the house. A Cleveland area family getaway package could offer one night's

accommodations, tickets for all members of the family, scrip for in-park use at shops or food locations, souvenir towels for use at Wildwater Kingdom, and a bedtime visit by a PEANUTS character. It is to be noted that Geauga Lake does already offer hotel packages on its website, but I suggest increasing promotion of the hotel and specific packages to families who want to feel like they are “getting away from it all” without having to drive far. The current packages cater to families coming from longer distances. This would also help fill rooms during low-occupancy periods of the year depending on packages offered.

### ***Radio/TV Broadcasts***

Live television and radio broadcasts often take place from inside amusement parks. Geauga Lake should encourage these broadcasts. PR representatives can provide information for those broadcasting relating to changes made to the park for the 2005 season and can be interviewed regarding the park. Broadcasters often encourage listeners/viewers to “come on out” to their location to enjoy an event or great weather.

### ***Sports Promotions***

Cleveland sports teams are extremely popular and fans are truly fanatic about their teams! Several promotions can be tied into Clevelander sports fervor-

***Team Days:*** Discounts can be offered on specific days to all park guests who wear a certain number of pieces of Cleveland team apparel. For example, on Cleveland Baseball Day, all guests wearing at least two pieces of Indians apparel

(a hat and t-shirt, for example) will receive a discount on at-gate admission prices. Dates could coincide with sports playoff days or major game days. It could also be broadened to Cleveland Sports Day, which would include all Cleveland major league sports.

***Sports Restaurant:*** While not specifically a promotional tactic, I suggest that Geauga Lake examine the feasibility of a sports-themed food location that would offer viewing locations for broadcasted Cleveland sports. Cedar Point renovated an ailing park food location into such a concept and enjoyed a boost in revenues at the facility. With Geauga Lake being so close to the center of Cleveland sports fanaticism, celebrating this area tradition can also be tied to the goal of engaging the community.

### ***Contests***

Many smaller parks offer contests throughout the season to promote interest and attendance. One popular contest at other parks could be incorporated at Geauga Lake—"Name the New Ride." Rather than choose the name of a new ride in-house, the job is given to guests and the winner whose name is selected for the new ride receives free season passes, first-ride privileges, or an in-park party. Cedar Fair has a long history of duplicating names from park to park, making this idea a refreshing break from the status quo. Coloring contests are also popular: Black and white cartoon scenes to be colored are printed in area publications, provided at area retail outlets, or handed out at the park. Winners are selected after entries are mailed to the park and winners will receive passes or tickets. Photograph contests not only generate interest and sentimental emotions for

the park but also provide wonderful human-interest stories. Contests can seek entries portraying children with grandparents; the winner would not only receive a prize but would have the story behind the photo published in the *Plain Dealer*. This also promotes the park as a place where priceless memories are born, which ties into the theme of “Cleveland’s Favorite Family Tradition.”

### ***“My First Coaster” Promotion***

To reinforce the idea of Geauga Lake as a place where family memories are celebrated, the park could introduce the “My First Coaster” program. The first time a child rides a “big person” roller coaster is often an exciting event for not only the youngster but also the entire family. A child who is finally tall enough to ride the park’s large roller coasters can register their name and receive a congratulatory certificate at Guest Relations. A proposed plan is as follows: The child must be measured at Guest Relations before riding and if found to be of the proper height, the child is given a small card which will be given to the ride attendant at the ride queue entrance in exchange for a redemption card after the child rides the coaster. This redemption card can be taken to Guest Relations where it can be exchanged for a congratulatory certificate with the child’s name and the name of the coaster ridden. At the end of the year, the names of all the children who rode their first coasters during the 2005 season will be posted so the children may view their names and be proud of their success! PR could follow several children during the season as they encounter their first coaster and turn the event into a heartwarming human-interest story. This promotion offers endless possibilities for

positive stories and photographs plus builds favorable opinion towards the park as a place that embraces family life and celebration.

### ***Grandparent Days***

Another promotion that ties in with the theme of “Cleveland’s Favorite Family Tradition,” Grandparent Days would celebrate the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren. Grandparents would receive discounted admission to the park when they bring their grandchild to the special event. In-park photographers would offer opportunities for special photographs of grandparents and grandchildren together. Promotional pricing on food service could also be offered to grandparents and their little ones. Once again, many opportunities for human-interest stories and photographs would be generated through this promotion.

