



THE INVISIBLE ADVANTAGE

BUILDING CONSISTENCY BEHIND THE SCENES

By Brandon Willey

The busiest Saturdays don't go off the rails because of *one* big problem. More often, it's a series of small ones that should have been caught before the doors opened. A restroom wasn't inspected. An arcade game stayed out of service. A closing routine was rushed because everyone wanted to get home.

Those issues may start behind the scenes, but they rarely stay there. Guests experience them as longer wait times, equipment failures, frustrating interruptions, and service recoveries that can quickly change the tone of a visit. Employees feel the impact too, scrambling to solve problems that could have been prevented.

A lane issue, food delay, or attraction that's unexpectedly unavailable doesn't feel like a minor inconvenience to a guest. It feels like the center wasn't ready for them to come in. And when execution falls short, social media and online reviews make it easy for that experience to reach far beyond the building.

The good news is that most of these problems are preventable. They don't require a major capital investment or the latest technology. More often, they come down to a handful of operational habits that consistently separate smooth operations from stressful ones.

While every operation is different, the centers that consistently deliver great guest experiences usually have four habits in common:

- Preparing before the doors open.
- Staying ahead of maintenance.
- Setting the next shift up for success.
- Building a culture where everyone takes ownership.

BEFORE THE DOORS OPEN

Every great guest experience starts long before the first customer walks through the door. If the building isn't ready, employees spend the rest of the day catching up instead of taking care of guests.

That's why strong operators don't think of opening as simply unlocking the front door. They think of it as preparing the entire experience. The lobby, restrooms, party rooms, arcade, food service areas, attractions, and bowling lanes all contribute to a guest's first impression. When one area isn't ready, it can affect everything that follows.

Technology has made it easier to execute tasks and follow through consistently. Digital checklists, task management apps, and photo verification create continuity between shifts by helping managers communicate expectations, verify completed work, and identify issues before they become guest problems.

Just as important, responsibilities should be clearly assigned. When every team member understands what they own before guests arrive, accountability becomes part of the routine rather than something managers have to chase down.

Once guests arrive, the focus shifts from getting ready to staying ahead of the problems that can interrupt their experience.

Quick Win: A short pre-shift huddle can make a major difference. Review the day's reservations, parties, league activity, staffing gaps, equipment concerns, promotions, and special events. The goal isn't a long meeting. It's making sure everyone starts the day with the same game plan.



STAY AHEAD OF THE BREAKDOWNS

Preventive maintenance has never been the most exciting part of running a center, but it's one of the biggest contributors to a consistently smooth operation. When equipment works the way it's should, guests rarely think about it. When it doesn't, it quickly becomes the focus of their visit.

Years ago, preventive maintenance centered on bowling equipment and arcade games. Today, every part of the venue, from kiosks and payment systems to kitchens, attractions, lighting, and AV systems, plays a role in the guest experience. When one system goes down, the ripple effects can be felt throughout the operation, pulling employees away from serving guests and creating delays that can affect the rest of the day.

The operators who stay ahead of those problems are identifying potential issues before guests ever encounter them. Consistent inspections, routine maintenance, and good documentation make that possible.

Just as digital checklists help verify opening routines, digital maintenance logs help ensure important information doesn't get lost between shifts. Recording recurring issues, completed repairs, and outstanding concerns creates continuity, helping teams identify patterns and solve problems before guests experience them.

The goal is to reduce the number of interruptions guests experience and give employees the information they need to respond quickly when something does happen.

Great operators don't rely on memory. They build routines that make consistency repeatable.

Of course, staying ahead of problems doesn't end when the last guest leaves. The way one shift finishes often determines how smoothly the next one begins.

TOMORROW STARTS AT CLOSING TIME

It's easy to think of closing as the end of the day. Everyone is tired, the last guests have left, and the focus shifts to locking the doors and heading home. But operators who consistently deliver great guest experiences often see it differently.

Every shortcut taken at closing becomes tomorrow morning's problem. That's why the strongest operations treat closing as preparation, not cleanup. The goal is to leave the next shift in the best possible position to succeed.

One of the simplest ways to do that is with a consistent end-of-day recap. It doesn't need to be complicated, but it should answer a few basic questions: What broke today? What ran low? Were there recurring guest issues? What needs attention before tomorrow's opening?

Those notes create continuity between shifts. Instead of relying on memory or hoping someone remembers an important detail, the next team starts the day with a clear picture of where things stand.

FROM ROUTINES TO CULTURE

Opening routines, preventive maintenance, and strong closing procedures all have one thing in common. They only work consistently when the entire team believes they are part of delivering a better guest experience.

That's where culture makes the difference.

The strongest operations create an environment where everyone takes ownership of the experience, regardless of their role. Instead of simply completing a checklist, employees begin looking for opportunities to prevent problems before they happen.

That shift changes the conversation.

Instead of asking, "Did we finish the checklist?" teams begin asking, "Is the center ready?" It's a small change in mindset, but it leads to better decisions throughout the day.

Sales goals, league growth, and successful events deserve recognition, but so do the quieter wins that guests rarely notice. The technician who catches a recurring lane issue before league night. The front desk employee who spots a party room setup mistake before guests arrive. The kitchen team that identifies an equipment problem before it slows service.

Those moments may happen behind the scenes, but they shape the guest experience just as much as anything happening on the floor. Guests may never see an opening checklist, a maintenance log, or an end-of-day recap.

What they do notice is when everything works.

The centers that stand out today aren't the ones with the newest attractions or the latest technology. They're the ones that combine modern expectations with timeless operational discipline.



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