

TOP 10 TIPS

FOR OPERATING AN FEC

The Skinny

This publication, which was built from our ever-growing Tip of the Week series, reviews the top 10 tips for operating entertainment facilities.

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TIP #1

Hire Shining Stars

At most entertainment facilities, the majority of employees are teenagers. This makes sense because they're cheap labor, they're typically not in school when you're open, and they tend to be easy to mold into the type of worker that you need. But which kids should you actually hire? Who is easiest to mold? Who would be best suited to carry out the goals of your entertainment facility?

The best thing to do is to seek out and hire shining stars. By this, we mean look at kids in show choir, kids who play sports, and kids in bands. Why? Because they are comfortable in the spotlight. In fact, some of them crave it.

Your facility is entertainment; it's a show. When employees are on the clock, they are "on stage". Nobody understands this better than Disney - and it's always good to take a page from their book. Kids that engage in sports or choir know how to act in front of large groups of people, and they are comfortable in their own skin. They are able to pick up on training much faster and "perform" in front of your guests. Would you want to spend a lot more time and money trying to train kids that don't know how to speak in front of a group? Or kids that have stage fright? Or kids who don't have experience balancing school and extra-curricular activities like sports (or work)? The short answer; probably not.

Obviously, you won't be able to hire exclusively from the drama departments at the local schools, but it's at least a great place to start. And once you train one shining star, they can be a model and example for other employees that you hire in the future.

TIP #2

Cross-Train Your Employees

Sometimes, operators will only want to train an employee in one specific area of their facility - for example a cafe, a single attraction, the front counter, etc. Operators will do this because the training process is completed much faster, and the employee can become an expert in that single area. However, this can ultimately lead to a lot of issues with staffing and customer service.

As an example, let's say that you run into a pinch because an employee(s) calls in sick. Or maybe a lot of your employees are unavailable to work because of a big function like prom or spring break. If each employee is only trained in one or two positions, then certain areas of the facility will be understaffed because you only have a finite number of employees that can work those areas. In this case, an understaffed area, such as the front counter, will provide a sub-par customer service experience because your employees don't have enough help.

While managers can step in and assist as necessary, this shouldn't be the manager's primary responsibility.

These problems can be avoided if you cross-train your employees. Every employee should be able to work every position within the facility, which makes it easy to move people around and fill the gaps. This can also be beneficial when certain areas of your facility become busy. For example, if the cafe gets slammed with a lot of guests ordering food, you can temporarily pull someone from a slower attraction/area to help out.

The up-front training will take more time, but in the end, everyone (including your guests) will benefit from employees that can work in multiple capacities.

Tip #3

Empower Your Employees

Do you empower your employees? Do you trust your employees to resolve situations without requiring the help of a manager? If the answer to either question is no, you are missing out on a huge opportunity to maximize customer service and employee engagement.

Imagine yourself in a situation where you are the customer. You're at a business establishment and an issue comes up. Have you ever experienced an employee couldn't help you because they did not have the authority to do so? Maybe they needed to get a manager. And maybe the manager was already occupied with another customer, leaving you to wait even longer. How did that make you feel? Your service experience was interrupted or ended simply because this employee couldn't take care of the issue themselves. Many times, you probably thought to yourself, "Why can't this employee just solve this for me?" You're upset because the employee can't help you. The employee is upset because they feel trapped and unable to resolve the issue. It's a lose-lose scenario.

What's the solution? As part of your training, empower your employees. Provide them with the resources to resolve situations, as well as the boundaries they should work within. The employees will take more ownership in their work, and your customers will appreciate the service a whole lot more.

Does this idea make you nervous? Try it, and your employees might surprise you.

Tip #4

Motivating Without Money*

You don't have to spend much at all to show your employees that they are valued and appreciated, but it will benefit you beyond measure:

- **Have a Morning Huddle** – Take five minutes at the start of each day to congratulate the team, give birthday or other meaningful event wishes, and communicate critical information about the day ahead.
- **Bid a Fond Farewell** – Take five minutes at the end of each day to thank each staffer for creating memories, and making guests feel special. Let your staff members know that you could not do it without them.
- **Offer Food for Thought** – Reward your staff with low-cost food items. For example, a simple box of donuts or bagels really helps start the day off right. Pizza “on the boss” is always appreciated. For those bosses really on a budget, even candy “kisses” will bring a smile to your team.
- **Take Note** – Take the time to prepare a handwritten note to a team member for a job well done. Go one step further and send a note to a team member's parent. (I received a note from my daughter's boss. Wow, that made an impression!)
- **Be Picture Perfect** – Post a board with pictures of staff members “caught in the act” of having fun, smiling and making guests feel special. Encourage the team to take pictures of each other and post them. Have a contest for the photo of the week.
- **Follow Mom's Golden Rules** – Treat your employees with respect just as you would want to be treated. Say, “please” and “thank you” for their efforts. Be specific when you praise and give examples of what staff members did well. Remember the most “golden” rule of all: “Compliment in public, correct in private.”
- **Be Flexible** – Do your best, within reason, to accommodate a team member's request for time off.
- **Get with the Program** – Create your own rewards program and award certificates to deserving staff members as often as possible. Design a service pin or other low-cost award that staff members can wear proudly to acknowledge their achievements.
- **Get Personal** – “Know thy staff members” and tailor small rewards to their individual tastes, i.e. a flower in someone's favorite color, or life-savers® instead of chocolates. Knowing people's favorite things makes them feel special.
- **Get Creative** – Allow your team to select cool, fun titles that describe their strengths on the job, i.e. food critic, digital director, prize patrol, etc. Give them business cards with their unique titles. (Send an email to sheryl@sherylgolf.com for a complete list of ideas.)
- **Give 'em a Break** – Walk the facility frequently and cover for a staff member, giving them an extra break. This makes your staff member feel valued and gives you a chance to get in touch with the front line. Knowledge is profit!

**This tip is provided by Sheryl Bindelglass of [SherylGolf](http://SherylGolf.com).*

TIP #5

Practice What You Preach

If you're like most entertainment centers, you probably have an event package available for companies to do team building at your facility. These packages are great revenue builders, and they help drive traffic to your site during the week when you would otherwise be slow, or even closed. You probably have flyers, website pages, and even verbal pitches geared toward getting new corporate business, detailing how team building is an essential part of a company's success. But do you practice what you preach?

There are so many centers that preach team building to potential customers, but they don't actually provide team building for their own staff. Team building and group outings can have an enormous impact on staff chemistry. You want your staff to care about your business, so let them know you care about them. Organize staff events or dinners once a month (or even once a quarter). If the budget is tight, you can even host events at your own facility. Use a weekday night that would otherwise be slow, and close the site for a staff-only potluck dinner. Let your employees socialize and play games for free.

Heck, even invite their immediate family to the event. Once you show Timmy's mother that you care about him as an employee, she'll make sure he never sleeps through a Saturday morning shift again!

These group events for your staff can be as simple or as intricate as you'd like, as long as you make them happen. Your employees will pay you back with gratitude and a whole lot of hard work.

Tip #6

The Illusion of Perfection

Birthday parties are very important events to both parents and the children celebrating the birthdays. The parents want everything to go well (even perfect) because they are paying good money to have their party at your entertainment facility - and a birthday only comes around once a year. But what happens when something goes wrong? Well, it's time to create the illusion of perfection.

What does this mean? Essentially, train your staff to put on a "face" of perfection so that guests think all is well, even if something is amiss. For example, a common issue that many facilities have to deal with is late pizza arrival. Whether you make the pizza in house, or you're waiting for delivery from a local vendor, just about every operator has run into this problem. But instead of telling the parent that you're behind and apologizing (which can create unnecessary tension), have your staff improvise. In this particular situation, your employees can play games when the kids arrive to the party room to eat pizza. Play heads-up seven up, or any other game where all of the kids participate. The parents simply think

this is part of the experience, and the kids are having fun so they don't question it - the guests are none the wiser. Once the pizza does arrive to the table, stop playing games and serve as you normally would.

In this situation, nobody knew that the pizza was running behind because you provided the illusion of perfection. While this won't work for every issue, this technique can be a helpful way to "hide" any idiosyncrasies that may occur during an event.

Tip #7

Increase Birthday Smiles

Birthday parties are the single highest source of revenue for most family entertainment centers. Therefore, a lot focus is put toward creating a great birthday party experience for everyone - parents and children included. So how can you improve that experience and "increase birthday smiles" at your facility? When in doubt, take a page out of Disney's book.

If you've ever been to a Disney resort, you see thousands of guests wearing celebration buttons. There are buttons for any kind of celebration - birthdays, anniversaries, honeymoons, family reunions, etc. Disney allows any guest to pick up these buttons for free, and guests wear them to let everyone in the park know why they are celebrating. And do you know what happens if you wear a birthday button at Disney? Just about every cast member that you come across will enthusiastically say "Happy Birthday!" As if spending a birthday at a Disney resort wasn't enough, little Johnny's face lights up every time he hears a cast member say those magical words.