### ***School Spirit Days***

This promotional idea ties into Kennywood’s famous “school picnic days” that inspired part of the basis of this proposal. Area schools would be assigned specific days by the park as their own “school picnic” day where discount tickets would be offered to teachers, staff, and students. Banners and signage would welcome students and staff to the park. A picnic lunch package could be offered to the school to provide a universal lunch and gathering time for the students and staff. While this tactic is not unusual, it provides the basis for the beginning of tradition- one of the goals of this marketing proposal. Students will begin to look forward to their yearly school spirit day and establish ties with the park much like those experienced at Kennywood. Staff must make

a concerted effort to sincerely and warmly welcome students and staff to the park to create a sense that Geauga Lake is honored to have them as their guests.

### ***“My Favorite Geauga Lake Tradition” Promotion***

Another promotion inspired by Kennywood, who asks for guests to contribute their favorite Kennywood memories to be used in all manner of promotional material. Since Geauga Lake does have a long history within the Cleveland area but has not celebrated its past as other small parks may do, an effort should be made to seek out favorite memories and photographs from long ago from guests of all ages. Whether it's a grandmother speaking of her date with Grandpa when she was young or a mother of young children remembering when she was small and **her** parents took her to the park, gathering these memories and using them in promotional materials will go a long way towards building sentiment towards the park and reminding guests that the roots of Geauga Lake run deep. With all of the changes the park has gone through within the last decade, guests may have forgotten that the park has been a part of Cleveland tradition for over a hundred years.

### ***Youth Event Sponsorship***

Sponsorship of parks and park attractions by food and drink producers, for example, is extremely common within the amusement industry. Firms like John Deere and Pepsi sponsor Cedar Fair parks. Less common is the park sponsoring events itself, and I believe this will be another key part of restoring favorable opinion of Geauga Lake. Many youth events, such as sports games, student plays and performances, and youth

walks/runs are sponsored by area businesses. By partnering in sponsorship with the event/game coordinators and publicly making a commitment to backing area youth, Geauga Lake will become a part of the community at large. Let's presume the park provides beverages for a youth sports event. PR representatives can attend the event to help set up beverage distribution, talk to parents and children, and hand out promotional coupons to attendees. Often sponsors will be thanked during announcements, with signage, or in printed materials surrounding the event. When these families visit Geauga Lake they will recall the personal way in which the park reached out to their family and be more receptive to the park's promotional messages. These small gestures, relatively inexpensive for the park, show the public that it is reaching out to its target market and participating in the well being of community families rather than being just a business that happens to be in a given community. Fostering such goodwill within the community will reassure jaded consumers that the days of impersonal service and business tactics have ended for Geauga Lake and that the park is an integral part of Cleveland heritage and community.

### ***Combination Tickets***

Cleveland has many other attractions families love to visit. The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, Metroparks Zoo, and the Great Lakes Science Museum may all be a part of a family's summer agenda. A great deal of other parks have started affinity ticketing promotions that offer admission to a number of area attractions along with their own gate for one price- a price much lower than individual admissions to each attraction. Minor league sports events may also be included in the admission choices. With a ticket

purchase, the ticket holder will gain one day's admission to perhaps three out of six or seven choices at a discounted rate. Higher-priced admissions may count as two choices. Not only does the guest save on admission but also finds added utility through being able to use one ticket for many attractions.

Geauga Lake can capitalize on the family-favorite attractions in the Cleveland area by offering this combination ticket. An adult purchase price of, as an example, \$44.95 and \$24.95 for children would gain the guest access to Geauga Lake and two other area attractions. The ticket would be promoted at Geauga Lake, participating attractions, and at ticket outlets where other amusement park tickets may be purchased (please see the Place section for more on this topic). All involved benefit as each site promotes each other through this plan. Spirit and pride in the community is also built as families visit other excellent attractions in the Cleveland area.

### *Place*

Tickets are available, of course, at the park's main gate. Tickets may also be purchased online at the park's website, at many area grocery stores, and through organizations such as AAA. Discounted tickets are available at the front desks of hotels within the vicinity as well. Ticket prices are often discounted at locations other than the park's main gate.

Combination tickets in connection with the affinity marketing plan with area attractions would be available at Geauga Lake's ticket windows, online at a central

website for the promotion, other attractions involved in the promotion, grocery stores,  
and local insurance agencies.



