



Location Solicitation/Promotion Ideas

If your company is bringing new accounts on board or looking to bring non-league accounts into your league system, it is imperative that you develop a cooperative spirit with the location. Some locations may just want the equipment because it is new to the area or because all the local competition has it. They may not have given any thought or inclination to leagues. It is up to the operator to sell a location on how the operation-location partnership is a win-win situation that will boost the location's bottom-line. It is imperative for operators to keep the idea of running leagues in every location as a goal, to keep that goal in site, and to keep your accounts aware of your goal.

Finding the Right Locations

As you are doing your research by watching leagues and asking questions, start thinking about which locations are most suitable for leagues. Following are some things to consider carefully before approaching a specific location owner with a proposal for establishing a league in their location.

1. Does the regular clientele fit the general demographics/characteristics of league players? Are the people in the establishment you are considering similar to the people you have seen playing darts, pool and foosball in other locations?
2. Is the location owner one who appears to be consistently improving the operation? Is the attitude positive and progressive or passive and unenergetic? Your best potential league locations, of course, will be the locations that have the greatest desire to increase revenues and profits. Establishments that appear to be "lazy" may not take the proactive role necessary to build a successful league. Look for initiative.
3. Who are the "leader personalities" in the locations? Would they be endorsers or detractors of league ideas? Some operators have found that getting a key personality in the establishment behind the formation of a league is quite important in terms of recruiting players and creating the right level of excitement. A leader personality need not be a bartender or an owner. It may be a steady customer who has leadership qualities and enjoys getting others to join in the fun. Finding this personality will be well worth the time in terms of developing a new league.
4. A location whose owner may not have the initiative to help start a league can still be a good location – if there are dart, pool, and/or foosball players who frequent the location. It may take more work, but the effort will pay off. And once a location has dart leagues, the owner will see the positive effect on revenues and will most likely be of significant assistance in the future.

If you are considering a traveling league, you'll have to think about the distance between the different locations you'll approach. Since teams will be traveling from one location to another every week, you will want to make sure that travel isn't too far or too difficult. And the closer the locations are, the more likely that friendly competition and strong camaraderie will develop. The further the locations are from each other, the greater the obstacles in recruiting players.

As you are approaching the location owners, try to determine if they are enthusiastic about the program. How they receive your pitch on the opportunity may be the way that they will support the league all along. The league program is an attractive one to the location owner who gets a big return on a relatively small investment. Those who endorse the idea quickly will be the ones who will promote and support the program with the greatest level of enthusiasm. Enthusiasm is key, and you'll want to target establishments where you can detect it and where you can find a cooperative spirit.

Preparing Proposals

Once you have selected the establishments that you want to target for your league, you will have to propose the idea to the location owners. You'll probably have only a small window of opportunity to present your idea, so be brief, benefit oriented and memorable.

Practice your presentation carefully. You might even want to begin with the least likely prospect on your list. They will provide a rehearsal for you and are likely to ask some questions and bring up some objections, which may not have occurred to you, thus, providing you with some practice at a low risk since they were your least likely prospect. If they say "yes", you know you have sharpened your presentation and can look forward to a successful presentation on your next call.

Your presentation should address the following key points that show the benefits location owners will realize if they promote leagues in their establishments.

1. They will make money. Every week, two or more teams will come into their establishment to compete on each league night. They will practice between matches. They will bring their friends with them. They will all eat and drink in the establishment. Even if you are planning only in-house leagues, the location owner will have more people in the establishment than if there were not a league. Leagues bring in people, on otherwise slow nights, who will buy food and beverage and play other coin-operated equipment as well.
2. Leagues develop customer loyalty. Leagues give patrons another reason to go to a particular location.
3. Develop more customers. Patrons want to be where the action is, where the people are, where they can have fun.
4. Improve customer relationships. Leagues provide an easy way to show customers that the establishment is doing something special for them.
5. Leagues keep dart-playing customers. And these dart players attract new dart players.
6. Dart leagues appeal to all levels of players. The mixed doubles format makes the game especially social and enjoyable.
7. Increase business and profits on slow nights. Most establishments will schedule dart leagues on nights that are otherwise slow.

As you approach the location owner, you will not have very much time. Consolidate the key messages you want to communicate into no more than 10 pages of graphics and text. Personalize the presentation to specific locations and be sure to leave the proposal with the location owner after you have made the in-person pitch. The proposal can be included in a packet of information you have prepared to take with you on visits to prospective accounts. Be sure to leave the owner with a printed document that can be reviewed later.

These packets might include:

1. The personalized proposal for their location --- from equipment placement to league wind-up.
2. A list of responsibilities of all parties to the league:
 - the account
 - the league operator
 - the dart league coordinator
 - team captains
3. Samples of league promotional materials including:
 - Sign up sheets & posters
 - league rules
 - score sheets
 - weekly team and player standings
 - tournament posters
 - information on league affiliated associations

It might be a good tactic to visit the location owner on a slow night when the lack of business is very clear, and at a time when the owner has time to listen to a new idea.

Many accounts can be rather complacent about your "little" league. This is because they do not understand the value of that "little" league to their bottom line. The location must be shown what the value really is. There is no greater ally to the successful operation of leagues than the location owner/manager who realizes an opportunity when they see it. It is your first responsibility to bring that key person on board.

