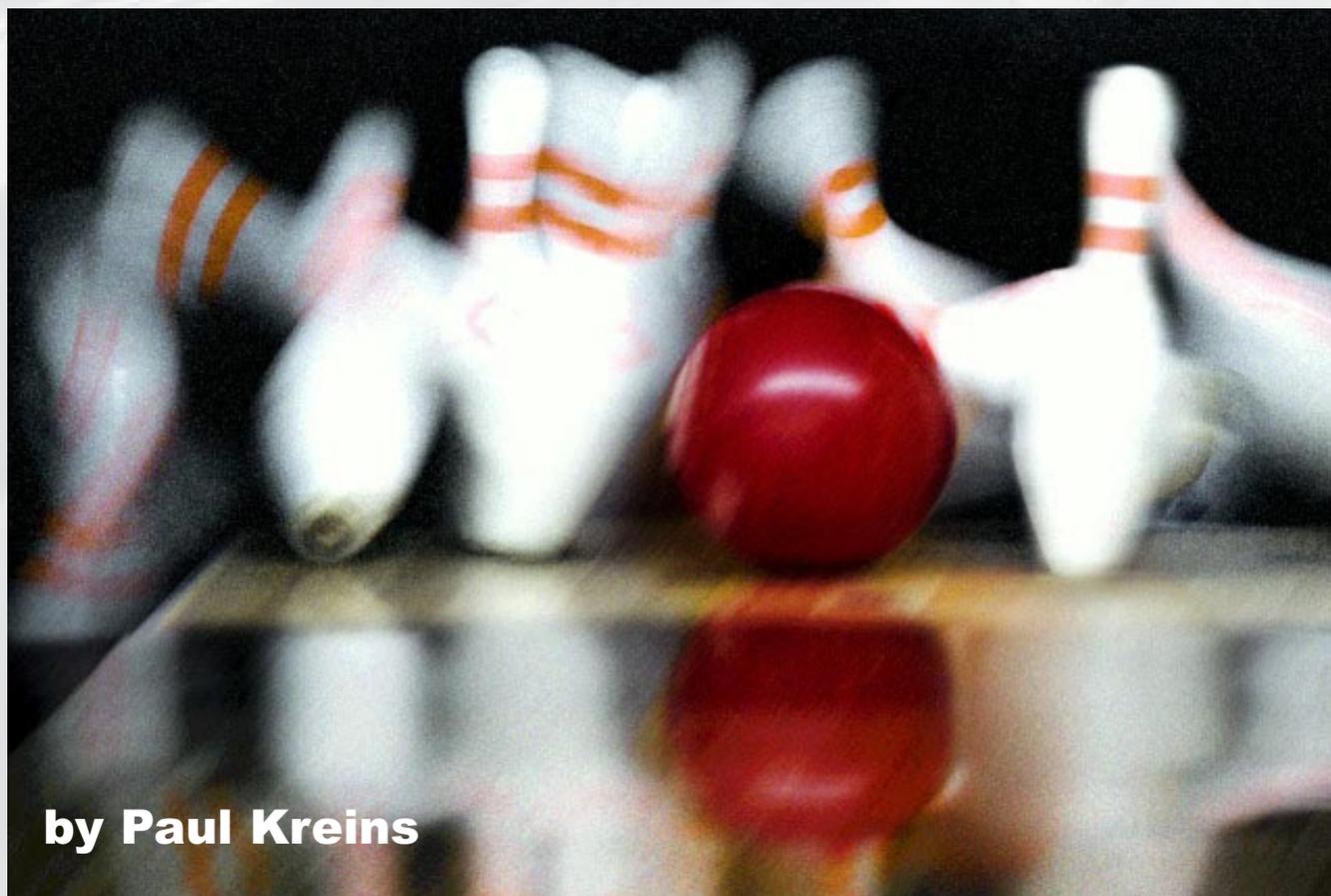


Trends, Changes and Critical Factors for Success

in the Pro Shop business



by Paul Kreins

The Importance of Pro Shop Operators and Instructors in the Future of Bowling

Pro shop operators and instructors will be key players in the resurrection of the bowling industry. With the importance of developing and retaining new customers; the proliferation of high-tech equipment and new drilling and layout techniques; and the profit potential of retail sales, pro shop operators will be as important as any other entity in bowling.

It will be important for bowling proprietors to recognize the value of the pro shop operator/instructor as a vital link between the bowling center and its bowlers. Likewise, it will be just as important that the pro shop operator recognizes his/her own value to the sport and to the business.



The typical bowling center has a 10% - 20% attrition rate of league bowlers. That rate jumps to 70% of first-year bowlers. Should the pro shop operator be concerned about bowler attrition, or is that the proprietor's problem? Should the pro shop operator be concerned about *new bowler development* and *bowler retention*, or is that the proprietor's problem?