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## **APPENDIX**

### **APPENDIX A: SURVEY PRELIMINARY DESCRIPTION AND OBJECTIVES**

#### **GEAUGA LAKE & WILDWATER KINGDOM SURVEY FOR 2005 GUESTS: PRELIMINARY DESCRIPTION AND OBJECTIVES**

##### **Problem Definition**

Geauga Lake & Wildwater Kingdom in Aurora, Ohio is a seasonal theme park that has undergone a number of management changes over the past decade. The park was originally a site catering to local Cleveland residents; a different customer base than many larger theme parks that draw upon much larger markets. The park's customer base focus became larger when purchased by Premier Parks, Inc. in the mid-1990's, who desired to build attractions that could make the park more of a destination. At the end of the 1990's, the park became a Six Flags park and its focus became building world-class attractions that would draw upon a large base and compete with its closest competitor, Cedar Point in Sandusky, Ohio. This alienated the local base that remained loyal to Cedar Point and among other guest complaints attendance plummeted. The park's purchase by Cedar Fair's parent company, Cedar Fair, L.P. in 2004 brought a management change that desired to turn Geauga Lake back into a smaller family destination as opposed to a major summer vacation trip. New management wishes to understand the dynamics behind its guests' planning and attendance behavior. It is believed that past guest experience and feelings affected guest satisfaction levels.

The purpose of this study is to examine guest behavior in regards to trip planning and reasons behind attendance as well as guest attitudes towards Geauga Lake and if these attitudes affect attendance. Factors to be examined regarding planning and attendance include influences behind guest visit, time spent planning, number of times guest expects to visit a theme park, why guest did or did not visit Wildwater Kingdom, and behaviors and opinions regarding park admission tickets and prices. Factors to be examined regarding guest feelings on the park include sentiment on visitation before, during, and after Six Flags franchising, experience as compared to other Cedar Fair parks, if return to park's original name motivated visitation, and if the park is perceived as a family park. As well, the top three answers that are given to a question regarding the main source of dissatisfaction will help to compile a list of major sources of guest complaints.

The information gathered will help to understand motivating factors behind guest visitation and behaviors surrounding visitation. Guest satisfaction levels will be determined using survey results. A write-in question will allow for the determination of the top three sources of guest dissatisfaction. The survey will also serve to test the hypothesis that previous management affected guest satisfaction levels.

## **Objectives**

Survey objectives must be clearly defined so survey effectiveness measures may be determined. When objectives are clearly defined, one can observe if the survey's questions have gathered the responses one was seeking. Objectives also serve as an organization tool when designing the survey. The objective of this survey is to assess current guest behaviors and feelings regarding trip planning, visitation, and experiences within the park as well as to determine if past guest feelings regarding the park affected satisfaction. Another objective is to determine the top three sources of guest dissatisfaction. The objectives echo the anticipated results of the survey.

### *Primary Objectives*

- 1) Determine if guest satisfaction was lower during visits under park's previous managements and higher under current management
- 2) Determine three main sources of guest dissatisfaction
- 3) Determine guest behavior regarding main visit reasons, time taken to plan visit, length of visit, whether lodging was utilized, admission discount usage, visitation to other theme parks, and future visits to the park

### *Secondary Objectives*

- 4) Determine guest opinion on food service and ride employee conduct
- 5) Determine guest opinion regarding what attractions were liked and disliked
- 6) Determine guest's main dislike about the park
- 7)

## **Information Needs**

Following are the informational needs requested of the guest. Predetermining informational needs helps to determine questions to be asked during the design of the study. Each question possesses a different informational need determined by the information sought and the reasons for seeking the information. Answers given to questions designed using these information needs will help to test our hypothesis and meet the objectives of the survey.

- Identify if visit was first visit for guest
- Identify influences behind guest visit
- Identify if guest has visited park before
- Identify if guest visited park before Six Flags purchase
- Identify if first guest visit was after Six Flags purchase
- Identify number of times guest expects to visit a theme park in 2005
- Identify if guest visit was planned or spontaneous
- Identify if guest visited Wildwater Kingdom
- Identify why guest visited Wildwater Kingdom (if applicable)
- Identify why guest did not visit Wildwater Kingdom (if applicable)

