



BUILDING SMARTER FOOD REVENUE

WITHOUT BECOMING A RESTAURANT

By Brandon Willey

Nobody gets into the bowling or FEC business dreaming about inventory counts and kitchen ticket times, yet food and beverage have become one of the biggest opportunities inside the center. For many operators, it has also become one of the most challenging parts of the business to balance.

Guests expect better quality, more variety, faster service, and an experience that feels competitive with restaurants and social entertainment venues. At the same time, most operators did not enter the industry as restaurateurs and are trying to grow a profitable F&B program while balancing labor, kitchen limitations, and rising guest expectations.

The opportunity is not necessarily building a larger menu or turning the operation into a full-scale restaurant. More often, it comes down to building a food and beverage program that fits the brand, supports the flow of the center, and gives guests another reason to spend more and come back.

PART OF THE EXPERIENCE

Today's guests are not just buying entertainment, they are buying a night out, and food and drinks help shape that experience. Because bowling is social and group-oriented, the menu should feel craveable, shareable, and easy to enjoy throughout the visit. If the menu feels like an afterthought, guests will usually treat it that way.

That pressure to deliver a better overall experience is where many operators run into the same challenge: trying to improve food and beverage performance without creating a more complicated operation.

DON'T EXPAND THE MENU, ENGINEER IT

Many operators respond to underperforming F&B by adding more items. But a larger menu does not automatically create more sales. In many cases, it creates the opposite: slower ticket times, inconsistent execution, more waste, higher labor complexity, and frustrated guests.

Menu engineering starts with knowing which items are Stars, Workhorses, and Dregs.

- Stars are high-margin, high-popularity items that should be featured prominently on menus, digital signage, party packages, and server recommendations.
- Workhorses are popular items with lower margins that may need adjustments to pricing, portioning, bundling, or ingredient cost.
- Dregs are low-profit, low-popularity items and are often candidates for removal or replacement.

This exercise can be uncomfortable because many venues carry legacy items simply because "we've always had them." But every item on the menu should earn its place. If it does not support sales, margin, or operations, it may be hurting the business more than helping it.

BUILD SIGNATURE "HERO" ITEMS

Every strong eatertainment concept tends to have a few items guests remember. These "hero" items become part of the venue's identity. They are the dishes guests photograph, share on social media, and come back to order again.

For one venue, that might be loaded tots served in a shareable skillet. For another, it could be a giant pretzel with multiple dipping sauces or a signature hot honey chicken sandwich. The best hero items are memorable, repeatable, and easy for staff to describe.

The key is avoiding items that look great in a marketing photo but fall apart on a busy Saturday night. A true hero item has to be both marketable and executable. If it cannot be made consistently during peak volume, it will disappoint guests and frustrate staff. Operators should ask themselves: "What food are we known for?" If the answer is only pizza and nachos, there may be an opportunity to create something more memorable and brandable.

MATCH YOUR BRAND

Not every center should have the same menu structure. A boutique bowling lounge, family entertainment center, sports-driven venue, and arcade-bowling hybrid all deliver different experiences.

A family-focused center may need kid-friendly items, shareable



platters, and simple party bundles. An upscale social venue may lean into premium appetizers and craft cocktails, while a sports-bar-forward center may focus on wings, burgers, beer pairings, and game-day platters.

Brand alignment also shows up in naming, plating, packaging, and signage. Regional sauces, local beers, community partnerships, and limited-time features can make a center feel more connected to its market. The goal is not to chase every food trend, but to create a menu that feels authentic to the brand and the community around it.

DESIGN FOR KITCHEN REALITY

A creative menu is only valuable if the kitchen can execute it consistently. One of the biggest mistakes operators make is designing food around aspiration rather than operation.

The real test is not whether an item works on a slow Tuesday afternoon. The test is whether it works when every lane is full, birthday parties are checking in, the arcade is busy, and there is a waitlist at the front desk.

Slow food does not just impact operations, it impacts the entire guest experience.

That is why kitchen workflow should influence menu strategy from the beginning. Operators should evaluate the kitchen they actually have, not the one they wish they had. Ticket times, prep capacity, storage, and staffing all play a role.

Smart menus rely on cross-utilized ingredients to reduce inventory complexity without making every item feel the same. They balance fast-fire items with more complex offerings and use prep systems that support consistency and speed during peak periods.

TRAIN THE TEAM TO SELL THE EXPERIENCE

Even a strong menu will underperform if staff treats food as an afterthought. The team needs to understand what to recommend, when to recommend it, and how to sell it.

- Front desk staff should know which bundles work best for families.
- Servers and lane attendants should understand which items fit groups, parties, leagues, and adult social occasions.
- Party hosts should know how to suggest upgrades naturally instead of sounding scripted or pushy.
- Training should also include communication around timing. If an item takes longer during peak periods, staff should know how to set expectations clearly.

Guests are often forgiving when they feel informed, but far less forgiving when they feel ignored.

ANOTHER REASON TO CHOOSE YOU

The right F&B program gives groups something to share, parents something to appreciate, adults something to enjoy, and guests another reason to visit.

Most operators didn't get into the entertainment business to become restaurateurs. But today, a profitable food and beverage program has become part of running a successful center. The good news is that it does not require a massive kitchen or an oversized menu. More often, it comes down to building a focused operation that fits the brand, supports the guest experience, and executes consistently on busy nights.



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