



THE BUSINESS OF BELONGING

GROWING REVENUE THROUGH LOCAL ALLIANCES

By Brandon Willey

In today's entertainment landscape, standing out takes more than flashy promotions. The most successful centers aren't just selling a night out—they're embedding themselves into the fabric of their communities. Partnering with local schools, youth sports teams, and businesses is beyond good PR; it's a revenue-driving strategy that builds loyalty, trust, and long-term success. By joining forces with these groups, you open the doors to new customers and strengthen ties within your community.



TJ Schier

I recently sat down with TJ Schier, CEO of SmashSwing Immersive and SMART Restaurant Group, to discuss practical strategies to effectively forge and nurture these community partnerships. He acknowledges, "While it might seem tiresome to get hit up for endless requests, you should try to say yes to as many as possible." He emphasizes the importance of being the local community go-to spot and notes, "People buy from those they trust, and visibly supporting your community builds that trust."

CONNECTING WITH LOCAL SCHOOLS

Schools always look for meaningful ways to raise money for extracurricular activities and classroom resources. Schier says your mantra should be: "We can help you make more money than we could donate to you directly!" Hosting a fundraising fun night out once per semester is an excellent way to bring families through your doors. He suggests offering schools a generous percentage (20-35%) of the proceeds from each game or bowling package sold during designated event timeframes. He emphasizes that 10% won't move the needle and that a higher percentage shows you are more committed to the cause than other potential partners. To cap off the event, Schier says to provide a bounce-back coupon with a short-term expiration to all attendees that night to drive an even greater return on investment for the fundraiser.

Competitive Strategies

Another successful approach is to reward students for academic or extracurricular achievements. Work with local school administrators to provide bowling passes or discount coupons for students who excel in academics, sports, arts, or volunteering. This positive reinforcement motivates young people while encouraging families to visit during downtime if they have specific redemption days of the week.

HOT TIPS FROM SCHIER:

1. Sell gift or arcade play cards at a discount that groups can resell for full value. This approach is a great way to help groups raise funds. For example, the group buys 100 \$20 play cards from you for \$1,500 and resells them to friends and family for \$2,000, netting the group \$500.
2. Provide low-value gift cards and coupons for holiday and end-of-year parties for teachers or school administrators to give to their students.

ENGAGING YOUTH SPORTS TEAMS

Youth sports are a cornerstone of community culture. Coaches and organizers for these young athletes often look for fun, off-field team-building activities. Shier says, "By offering special packages or discounted rates for youth teams, you establish your venue as a go-to spot for end-of-season parties or celebratory outings." Providing group deals that include discounted lane rentals and food and beverage options gets people into your facility at either break-even or profitable rates. "More importantly, you are advertising," Shier adds.

Another valuable strategy is sponsoring local youth sports teams. Schier has successfully provided discounted boxed lunches for sports teams and groups to sell during their hosted tournaments. Jersey or field banner sponsorships are additional ways your bowling center can boost brand visibility. You can display team photos or trophies in your facility to create a sense of pride and community ownership. Shier believes this encourages coaches, team parents, and young athletes to become ambassadors for your bowling center. When your center becomes known as a community-centric, youth-friendly facility, word spreads quickly among local sports circles, driving more foot traffic over time.

COLLABORATING WITH LOCAL BUSINESSES

Building alliances with local businesses can be a powerful source of mutual growth. Partner with popular local retail stores or complimentary businesses to create bundled deals such as "Massage & Play" or "Shop & Bowl" specials. By advertising each other's experiences, you can simultaneously reach new audiences. However, Schier cautions, "This only works well if both parties are invested in promoting and marketing the collective deal. Otherwise, you could do all the heavy lifting without the reward."

Corporate groups always look for unique and engaging team-building opportunities or simple ways to reward their employees. Shier suggests picking a business of the week (or day) and providing them a gift basket with gift cards, arcade play cards, swag, bouncebacks, and any other goodies you might be able to provide. Another way to engage local corporate groups is to ask how many employees they have and send them a BOGO bowling game or \$5 play cards for each employee. He admits that while a cost may be involved, you are essentially giving away time, not hard costs like food and beverage.

HOT TIP FROM SCHIER:

1. Start with a Lunch and Learn, inviting HR administrators or relevant stakeholders from local businesses to a preview event. Provide food and fun for FREE. Present your event packages and the unique ways you can partner with them to become the go-to place for their team events and employee perks.

GETTING THE WORD OUT

Once you establish these partnerships, effective communication with the community is key to maximizing their potential. If you can, Schier recommends developing a joint marketing calendar with your community partners (schools, sports groups, businesses) to align promotional efforts. As always, you should leverage social media, email newsletters, and local press and media to publicize your upcoming events, fundraisers, or special offers. Shier says that the goal is to be omnipresent—people see your logo and name everywhere.

HOT TIP FROM SCHIER:

1. Have a tent or table at every community event you can attend. Provide a prize wheel spin to capture emails and/or phone numbers to build your database. Then, have a drawing for a gift card for a daily winner. Provide a BOGO or \$5 play card for all who stop by.

Aligning with schools, youth sports, and local businesses isn't just about generosity—it's about strategic growth. Thoughtful partnerships strengthen brand awareness, boost customer loyalty, and create steady foot traffic. Done right, they turn your business into a community staple, ensuring long-term success in an increasingly competitive market. ●



Brandon Willey, ICAE, is co-founder of the LBX Collective and Premier LBX Group, co-host of The LBX Daily Show, and founder and CEO of Hownd. Brandon has an intense passion for the attractions industry and extensive knowledge of location-based entertainment. Brandon is the former chair of IAAPA's FEC Committee and now sits on the North American Manufacturers and Suppliers Committee. You can connect with him at [LinkedIn.com/in/bwilley](https://www.linkedin.com/in/bwilley).