Identify other theme parks visited by guest within a six-hour radius of park  
 Identify what attractions/features guest would desire to be added  
 Identify which attractions/features guest would desire to be removed  
 Identify if guest used discounts on park admission  
 Identify where guest obtained discount  
 Identify guest opinions on adult park admission prices  
 Identify amounts guest would change adult admission price by (if applicable)  
 Identify guest opinions on junior park admission prices  
 Identify amounts guest would change junior admission price by (if applicable)  
 Identify if guest stayed overnight in the local vicinity before or after park visit  
 Identify guest's main dislike of park  
 Identify if guest expects to return to park during the 2005 season  
 Identify if guests expects to return to park after the 2005 season  
 Identify guest opinion on quality of customer service at food service establishments  
 Identify guest opinion on ride attendant conduct  
 Identify if guest felt visiting the park prior to its Six Flags franchising was a satisfactory experience (if applicable)  
 Identify if guest felt visiting the park while it was a Six Flags was a satisfactory experience (if applicable)  
 Identify if guest felt visiting the park under current management was a satisfactory experience  
 Identify if guest felt experience at Geauga Lake was satisfactory as compared to other Cedar Fair parks (if applicable)  
 Identify if guest past experience at Geauga Lake lead to hesitance to revisit (if applicable)  
 Identify if park's new management and return to original name influenced park visitation  
 Identify if guest feels Geauga Lake is a local family amusement park as opposed to a major theme park destination  
 Identify guest age(s)  
 Identify guest family size  
 Identify guest annual salary  
 Identify guest Zip code

### **Methodology**

The population being sampled is guests ages 18 and over who visited Geauga Lake during the 2005 season. A return of at least 1,000 surveys is desired. Addresses will be gathered via two methods-

- 1) Opt-in spaces will be provided on all promotional discount coupons available to guests during the 2005 season. If a guest chooses to opt in, he or she will provide their address (minus name to keep survey anonymous) to which the survey will be mailed. A postage-paid envelope will be enclosed with the survey to encourage response

- 2) To prevent bias toward those who used promotional discounts, the surveys will also be distributed via intercept method at the park's exit during the last two hours of park operation. Surveys will be enclosed in a sealed envelope along with a postage-paid envelope to encourage response

## APPENDIX B: SURVEY FOR 2005 GEAUGA LAKE GUESTS



**Geauga Lake & Wildwater Kingdom is committed to providing the best in family entertainment. This goal can only be reached with the assistance of people like you!** Please take a few moments of your time to complete this survey regarding your visit to Geauga Lake. Please return the survey using the postage-paid envelope enclosed. All surveys are completely anonymous and the information given is for in-park use only.

Upon processing of your survey, your family will be sent a coupon good for \$5 off up to six all-day admissions to Geauga Lake or \$10 off up to six all-day admissions to Cedar Point (Sandusky, Ohio). Unlike many other discounted admission promotions, this coupon will be valid for the **entire** 2005 and 2006 operating seasons- *no blackout dates!*

**Thank you for your time and thoughts! Your opinions will help to create an incredible experience for your family for years to come!**

1) Was this your first visit to Geauga Lake?

Yes

No

2) If it was not your first visit, did you visit the park prior to it becoming a Six Flags theme park in the year 2000?

Yes

No

Not applicable

3) If it was not your first visit, was your first visit to Geauga Lake after it became a Six Flags theme park in 2000?

Yes

No

Not applicable

4) What was your main reason for visiting Geauga Lake?

- Family/personal tradition (visit every or almost every summer)
- Received discounted/complimentary tickets
- Roller coaster enthusiast(s)
- Have never visited Geauga Lake and were curious
- Curious about changes made to park since it returned to Geauga Lake name
- Curious about changes made for the 2005 season
- Wanted to visit Wildwater Kingdom
- Visiting Cleveland area for other reason than specifically visiting Geauga Lake
- Children asked to visit
- Other

5) Did you visit Wildwater Kingdom during your visit?

- Yes
- No

6) If you *did* visit Wildwater Kingdom, what is the **main reason** why you did so?

- Not applicable
- Because Wildwater Kingdom is included with park admission
- Curious to experience new water park
- Always visit water attractions while at Geauga Lake
- Spouse/significant other and/or yourself enjoy water parks
- Children enjoy water parks
- Attempting to cool off from hot day
- Wanted to experience high-thrill water attractions
- Wanted to experience relaxing water attractions
- Wanted to sunbathe
- Other

7) If you *did not* visit Wildwater Kingdom, what is the **main reason** why you did so?

- Not applicable
- Bad weather
- Children do not enjoy water parks
- Spouse/significant other and/or yourself do not enjoy water parks
- Came to Geauga Lake specifically for roller coasters and/or other non-water park attractions
- Did not realize it was included in park admission
- Not prepared with proper bathing apparel
- Other

8) How many days did you spend at Geauga Lake during your visit?

- One
- Two
- Three
- Four or more

9) How was your visit planned?

- Spontaneous decision (no planning)
- Planned up to one week in advance
- Planned one to two weeks in advance
- Planned three to four weeks in advance
- Planned five to six weeks in advance
- Planned seven to eight weeks in advance
- Planned nine to ten weeks in advance
- Planned eleven to twelve weeks in advance
- Planned more than three months in advance

10) Did you stay overnight at lodging in the local vicinity of Geauga Lake before or after your visit specifically due to your visit to the park?

