TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR GAME OPERATIONS

Get Immediate Revenue Increases

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Bowling proprietors are a unique and hardworking breed. We admire their dedication to their businesses and the long hours they put in. They have followed tradition and either take on the dual roles of owner and general manager or delegate the operations of the bowling center to a general manager. This article is dedicated to bowling center owners and general managers.

Taking charge of your games operations applies both to centers that own their games and to those that use a revenue-share operator. In either case, the owner and general manager need to "oversee" and take the lead in establishing a "culture" among the entire staff of caring about game operation and understanding how this one sector can help improve the entire center's revenue picture.

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This caring culture needs to be taught and instilled in managers, assistant managers, front desk staff, game technicians, floor staff, porters, redemption prize center staff, cleaning crew, party hosts and even the group sales and marketing personnel.

Basic Problems

Some of the most common operating deficiencies I encounter over and over are the main reasons why game revenues in most bowling centers are well below their potential. The root causes are due to a lack of having specific job descriptions with individual responsibilities, lack of each staff member understanding the big picture of their job and how it relates to center revenue, lack of communication between staff, lack of training and cross training, lack of weekly evaluation of revenue data, and lack of follow through and oversight. In other words, the right hand does not know what the left hand is doing, and nothing gets done because no one is responsible, and it is easy to just blame others.

The games are noisy, and customers are always complaining about them not working. The game technician is in charge. My job is the front desk (or the redemption prize center), so why are the customers complaining to me?

Tickets, tokens, keys or prizes are left out in the open (even behind the front desk) or stored in a locked room that multiple staff have access to. This is just the opposite of instilling a culture that believes that tickets, tokens and prizes are the same as cash and must be locked up and inventoried to close the loop on theft. (Note: To avoid cash theft, only a limited number of staff should have keys to the bill changers — perhaps only the GM and game technician.)

The person responsible for repairing and maintaining the games (game technician) is often also in charge of collecting the games, taking meter readings, and making sure that each game is adjusted whenever its ticket payout percentage or win percentage is out of range. The price/play is determined by the game technician. Parts to repair the games are ordered by the game technician. He does not know the cost of a part, because he never sees any of the invoices — someone else pays the invoices. The game tech wants to get rid of any of the games that require a lot of maintenance, even if these games generate great revenues. One owner traded in his new Wizard of Oz (the #1 earning game in the industry) because the technician and front desk complained that it was too hard to keep track of the special cards.

Another person is responsible for ordering the prizes for the redemption prize center and sometimes for the cranes and merchandise dispensing games. This person determines the prize points (amount of tickets or points required to redeem each prize). They do not understand or know what the ticket value is. They follow no specific formula. The most creative I have ever come across was to base the number of points on the size of the prize and not what it cost. A hula-hoop had the largest point total, because it was the biggest prize.

Another person (usually the GM) schedules the staff required to operate the redemption prize center and any floor staff needed to help out in the game space to unjam tickets and tokens, remove stuck bills in the bill changers, unjam tickets in the ticket eaters and remove shredded tickets, load tickets, remove bills and add tokens to bill changers, write down out-of-order games, keep the game space clean, and teach customers how to play the games. In many cases these people cause more problems, because they are not trained properly, or if at all. Another person enters the game data into a computer spreadsheet, but does not know what most of this information means. Their job is just to enter the data.

The GM and owner review the game data whenever they have a chance, and in reality only focus on how much each game is earning or how many dollars they see. Neither wants to admit to the other that they do not understand what their ticket value is or even their token value or what payout percentage actually means. Many of the meter readings have errors or are the same from week to week, and the reports are not very useful.

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After awhile, no one pays much attention to them. The game technician gets no feedback and soon even he does not pay any attention to the meter and collection data he submits. If there is a debit card system, the reports are usually accurate but the ticket values are usually wrong.

Another person does the marketing and knows enough to include some game tokens in birthday party packages, but does not include game tokens in any other center promotions. Sometimes they include tickets for the birthday party child, but they have no understanding of what a ticket is worth.

The GM needs to make sure that all staff are trained in how to properly load tickets, unjam tickets and tokens. This training should be done by the game technician who will gladly want to train the staff, because it means less problems for him and less game down time.

The owner or GM go to Bowl Expo, or a game distributor open house, or purchase new games based on what they "hear" from others. In some cases, the game technician has input or makes the decision. No one takes the time to do the research to see where any new game ranks. (The Redemption & FEC Report is the only accurate and unbiased game ranking source).

Refunds are given at the front desk or redemption prize center when a customer complains about having lost money in a game. A staff person places an out of order sign on that game or unplugs it and does not report it and write it down on the Games Down Log along with what complaint was. The staff person does not play the game and determine exactly what is wrong with the game. The game technician comes in on some future day and sees the out of order sign, tries the game, it works perfectly, and he rips off the out of order sign.

If any of the above situations are present in your game operation, it is time to take charge and eliminate them. A change in culture is initiated and driven from the top. The only way it happens is for the owners and GM to first learn about basic game operations. One day's education can be worth a million dollars over several years.

A full time or part time game technician is not "wired" to enter and track meter readings and game programming on his/her own without weekly supervision. Yes, a good game technician gets his own reward by fixing technical problems and keeping the games operating. He knows that having games out of order makes him look bad. A good GM will spend about 20 minutes each week going over the game reports by himself and together with the "team", noting which games are performing well and what adjustments need to be made to maximize revenues. When the game tech knows that both the GM and owner are reviewing these reports, he will make sure that all of the meters make sense and take ownership in the process. The GM can then teach all of the other staff

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people what is important and how their job responsibilities all tie together.

For example, the person who purchases the prizes needs to understand why there needs to be a specific ticket point formula so a precise ticket value can be established that is used to convert tickets to dollars. Each week, the inventory value is reduced by the total points redeemed multiplied by the ticket value. The Redeemed percentage equals this value divided by the redemption game gross and needs to be close to 25 percent. This formula cannot be changed, or it creates garbage numbers in the computer system and makes it impossible to properly program each game's ticket payout pecentage.

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The staff will understand that every token, ticket and prize must be accounted for. All of the tickets redeemed each week will be compared to all of the tickets won from all of the games and also compared to how many tickets were put into the ticket eaters. We will know how many outstanding tickets there are and how many of those were redeemed each week. We will track how many tokens were refunded, how many tokens the bill changers sold, how many tokens were sold over the counter, and how many tokens were included in birthday party and other discount value packages,

Those who do the marketing will know how much a discount token is worth and understand what the true cost of sales is. They will learn the value of including tokens in setting up additional high perceived value discount packages to drive business. They will understand that tokens and tickets (or unit credits and e-points for a debit card system) should be the central hub of all of their marketing and promotional packages.

A new team culture will start to grow and flourish where all of the key staff people understand how important the games are to the center's operation and marketing programs. Soon, there will be very few out of order games, the staff will become enthusiastic and try their best to do quick fixes and keep the games operating, the games and game space will become cleaner, the redemption prize center will look full, clean and appealing, the games reports will become a useful tool, parts costs will be reduced, and the staff, GM and owners will be paying attention to every aspect of the games operation. And finally, game revenue will naturally increase, and this will be the catalyst for increasing repeat visitor frequency, which will directly increase all other revenue categories within the bowling center.

This is what happens when you take charge of your games operation!

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