Written Contracts

According to an article in RePlay Magazine written by Larry Merritt, attorney at law, one of the biggest mistakes operators make is to fail to have their locations sign written agreements. Operators who fail to obtain written contracts experience more customer disputes and the loss of customers to competitors. Although some operators say that locations refuse to sign them...that competitors are offering equipment without contracts... that franchisers will not let the franchisees sign contracts...and so on, the reality is that location owners sign contracts all the time (consider the complex lease they sign for the retail space of their business). So there is no reason they cannot sign one with you.

Many can find it uncomfortable to request that a new customer sign a formal contract. Most would prefer to conduct business on simple handshake. Based on Larry's 25 years' of legal experience, he will assure you of this fact: when you insist on a formal contract in the beginning, the business relationship is stronger and longer lasting. In some cases when a signed contract is not asked for, the customer may not respect you and may seek to take advantage of the situation.

Here are 10 reasons why you should have a written location contract with your customers.

1. **TERM.** The contract creates a set period of time during which the locations must continue to do business with you. This gives you the opportunity to recover your investment in the location and make a profit. Otherwise, the location can terminate the relationship at any time.
2. **ELIMINATE COMPETITION.** Competitors cannot lawfully take a location from you during the term of a written agreement. When there is no contract, the location is fair game.
3. **CERTAINTY.** A written agreement defines the relationship and responsibilities. A contract determines such issues as who pays for damaged or stolen equipment, who pays the taxes on the equipment, and who gets to select what equipment is placed at the location. Under an oral agreement, these issues are uncertain and the location owner may require the operator to assume these costs and liabilities.
4. **ENFORCEABLE.** The written contract gives you the right to sue to collect your profits. An old adage states that an "oral contract is not worth the paper it is written on." It is difficult to successfully sue to enforce an oral agreement. On the other hand, courts respect written contracts.
5. **VALUABLE ROUTE.** A route has real value if it is supported by written contracts. A route can be sold as a viable business. However, it will be difficult to sell a route that is based on oral agreements. Why buy a route when a competitor can steal the locations away at any time?
6. **VALUABLE COLLATERAL.** A bank is more likely to lend money to an operator when the route is based on written contracts. The loan officer can inspect and rely upon the written contracts as an indication that the business will earn a future profit. A bank may be reluctant to lend money to a business that could lose its customers at any time.
7. **EASIER DISPUTE RESOLUTION.** Disputes can be resolved by mediation or arbitration when there is a written contract. Oral agreements must be resolved by expensive court litigation.
8. **ATTORNEY FEES & COSTS.** Attorney fees and costs can be awarded to an operator who brings an action to enforce a written contract. An oral agreement cannot be the basis for an award of attorney fees.
9. **A LEGACY.** Written contracts survive the passing of a route owner. The route is an asset that can be left to one's heirs. On the other hand, without a written contract, all of the locations could be stolen by competitors upon the death of a route owner and deprive the heirs of receiving anything of value.
10. **PROFESSIONALISM.** A location owner is more likely to respect you as a professional businessperson if you present a written contract. It shows that you are sophisticated and run your business in a proficient manner.

NOTE: Larry Merritt, author of the "standard location contract" used by many operators industry-wide recently returned to his practice in Southern California after a sabbatical.

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Keeping the Account

Once you have the account, it is imperative that you keep that account enthused and ensure that the account feels appreciated. This can be accomplished in a variety of ways, not the least of which is by ongoing communication and reiteration of your commitment to the location.

Financial Commitments

The topic of mutual appreciation is most important when discussing the areas of financial support by the location toward the operation of the league, particularly team sponsorship or league sponsorship. The lack of paperwork of the documented agreement can cause problems collecting on financial commitments of some locations.

A simple way to alleviate these situations is to prepare an invoice on the spot, in triplicate. As the operator, keep one copy, give one to the account, and place the third copy in the coin box with the understanding that the commitment agreed to will be collected on a regular basis from the coin box based on matches played in the location.

When a collection is done, the invoice from the coin box is adjusted to reflect the credit, and the balance is carried to the next time out. This collection process does two things: it allows you to keep up with the commitment made by the location, and by issuing a receipt for monies collected, reminds the account that your promises regarding continued and regular play are being kept. When receipts for monies collected for house sponsorship is issued, it also gives the account his paperwork for tax purposes.

Pulling the Equipment for a Special Event

At certain times during the year, there may be occasions when the operator is required to put together a quantity of equipment for a major tournament or play-off format. Even though you included a provision for this in your written agreement with the location owner/manager, there may be a small amount of animosity generated by the location toward the operator because it inevitably happens over a weekend and because your equipment has become an integral part of the location's business.

Be sure to address this scenario with the locations at the beginning of the year when you outline the season for your accounts. A fully informed account who is included in the plans for the upcoming season, including tournaments and special events, will be much more amenable to these minor inconveniences. Ensure that these locations understand that special events are not only very important to the continued success and overall promotional game plan for the league year but also can benefit the location with the increased visibility in the community. This increased visibility may be as simple as placing a sign near the machine at the event that indicates that the machine was placed there with the compliments of (Name of Location) or by providing them the opportunity to provide door prizes, trophies, plaques, and/or other sponsorship opportunities.

When the locations take advantage of additional sponsorship opportunities, be sure to provide them additional recognition by encouraging them to be on hand to make the trophy/plaque presentation, and including their name on the award that was sponsored and on the promotional materials. Accounts like to have their name in lights and their contributions well recognized for all to see.