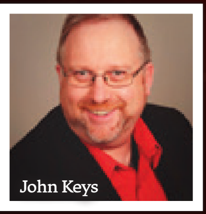
REVENUE RESET

Turning Tight Times into Smart Wins

By Brandon Willey

In today's unpredictable economic climate, bowling centers and FECs face challenges that demand agility, creativity, and operational insight. Operators must find ways to build financial resilience without compromising the guest experience.



John Keys

I recently spoke with John Keys of CenterEdge Software about rethinking how operators can diversify revenue streams and manage costs while staying connected to guest needs.

THE NEW VALUE EQUATION

Coming out of the pandemic, consumer spending surged, fueled by pent-up demand in what was called "revenge spending." But that's shifting. "That past behavior is being replaced by 'revenge saving,' where families are more cautious with their discretionary income," Keys explained. "According to recent data, the personal savings rate in the U.S. has jumped to 4.5%, up from 3.8% just months ago."

For center operators, this means consumers still crave experiences but are becoming more deliberate about where and how they spend. They may skip out on big-ticket trips to Mexico or Disneyland, but they'll invest in meaningful, local experiences, especially when they perceive substantial value. This presents an opportunity to position your venue as an accessible, high-value alternative to high-cost vacations.

PACKAGE SMARTER, NOT CHEAPER

Rather than resorting to discounts, Keys stressed the importance of building value. "Bundling experiences strategically can yield more engagement and better margins. Look at your core attractions—bowling, laser tag, arcade, and others—and ask: What combination maximizes family or group enjoyment? Do current bundles reflect what guests want now, not just what worked six months or years ago?"

One example he shared involved an operator who reimagined school event planning. Instead of overwhelming organizers with a long list of choices, they offered a few well-designed tiered packages with popular perks. This made it easier for guests to choose quickly and confidently, leading to more yeses, fewer questions, and a noticeable booking boost.

Similarly, upsell opportunities like VIP lanes, themed parties, and food upgrades are more appealing when framed as enhancements rather than extra charges. A glow-in-the-dark cocktail or premium dessert can transform a $20 visit into a $35 one, all without the need for costly new attractions.

PEAK VERSUS OFF-PEAK

"Not all hours are created equal," Keys pointed out. "Operators must get smarter about peak and off-peak pricing strategies. Your lights are on whether you're busy or not, so use BOGOs, unlimited play promotions, or themed events to drive traffic during slower hour blocks like Tuesday nights or weekday afternoons."

And when demand is high, don't shy away from charging accordingly. Airlines and hotels have been doing it for decades. "Why shouldn't a Saturday birthday party carry a premium?" he asked. "Always be open to trying something new. Test, iterate, and communicate the value clearly."

He also highlighted how unique off-peak events like adults-only nights with elevated cocktails and late-night hours can turn underused hours into revenue drivers while boosting brand recognition and relevance.

THE FRICTION FIGHTER

In a world of digital convenience, guests expect seamless engagement. That means online booking, digital waivers, and mobile-friendly upsells should be standard. If your venue doesn't offer online booking, digital waivers (if needed), and mobile-friendly upsells, you're missing out on revenue before guests walk through the door.

"Reducing friction at every touchpoint, especially for parents or planners organizing group outings, is crucial," Keys said. "Booking should be simple. Add-ons should be intuitive. Rebooking should be a one-click process." Less drama, more fun.

Centers that invest in digital convenience often see a direct lift in pre-arrival spending. According to Keys, that's not just revenue; it's the foundation for a smoother in-person experience and greater profitability.

PARTNER SMARTER

One of the standout takeaways from our conversation was the value of innovative vendor partnerships in managing costs. Whether ordering redemption inventory, negotiating POS systems, or selecting attractions, vendors often have insights from working with dozens—or even hundreds—of operators.

Some redemption suppliers, he noted, had the foresight to bulk-purchase inventory ahead of tariff hikes, protecting clients from cost increases. "If your suppliers aren't sharing proactive strategies like this, it's time to ask better questions or find partners who will."

Regular check-ins can be revealing. Ask your partners: "What are other operators doing? Are we using all available features or service opportunities? What low-cost changes have made an impact elsewhere?" Suppliers often see what's working across markets and can help you adapt intelligently.

EMPOWER YOUR TEAM

According to Keys, financial resilience isn't just built at the top. "Your front-line staff, who are teenagers or young adults, can provide valuable insights when encouraged to think like guests." He suggests simple team exercises like competitive visits to other venues often spark big ideas.

Encourage them to spot friction points, opportunities for better service, or ideas worth borrowing. Keys suggests, "Ask questions like: What's one thing we can do better than the venue down the street? What makes a guest feel seen or valued? Their answers can help shape innovative operational tweaks that delight guests and improve efficiency."

SMALL TWEAKS, BIG IMPACT

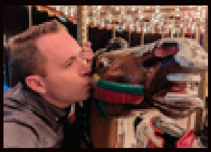
Financial resilience is more about course-correcting than about big pivot. Just like a pilot adjusting for wind on a cross-country flight, center operators should constantly reassess: Are we in tune with what our guests need *today*? Are we pricing for demand *now*?

"Even minor adjustments like where a trash can is placed, how a party host greets parents, or what default bundle appears first on your website can improve flow, boost upsells, and reduce labor waste," Keys pointed out.

The most resilient centers are in constant testing mode. As Keys puts it, "Just because it hasn't been done in the industry, or you haven't done it before, doesn't mean you shouldn't try."

Building a financially resilient business isn't about overhauling everything at once; it's more about staying curious, listening to your team and guests, and being willing to tweak, test, and try again. Whether it's smarter bundling, peak-hour pricing, digital upgrades, or tapping into vendor know-how, the goal is to deliver more value while running leaner, smarter operations.

So take a fresh look at your current playbook. What's still working? What's just taking up space? In today's landscape, the centers that stay nimble, dialed-in, and unapologetically guest-focused are the ones that win.



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.