As a pro shop operator, your future lies in the *growth* of the bowling business. You are in a business with a market that has shrunk for 22 consecutive years. You need to be doing everything in your power to help the bowling center grow. As the bowling center business grows, so will yours.

Twenty years ago it may have been an accepted practice for the bowling "pro" to disassociate himself from the bowling center — to take a, "*That's not my problem,*" attitude. Twenty years ago it may have been accepted when a proprietor relegated the "pro shop" to a closet behind the mechanic's shop. Not today.

Bowling is going through a painful metamorphosis. One of the changes we'll see as the industry emerges from its cocoon is an emphasis on bowling instruction and quality customer service. A significant element of customer satisfaction will be provided by the "house pro" or pro shop operator.





Your Relationship With the Bowling Proprietor

Developing a productive, mutually beneficial relationship with the proprietor will work whether you're an in-house or free standing shop. Some ideas to consider:

Give practice games with every ball purchase.

The bowling center should be willing to provide you with a certificate good for at least three free practice games with a ball purchase. Note: Don't use the phrase "Free Games." Instead, call them "Practice Games."



Hold an "Equipment Check" week.

Set up a table on the concourse with your scale, durometer, pitch gauges, fitting ball, resurfacing machine etc. Offer to check bowling balls for free. Check for proper span, balance, pitch, surface condition, etc. You'll be doing the proprietor a favor while bringing attention to your services and skills.



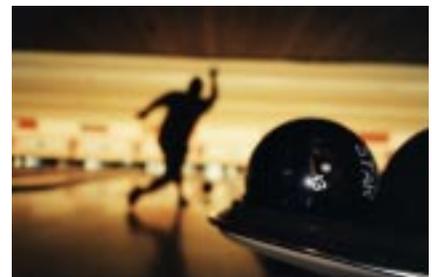
Start an In-Center Ball Club.

Works like a Christmas Club at the bank. Customers pay a set amount each week until they reach the level where they own the ball. However, each week you also hold a drawing in which one club member "wins" their ball early.



Run *Learn-to-Bowl* classes and *Improve-Your-Bowling* seminars.

A primary reason bowlers quit bowling is because they reach a level where they stop improving. You'll be helping the proprietor by keeping his/her bowlers from becoming frustrated about their game.



Your Relationship With the Bowling Proprietor

Coach a Youth League.

You don't necessarily need to tie-up your Saturdays. Coach an after-school league during the week. If the center doesn't have one — start one. Call it the *XYZ Pro Shop Junior Classic*. Again, you'll be helping the proprietor while bringing attention to yourself and your business.

Work together to run merchandise leagues.

Have-a-Ball leagues, jacket leagues, shirt leagues, etc. are a great way to attract new bowlers while *you benefit* from the sale of the merchandise.

Help proprietors identify problems.

You are in the unique position of being able to listen to customer complaints and suggestions. Seldom will an angry customer go complain to the person who can actually do something about the problem. You are non-threatening, like a bartender, a barber, or an analyst. When you hear of a problem or a potential problem, let the proprietor know immediately so he/she can do something about it.



Recreational Bowlers are Tomorrow's Avid Bowlers

The drastic decline of league bowling would seem to be extremely unfavorable for the pro shop business. League bowlers have historically accounted for the majority of pro shop sales, especially high-end balls and repeat business. But, *bowling today is experiencing its greatest influx of new bowlers in 30 years*, due in part to greater availability of lanes during prime time and weekends. *Today's recreational bowler is more inclined to purchase their own equipment than ever before.*

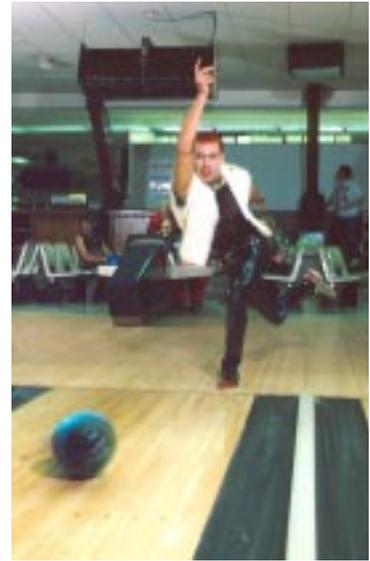
With recreational bowlers, *the pro shop's objective should be to develop and cultivate a lifetime customer, not to make a quick one-time sale.* You should also recognize the fact that most new bowlers will not be lone wolves. Instead, they'll be taking up the game with their friends, their family or significant other. Consequently, *each customer may actually become several customers when treated properly.*



Recreational Bowlers are Tomorrow's Avid Bowlers

Pro shops must adjust their operating hours to be available when recreational bowlers are most likely to be bowling – late nights and weekends. *They must carry an adequate inventory of entry-level and mid-level equipment.* They must make it easy and understandable for entry level bowlers to purchase, and later, upgrade equipment. This means offering “packages” that include a ball, bag, shoes and perhaps a lesson or instructional book or video. It means offering a generous trade-in program to allow beginners to upgrade their equipment. And, they *must not oversell the customer by putting them into more ball than they really need.*

Many of today's recreational bowlers are tomorrow's avid bowlers. Don't ignore this most important market segment.



