Road warriors: How to get the most out of route techs by 'routinizing'

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Editor's Note: Rink owners and operators, the following article is written for vending, redemption game and merchandise dispensing operators who manage the technicians or "road warriors" who hop from location to location to repair and maintenance such machines. We, at The RINKSIDER, thought this would be a good article to share with you to allow you a sneak peak into what goes on behind the scenes before, during and after you call in a repair. This might just help in planning ahead so ***you*** *aren't the one who gets stuck with an "out-of-order" sign on your busiest night of the week.*

Getting the most from route and FEC technicians on the road is both an art and a science. Efficient operators make every effort to 'routinize' and schedule their tech's time and efforts, but it's often a business of putting out fires and responding to "surprises" – like showing up at a location and discovering the location didn't report a game that's down and your tech doesn't have the needed part. Being ready for such surprises is an important part of route and FEC operations management.

Obviously, the workloads are different for techs depending on whether they service routes or fun centers. I strongly advise against mixing the assignments because the requirements for each are so different.

For street routes, techs typically service multiple locations per day, certainly many locations during the course of an entire week. But as every street operator knows, even the most efficient scheduling system can't prevent certain problems that require emergency visits. If a high-earning jukebox goes down at 10 a.m. in a late-night bar, the operator must get out of bed and go fix it – or risk losing the location.

For FECs, the name of the game is daily fixes for immediate problems, along with constant preventive maintenance and "tweaking" of redemption and merchandise dispensing games to ensure maximum profitability. During slow periods, the tech stays busy by catching up with reconditioning one game at a time. All this is a process that never ends. How can the operator rationally assign tech labor to an FEC? My rule of thumb for FEC technical services is to allow one hour of service for every $500 a week of gross revenue (not including collection time and restocking time which is additional).

Here are 10 tactics and principles that operators can use to get the most out of their route techs:

Supply the location with an extra game(s). Have extra "back-up" games at locations that are at the extremities of a route territory. Most operators do this. This way if one game is down, it usually won't affect the location's gross if a game remains out of order for a couple of days until the next scheduled service call. For the same reason it makes sense to have extra tokens on hand that the location can sell in case bill changers go down. Having an extra game in locations allows the operator to schedule a tech's visit when it makes sense. Sometimes responding immediately to a service call is not worth the tradeoff between the cost of the tech's time and travel costs versus 50% of the additional revenue that would be earned that week by re-routing the tech to repair the game today.

Stock the tech's vehicle with the most common parts. The best way to prepare for unexpected contingencies is to carry the right items with you. In addition to tools (see my previous VENDING TIMES column), the tech should make sure his vehicle is stocked with a good assortment of parts (see Parts Chart sidebar). The worst thing is to have a tech drive from a location with a bad part to the main office shop and then make a return trip with the replacement part. The time consumed on this unnecessary round trip throws an entire's week's schedule out of kilter.

If a tech is headed out from the shop on a call, he should bring 'game specific' parts that he may not normally carry and then return these parts to parts inventory upon his return if they are not used.

Keep in touch. Constant voice communication between the shop and the "road warriors" definitely saves time and money. That means both inbound and outbound calls. One of our rules is that a tech must call in every time he gets to a location and leaves a location. He gets up to date information about recent service calls to service from his current location, those that he has recently been to, and new service calls that will alter his route schedule. When he is ready to leave a location he reports the repairs he made on known out-of-orders and those he found that that weren't known in advance, what repairs he could not make and what games are still hard downs or soft downs. A hard down is a game that is not operating at all. A soft down is one where part of the game is not functioning but the game can still earn money. For example, perhaps Player #1 works but Player #2 is out or one player position of a 3-player game is not working. The best call in would be—'All games are GTG"-(Good to Go).

For some routes, techs report in each morning and night to drop off money and pick up parts. For large or widespread routes, techs may not visit the shop very often and much of the parts and merchandise is drop-shipped to the location or even the tech's home. If you don't have a system in place for locations to call you and report problems, your office should call locations before the tech arrives to find out what's out of order so the office can know about how many hours will be required there.

Keep good records. Creative paperwork saves money. We have an ongoing "Games Down Report" that we ask our locations to fill out. These forms indicate if the status of an out-of-order machine is a "soft down" (such as, a coin slot is not working) or a "hard down" (the machine itself will not turn on, for example). Locations fax the document in each Friday.

Our Dispatcher keeps a book of these

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faxed reports for each location and of course enters each location out of orders as they are called in or reported by the techs in the Dispatch Computer Log.

This gives our company a check and balance so we can tell not only the status and history of each game at each location but the quality of information and reporting coming from the location and the time it took to repair each out of order. The better the quality of reporting, the faster the techs and dispatchers can respond. Armed with this information, the tech can know in advance what to expect and be prepared when he arrives. The record keeping often helps during location contract extensions as it always seems that locations are not aware of the efforts made to repair their games. All they seem to remember in their selective memory banks is that 'the games break down a lot.'

On site, the tech signs the location's paperwork so we can see what was fixed and how long the repair took. If the same problem is reported over and over, it tells us either that the tech is not really fixing the problem or that the machine itself has an unusual problem and needs to be rotated out of the location and brought into the shop.

Share responsibility. Rotating techs among locations can solve many problems and also catch unexpected problems. Some techs are particularly expert and should be sent around to locations with tougher game repair problems. Rotating techs among locations also gives you a way to check on all your technicians' work by having more than one person responsible for the same location.

Promote teamwork. Dispatchers need to be able to confirm facts reported by techs. To avoid having techs play cat and

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