- Yes
- No

11) What is your opinion on the price you paid for each **adult** admission to Geauga Lake?

- Just right
- Too expensive
- Too inexpensive
- Not sure
- No opinion

12) If you believe **adult** admission price to Geauga Lake should be changed, by what amount?

- Not applicable
- Decreased by under five dollars
- Decreased by five to ten dollars
- Decreased by more than ten dollars
- Increased by under five dollars
- Increased by five to ten dollars
- Increased by more than ten dollars
- Not sure

13) What is your opinion on the price you paid for each **junior** admission to Geauga Lake?

- Just right
- Too expensive
- Too inexpensive
- Not sure
- No opinion

14) If you believe **junior** admission price to Geauga Lake should be changed, by what amount?

- Not applicable
- Decreased by under five dollars
- Decreased by five to ten dollars
- Decreased by more than ten dollars
- Increased by under five dollars
- Increased by five to ten dollars
- Increased by more than ten dollars
- Not sure

15) Did you use a promotional discount on your admission(s) to the park?

- Yes
- No

16) If you did use a promotional discount, from where did you obtain the discount?

---

17) What other theme parks listed have you visited or plan to visit this summer?

- Cedar Point
- Paramount's Kings Island
- Kennywood
- Conneaut Lake Park
- Idlewild Park
- Six Flags Kentucky Kingdom
- Hersheypark
- None

18) Will you visit Geauga Lake again during the 2005 season?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

19) Do you expect to visit Geauga Lake again next year?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

**The following questions are regarding your feelings on various factors behind your visit and your experience while visiting**

20) Please circle your opinion of the quality of customer service you experienced during your visit while patronizing food service establishments:

Poor   Fair   Average   Good   Excellent   Not applicable

21) Please circle your opinion of ride attendant conduct you witnessed/experienced during your visit:

Poor Fair Average Good Excellent Not applicable

22) What rides and/or attractions would you remove from Geauga Lake if given the choice?

---

23) What rides and/or attractions would you add to Geauga Lake if given the choice?

---

24) If you have a major dislike at Geauga Lake, what would that be?

---

*Please circle the answer that best describes your answer to the following statements:*

25) I visited the park before it became Six Flags Ohio/Worlds of Adventure and found the experience satisfactory

Strongly Somewhat Neither agree Somewhat Strongly Not  
Agree agree or disagree disagree disagree applicable

26) I visited the park while it was Six Flags Ohio/Worlds of Adventure and found the experience satisfactory

Strongly Somewhat Neither agree Somewhat Strongly Not  
Agree agree or disagree disagree disagree applicable

27) My visit to the park this year was satisfactory

Strongly Somewhat Neither agree Somewhat Strongly No  
Agree agree or disagree disagree disagree opinion

28) My experience at Geauga Lake was satisfactory in comparison to my experiences at other Cedar Fair parks (Cedar Point, Dorney Park, Valleyfair, Worlds of Fun, Knott's Berry Farm, Michigan's Adventure)

Strongly Somewhat Neither agree Somewhat Strongly Not  
Agree agree or disagree disagree disagree applicable

29) The park's return to its original name and new management affected my decision to visit Geauga Lake

Strongly Somewhat Neither agree Somewhat Strongly No  
Agree agree or disagree disagree disagree opinion

30) I feel that Geauga Lake is a local family amusement park as compared to a large theme park destination like Cedar Point or Paramount's Kings Island

Strongly Somewhat Neither agree Somewhat Strongly No  
Agree agree or disagree disagree disagree opinion

31) What is your Zip code? \_\_\_\_\_

32) What is your income range?

- Up to \$14,999
- \$15,000 to 29,999
- \$30,000 to 44,999
- \$45,000 to 59,999
- \$60,000 to 74,999
- \$75,000 to 89,999
- \$90,000 to 104,999
- \$105,000 to \$119,000
- \$120,000 and above

33) Did you have children with you during your visit?

- Yes
- No

34) If you did have children with you during your visit, how many individuals under 18 were in your party?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7 or more

35) What were the years of age of the children?

*Please fill in with number of children within each age group*

- Under 1-3
- 4-6
- 7-9
- 10-12
- 13-15
- 16-18

36) What is **your** age?

18-21

22-25

26-29

30-33

34-37

38-41

42-45

46-49

50 and above

Decline to answer

**Thank you for your time and opinions!**

SURV (X)