Successful pro shop operators will position themselves as qualified experts/technicians

The role of the pro shop operator is shifting from that of a retailer to that of a service provider. Internet technology has made bowling balls an easily attainable commodity while manufacturing techniques have made balls indistinguishable from one another. But, the complexity of bowling ball technology has also made the pro shop operator's role as a service provider more valuable than ever.

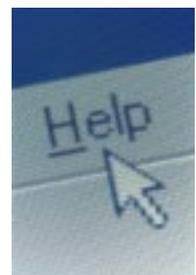
A la carte pricing, in which pro shops segregate product prices from services such as drilling, grip installation and resurfacing, has become a standard practice. *The ability to layout a high-performance ball and to determine what is best for an individual customer are specialized skills for which you can charge premium prices.*

Tomorrow's pro shop customers will buy *products* from you only as a matter of convenience, but *they'll come to rely on you for your knowledge and expertise in the area of fitting, layout and drilling.*

Successful pro shop operators will position themselves as qualified experts and technicians.

Customer Service

Different than being a provider of services, *offering exceptional customer service is the critical intangible element of a successful pro shop today.* With bowling equipment becoming a commodity, exceptional service is what will separate you from every other run-of-the-mill-out-of-my-garage ball driller.



Instruction is a Revenue Generator

Always one of the most critical, yet most neglected aspects of the business, *instruction will play an ever-increasing role in your success in the future.* Instruction should be considered at least as important as the equipment you sell. *Instruction is a revenue generator* for you as well as a means by which you can keep your customers interested in the sport.

A major reason for bowler dropout is frustration over failing to improve – especially after investing a lot of money in new equipment. It's critical that you understand what a mistake it is to send a customer out the door with a \$200 bowling ball that he or she doesn't know how to throw. Doing so is a disservice to your customer and detrimental to your long-term success.



You can increase your revenues and improve your profit margins significantly by making instruction an integral part of your product mix. Along that line, you should stock (sell or rent) bowling instruction books and videotapes. Having bowling books and tapes available will be a way to instill in your customer the importance of bowling instruction when you can't be there to physically conduct the lesson.



The Internet's Impact on the Pro Shop Operator

The Internet has touched everyone's lives. *The Internet will affect pro shops and distributors more than any other integer in the sport.* Bowling equipment is available everywhere, and at alarmingly low prices.

With bowling equipment now a commodity, servicing customers' needs for fitting, drilling, resurfacing, and technical advice, becomes more important than ever.

Pro shops and instructors can benefit from having their own websites, both as a means of eCommerce, but more importantly for informational purposes (hours of operation, services offered, bowling tips, "hot" equipment, sales...).

Database Management

Having fewer customers increases the importance of knowing those customers and their needs. Knowledge is power and information provides knowledge.



Inventory Management

The glut of new product introductions, smaller profit margins and the artificially short life-cycles of today's high-tech *bowling balls have forced pro shops to become expert buyers and adept at inventory control.*

Be selective and be careful about the merchandise you stock, but always try to meet your customers' demands — a sale of a special-order item today may lead to a lifetime of sales from a satisfied customer.



Expanding Product Lines

Growing your revenues will mean broadening your product (and services) line. Doing so increases *share of customer*, which is as important, and much easier, than increasing your *share of the market*.

Merchandising

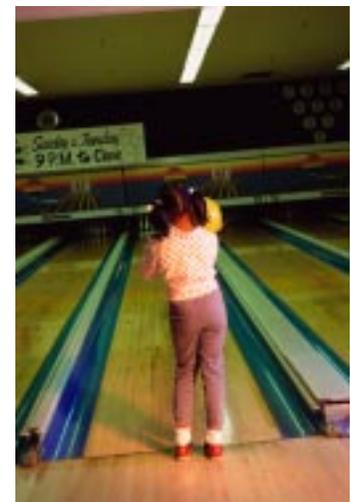
We are bombarded with thousands of images each day, all vying for our attention. *Presenting your products and services in an appealing, attractive and eye-catching manner is more important than ever.*

The Youth Market

Kids love to bowl and parents want the best for their kids. The youth market represents unlimited potential for you.

Continuing Education

Drilling a bowling ball has become ridiculously complex. Consequently, it is absolutely essential you stay on the cutting edge when it comes to technology, technique and education. Join the IBPSIA. Attend seminars, workshops and conventions. Get certified.



IBPSIA