

TEST BEFORE YOU INVEST

Smart Ways to Try New Ideas

By Brandon Willey

As a BEC operator, it's likely you have experienced the moment when you spot a trend that looks like an easy revenue generator or guest experience win and your brain skips the test phase and jumps straight to making it a fixed, long-term part of the business. Whether it's a new food concept, late-night format, or collaboration with a brewery down the street, that idea can quickly turn into equipment purchases, signage, staffing, vendor contracts, and maybe even a remodel.

That's when the capital trap springs. Either you overcommit early to an idea that hasn't proven itself, or you walk away from a potentially great concept because the investment feels too big before it's had a chance to succeed.

The ideal move is to treat your business like a flexible platform for controlled experiments. With lanes, party spaces, and food and beverage that can pivot quickly, pop-up events, themed nights, and short-run social leagues allow you to test menu ideas, entertainment formats, and partnerships without making big commitments. Guests respond to novelty when it's time-boxed and creates real urgency, while you gather real-world data quickly and only scale what earns the right to become permanent.

THREE AREAS WHERE TESTING PAYS OFF

The easiest way to test new ideas is to run small, short-term experiments in three core areas of your business: food and beverage, entertainment formats, and partnerships. These are changes you can make within your existing operation to see what works before committing long term.

1. Menu and Bar

Experimenting with your menu and bar is often the fastest path to new revenue because it doesn't require rearranging walls or adding new attractions. Limited-time offers like a seasonal entrée, a drink flight concept, or a new shareable built for groups let you test what guests will order—and what your operation can realistically support. The important part is resisting the temptation to judge success on sales alone.

A menu item can sell well and still be the wrong decision if it slows the kitchen, blows up ticket times, or creates waste that eats into margin. The test is as much about operational truth as guest interest. Can your team batch it? Does it require a new station? Does it stress your fryers at peak times? Can the bar execute quickly when your center is full? When you treat menu changes like experiments, you get to keep what works and discard what doesn't.

Competitive Strategies

2. Entertainment Formats

Entertainment formats are another strong area for experimentation and can help uncover what new experiences guests are hungry for at the social and entertainment levels. Many centers focus on simply adding attractions, but a surprising amount of growth comes from changing how the same space is used.

A mini-tournament night, a lane-side hosted game, or a micro-competition series can change dwell time and increase spend without adding a single piece of equipment. The goal isn't to throw something fun at the wall, but to learn which formats create repeat behavior and a distinct identity for your center. When a new concept clicks, it becomes a reason to visit on a Tuesday—not just a Saturday.

3. Partnerships and Sponsorships

Partnerships and sponsorships can also open the door to growth you likely wouldn't create on your own. The key is approaching them with the same discipline you'd use when testing menu items or new entertainment formats.

A local brewery collaboration, food truck pop-up, radio station promotion, influencer host, youth organization fundraiser, or corporate wellness partner can all look great on paper—but testing quickly shows what really matters. Does the partner bring the right audience? Does the experience feel like a good fit for your brand? And does the math still work after labor, discounts, and comps are counted?

Short-run partnerships help protect you from the “logo trap,” where a partner gets visibility, but your center doesn't see meaningful gains in traffic or revenue.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT TESTING TIMELINE

Not every idea needs the same amount of time to prove itself. In most cases, testing happens across three timelines: a one-night pop-up, a four- to six-week run, or a six- to ten-week short-run league. The smartest approach is matching the timeline to the type of decision you're trying to make.

A **one-night pop-up** is the quickest, cheapest way to learn. It's perfect for testing a single menu item, running a trivia sponsor night, trying a flash pricing change, or seeing whether a DJ actually moves the needle beyond social media hype. The downside is that one night can be misleading. A holiday weekend, weather shift, or competing local event can distort results. To avoid this, repeat the pop-up across different nights over a few weeks to see whether demand is real or just a fluke.

A **four- to six-week themed series** is where reliable patterns start to emerge. A consistent Thursday night series, for example, gives guests a reason to build a habit and gives your team time to refine operations. You'll learn what works in week one, improve by week two, and begin to see real results by week four.

The biggest risk with a longer run is creating a small but passionate group of guests who love it and get upset when it disappears. That's why language matters. When guests know something is a limited-run experience, you can end it without backlash—and still bring it back later if the data supports it.

A **six- to ten-week** short-run social league can create recurring revenue, build community, and improve midweek utilization. Leagues are powerful because they generate pre-commitment, create a social identity, and give partners a longer window to participate. That said, they can be administratively demanding and may not be the right fit for every market.

If your center doesn't regularly run leagues, the operational load, from scheduling and communication to scoring, substitutions, prizes, and expectations, can be heavier than expected. If you're new to it, borrow best practices, use templates, and design the league to be fun and frictionless for guests while staying manageable for your team.



THE HYPOTHESIS FRAMEWORK

The difference between a fun event and a meaningful test is discipline. Before launching anything, write a single, simple hypothesis to force clarity: *We believe X will drive Y for Z audience.* From there, keep guest messaging tight. One hero item. One hero experience. One clear price. If you're testing menu changes, compare a flight versus a single item. If you're testing pricing, compare bundle A to bundle B instead of introducing multiple options and hoping staff can explain them correctly.

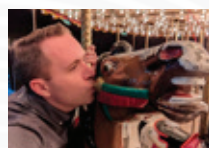
Most importantly, define success before you start. Decide which numbers matter: revenue per head, attach rate, labor percentage, food cost, ticket times, utilization changes, dwell time, guest satisfaction, or partner promo-code redemptions. This way you don't end the test with vague, subjective feelings instead of objective answers.

INNOVATION IS A MUSCLE, NOT A MOMENT

Centers that grow consistently don't rely on perfect instincts. They rely on repeatable learning. Many failed events aren't failures of the idea itself, but failures of execution and measurement caused by overcomplicated menus, underestimated training needs, missing POS tracking, or testing on the wrong night and drawing the wrong conclusions.

When you run small experiments often and evaluate them honestly, pop-ups and short-run formats become an ongoing R&D process that costs a fraction of permanent upgrades. You'll still make capital investments, but only after the market has proven it wants what you're proposing.

The takeaway is simple: prove demand first, then spend. ●



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