Any facility can utilize this same technique in their own center. Give the birthday child a button, a sticker, a t-shirt, or any other birthday swag. Then train your staff to enthusiastically say "Happy Birthday" every time they see the child. Maybe give the kid a high-five. Let your employees improvise however they'd like, as the details aren't really important. The smile on little Johnny's or little Susie's face is what's important.

That smile is what we're looking for. Kids love being recognized on their special day, and perhaps more importantly, the parents love it too. This experience is just added value that justifies spending the money to have the party at your facility. And that smile is what the parents will remember when they book future birthday parties.

Tip #8

Increase Arcade Revenue*

- Open up your arcade layout. When people see their kids, friends, and family, they stay longer because they feel more comfortable.
- Position your video-style games up front. Once players start winning tickets, they get on a mission and rarely return to play video-style games.
- Merchandisers should be in high traffic areas, even if it is not in the game room. Make sure you have a clear line of sight to a staffed area or an area with a clearly marked surveillance.

**This tip is provided by Dave Sexton*

Tip #9

The Redemption Counter is Crucial

The majority of entertainment facilities have a redemption counter where kids can exchange tickets for "junk." And just about everybody who has worked in this industry understands how maddening it can be to work a redemption counter. Little Timmy has 91 tickets, but he can't decide what he wants. For him, it's clearly the most important decision of his life. The employee just wants him to pick something and move on. The parent just wants him to pick something so they can go home. This process is made more difficult when you have 20-30 kids at the counter simultaneously. Often times, operators have the wrong mindset about running and staffing the redemption counter.

Operators and managers tend to view the redemption counter as a simple transaction: kids give you tickets, then you give them junk. On the surface, this seems accurate. Therefore, managers tend to schedule their less talented C-level employees to work the counter. It's easy for them to say "this is the worst employee scheduled for the day, so just put them on redemption." However, this is a mistake. While the transaction of tickets for junk is a simple process, there are more important implications that make the redemption counter crucial for future business.

The redemption counter is generally the last place that a guest will visit before they leave. The kids have used the last of their arcade money, gathered their tickets, and they are ready to spend their loot. Since the redemption counter is the last place both kids and parents will see, it's crucial to leave them with a positive impression. Regardless of how much fun the kids and parents had at your facility, if the redemption counter is a nightmare - long lines and unhappy kids - then that's what they'll remember when they go home. And that's what they'll remember when they think about coming back in the future....a nightmare is not the lasting impression you want to leave.

So we challenge operators to put your A-level employees on the counter. Encourage them to play with the junk and toys in an effort to get kids excited about making a decision. Give your

employees the latitude to fudge the numbers when necessary. If Timmy only has 91 tickets and wants a really cool toy for 100 tickets, let them have it. The value of this junk is low enough that 9 tickets won't make a difference to the business. But it will make a difference in the eyes of the parents. They see that your employee went the extra mile to make their kid happy, and that is the lasting impression the parent will take home. And that lasting impression will encourage them to come back and spend more money at your facility in the future.

Tip #10

Your Business Is Fun!

The entertainment business is fun. It's so easy to take this fact for granted during the day-in, day-out grind of operations. Obviously, running your own business isn't easy. But that doesn't change the simple fact that your business is fun!

Take every opportunity you can to express this to your employees and your guests. Provide your employees the latitude to have fun and personalize some of the more monotonous tasks. For example, if you have a laser tag attraction, let your employees personalize the brief. Simply memorizing a script and repeating it 40 times a day can be excruciatingly boring. So let your employees have fun with it. At the laser tag center I managed, our employees would say things like "Your packs will light up like Christmas trees," and "Make sure your phaser cord is in the front - you don't want to have a tail!" As long as they still provide the important rules and safety regulations, you won't have to worry from a liability standpoint - and the employees will enjoy their work much more.

If you have a redemption counter, encourage your employees play with the toys and junk while working the counter. When little Timmy comes up and doesn't know what he wants to buy with his tickets (the most important decision of his life!), the employee can make this process much easier by playing with the prizes. Throw a splat tomato on the glass right in front of Timmy, and he'll see how cool that can be.

The Happy Birthday song can be very boring, so again, have fun with it! At our laser tag center, we had a quite a few employees that were in show choir, and they loved singing. They would do a harmonizing rendition of Happy Birthday, while using the party table to make a drum beat. You wouldn't believe the amazing reaction from guests - especially the parents - when they have their own serenading quartet for the birthday party.

These little things go a long way to create a memorable experience for your guests. And they also keep your staff happy knowing that fun is the number priority.