



Proprietor Relations

Before being able to understand how an association can develop and maintain good working relationships with proprietors (used in a generic sense throughout this section to include proprietors or center management), an association must first understand while associations and centers are both integral parts of the bowling industry, there is an inherent difference between the two:

- **A center is a business.** As part of the bowling industry, proprietors have a genuine interest in the growth and success of the sport. However, as in any industry, maintaining a profitable business is an important concern for the proprietor.
- **Associations are service organizations.** An association exists to uphold the integrity of the sport, protect the future of the sport, and enhance the bowling experience. While financial solvency is necessary for all organizations, an association does not exist solely for financial gain.

Does this philosophical difference mean that an association and center cannot co-exist? By no means! Many components of operating a successful business coincide with an association's purpose and mission. Despite their differences, associations and centers benefit a great deal because of one another.

Proprietor Support is at the Center of Proprietor Relations

There exists no greater cornerstone for building a strong working relationship than if both parties realize each other's value in the relationship. From the association's perspective, the value of the center is clearly definable – the center provides a venue for the sport, along with other entertainment needs.

From the proprietor's perspective, however, the value of the association may be a bit harder to define. This is evident in the fact that some proprietors do not fully understand the value of an association. If, as a service organization, the association can be successful in enhancing the proprietor's business, the proprietor will acutely recognize an association's value to his/her business. The greater the association buys into the idea of service, the greater the benefits it may derive from the relationship.

Providing Proprietor Support

Before implementing any support efforts, it is vital that the association communicate with the proprietor. Moreover, the association, must realize that they are guests in the proprietor's place of business. If the proprietor desires the association take on a limited role in his/her center, the association must respect the proprietor's request.

Assuming the proprietor is receptive to the support, the association should take the initiative in cultivating the relationship with the proprietor. In doing so, the association should consider the following:

- Ask the proprietor how the association can provide support for his/her business. Including the proprietor in any decision that impacts his/her business is vitally important in developing a level of trust. As you work together, the association should be prepared with a few ideas of its own on how it may provide support. Keep the following in mind as a plan is developed:
 - Low average bowlers are more likely to waiver in their commitment to the sport than high average bowlers. As a result, this group is more likely to stop supporting a proprietor's business and/or renewing membership. Most bowlers fall into this category. Any plan to increase the business of the proprietor should pay special attention to retaining the low average bowler. An emphasis on personal contact and coaching clinics geared toward this group are options to consider.
 - A successful plan will focus attention on non-association members as well as members. Many centers generate a significant portion of their business from non-members, some of which frequent a center only a few times a year. If the association can play a role in encouraging these individuals to visit a center even once or twice more a year, the



proprietor's business will benefit, as will the chances of these bowlers becoming members of the association in the future.

- Ask the proprietor if they have any open time slots during the week and consider organizing a short season league. This helps both the association and center to grow membership and revenue. Something to consider with your short season league is what demographic the proprietor is trying to attract. This could help you decide the type of short season league to initiate.
- Ask yourself how an association endeavor affects the proprietor and make decisions that have a mutual benefit. For example, an association's annual championship tournament is an event that should benefit both the association and proprietor. Ask the proprietor what kind of arrangement would best impact his/her business. Consider the following as the tournament schedule is negotiated and planned:
 - Be flexible. If the association would like to spread the tournament out over several weekends, be prepared to take up fewer lanes so the proprietor can serve open play customers while also generating business from the tournament. Keep in mind that not only will the association benefit, but non-members will have an opportunity to observe one of the greatest benefits of membership, and perhaps develop an interest in participating.
 - Be considerate if the use of an entire center is desired. Should the request be to reserve an entire center for specific dates, the association should be certain that it can fill the center to capacity each day. If the center is not filled on a specific day or dates, the use of the center would not be maximized, thus negatively affecting the proprietor's business.

Continual Process

Contributing to the business of a proprietor is the foundation from which proprietor relations are built, as it establishes the value the association provides to the center. As in any relationship, however, a foundation alone is not enough. The relationship must continuously grow if an association wishes to experience great proprietor relations. The association can actively grow its relationship with proprietors by doing the following:

- **Try to learn about the business of bowling.** If an association is going to improve relations with proprietors, the association should learn as much as possible about the proprietor's business. In addition, the proprietor should know the association has an interest in learning to view the sport from his/her perspective. Inviting a proprietor to a meeting to explain the risks and costs of operating a center may be one way to help accomplish this. The average bowler has no idea about the costs it takes to operate a bowling center. Contrary to popular belief, bowling proprietors are not "printing money"!
- **Include the proprietor in association functions**, especially the fun events such as a golf outing or banquet. Understand the association cannot operate without the proprietors – realizing their value and including them in functions is one way to say thanks.
- **Treat all proprietors fairly**. Inevitably, there will be some proprietors an association works with better than others or has more to offer an association (i.e., more lane beds, newer facility, etc.). Regardless, each provides an opportunity for members to experience the value of bowling in certified competition and deserve to be treated fairly.
- **Maintain communication with the proprietor and an active presence in the center**. Making these two concepts a priority demonstrates to the proprietor his/her center, and the bowlers therein, are valued by the association. Do not overlook the value communicating and a physical presence can have – how quick the association returns a phone call or responds to a letter can leave a lasting impression of the association, positive or negative, in the mind of the proprietor.