

'Routinizing' from page 9

mouse games...reporting traffic problems or tough repair challenges so the next headache is assigned to someone else...the operator needs to make dispatchers and techs work as teams. If they solve problems together, they both "win" and this is reflected in pay and bonuses. Otherwise, they work against each other, or blame each other, and service and profits suffer.

Save your manuals. Our service department has schematics and manuals on every machine we operate. We try to insist that our library remains complete. This allows techs to call the shop or other techs and be guided through problems. In a perfect world, each game would have a manual and schematic inside.

Take pictures. Cellphone cameras are an important tool, as mentioned in my earlier column on tools. Techs can use camera phones to make sure they are ordering the right part. But techs can also send photographs of games or "problems" into the shop and receive useful on-the-spot-repair guidance. This saves time and money.

Avoid collection headaches. When I was servicing a large number of locations by myself back 30-40 years ago, I used to leave the keys to all machines with my locations. Naturally, this meant the locations also had access to the tokens and bill changers (it was there money in the bill changers and I did not have the keys). It's a workable system but the drawback is that when locations "see" that pile of money every week, they resent giving half to the operator when it's time to do the split. Keeping all the money (and keys) in the operator's hands prevents this problem

but it also means operators must visit locations much more often to fix token jams or coin jams, etc.

Collecting can be updated with modern technology to avoid this headache. For example, this entire issue can be solved with debit card systems. This technology allows the operator to watch online every time a game is played and money is received by a POS and/or bill changer or Kiosk. It means the location can have the keys and all the money but nobody can steal cash. Some operators even sweep locations' bank accounts each week. It is a costly solution but the advantages can be worth it. In our operations, it has worked out best for both parties when we split the cost of the debit card system, each owning half of it and we are both responsible to make sure it works properly.

Don't pile up cash. In the old days, our route vehicles were equipped with drop safes. When the tech returned to the shop, the box was opened and the money removed. Today I doubt operators want their techs to run around the streets with that much money.

One solution is scheduling regular drop-offs at the shop or the bank throughout the day as part of the route schedule so that the tech does not accumulate vast amounts of cash as he visits several locations.

Another solution: if you run ATMs, give all bills to the person at the location who stocks the ATM and have them write you a check. The ultimate goal is for the technician to collect the commission split, yet wind up with as little cash or no cash at all.

Yet another approach is to have two bill changers in the location, and let the location keep the cash in one while the tech collects the cash in the other. Some settling-up reconciliation is still required on collection day in most cases but the tech is leaving the location with less cash upon each visit.

Rotating techs among locations can solve many problems and also catch unexpected problems.

Still another approach: suppose your route has cranes with bill acceptors. The tech visits two or three times a week, both parties collect the bills, and writes down how much money has been taken. Once a week, the tech collects coins from the other games and a few bills from the bill acceptors. Most of this amount is given to the location as their split, so the collection is done but the route guy is not burdened with bringing back

lots of cash.

The satisfaction in this business (in addition to making money) is being told by location owners/managers that it is the 'little things' our route techs do that are most noticed—such as cleaning the glass coverings and cabinet fronts at each visit—and spray painting the scuffed up fronts of the games—and following up to let them know that a game has been repaired in record time. The important thing is not to be known as 'hit and run' artists, but a company that looks at the big picture when it comes to service.

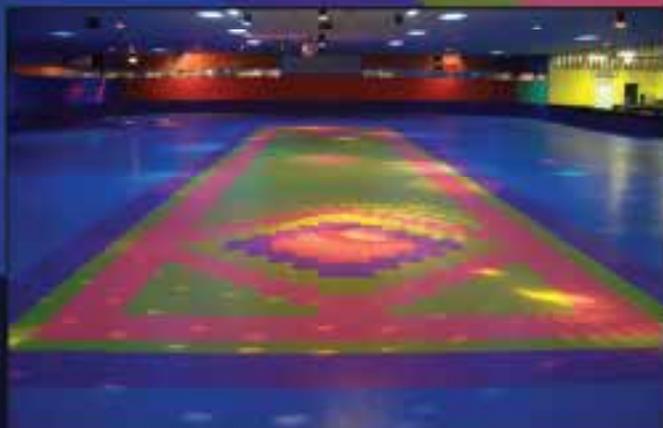
One of Alpha's service techs sums it up best: "I would rather replace a start button that is starting to wear as compared to getting dispatched out specifically on an unscheduled 'emergency call' to replace something as simple as a start button that would definitely put a prime workhorse game out of order—which would be logged as an 'oops.'" —Dave Forlano, Alpha-Omega Amusements, Southern Regional Technician.

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