

CREATING SKIERS

It's not easy, it's rarely glamorous, but creating new customers is essential to your health. Here are some ways to get 'er done.

BY RON LEMASTER

For years now, the ski industry has worried that the total number of active skiers and snowboarders is, at best, flat, or, at worst, declining. The NSAA Model for Growth provides figures that tell us what percentage of people taking beginner classes each year have "converted" to core participants, or lapsed into inactivity, or returned after a hiatus. The hard work, though, comes in creating a steady flow of newcomers.

That work is sometimes muddled by the imperative for snowsports school to also be a profit center. As resorts have become more bottom-line-oriented in the past 20 years, ski school as profit center has sometimes overshadowed its role in customer development. It hasn't always been this way; until some time around the late 1970s or early 1980s, the primary function of the ski school was to produce skiers and create an expanding and ongoing market.

The pressures of the newer profit role have served, in many cases, to subjugate the older one. Is it possible that this shift helps explain the market stagnation the industry has bemoaned for the past decade or more?

Still, a number of schools have figured out how to get a lot of people of all ages on skis and snowboards for the first time in their lives, and turn a significant percentage of these newbies into long-term

Ron LeMaster has spent more than 30 years as a ski instructor and coach. A technical advisor to the U.S. Ski Team and Vail Ski School, he has written four books on skiing.

skiers. For a number of reasons, day areas teach more beginners than destination resorts. People are more likely to give skiing and riding a whirl if it doesn't require a large commitment of money and time. Perhaps that explains why day areas with small vertical rises and access to large population centers offer some of the most innovative instruction programs.

KIDS SKIING

Ski areas have been running big numbers of school children and teens through their various programs for decades. Are these programs converting kids to long-time skiers and riders?

Glen Peterson, the snowsport school director at Hyland Hills outside Minneapolis, believes his programs have among the highest conversion rates in the country. One of the keys to success, he adds, is short multi-week ski school programs. After much experimentation with different lengths, all Hyland's programs are now three weeks long. Anything longer, Peterson opines, scares some people away.

Most snowsport schools report that their year-to-year-retention rates remain pretty high as long as they provide programs as kids age. In other words, kids who were in a middle-school program will continue to ski at the area when they're in high school as long as there is a program explicitly provided for them. Otherwise, participation fades.

There are many examples of continuing programs, but Bretton Woods offers one of our favorites: 14-year-olds who

have been through the programs for younger skiers can come back as assistant instructors. That makes them heroes, and gives the younger kids a goal to shoot for. Brilliant!

FAMILIES SKIING

We all know that kids who have been bitten by the skiing and riding bug are more likely to continue if there are more programs for them, or if their parents ski or ride, too. And the most important parent is mom. That's pretty obvious, too: Whenever you visit a day area with an active kids program, you'll see parents, usually mothers, sitting in the base lodge reading, working on computers, and otherwise killing time while their children are having a great time learning to ski.

Some ski schools see this as an opportunity, and actively work to get those parents into ski school. Hyland Hills requires parental participation in its programs for three- and four-year-olds. For other kids' programs, a voluntary meeting is held for all parents after the first session, and that meeting is used to pitch the parents' participation, at a greatly discounted rate, in their own learn-to-ski program that runs in parallel with the kids programs. Peterson reports that simple actions like this, and scheduling the start and finish times of adult lessons so that they mesh conveniently with those of the kids (adults start a short time later and end a short time sooner), along with attractive pricing, brings 20 to 25 percent of those parents into ski school.

At Perfect North Slopes in Indiana,



Top: Boston Mills/Brandywine taps into the young adult market with its Midnight Madness, from 8 p.m. until 2 a.m. Far right: Perfect North Slopes encourages parents to take lessons with their kids so parents can learn how to teach them. Right: Hyland Hills makes lessons appealing to kids and enjoys a high conversion rate.

one program puts parents in classes with their kids, and parents learn both how to ski and how to help teach their kids.

In Pennsylvania, the members of the Pennsylvania Ski Areas Association provide free skiing for fourth and fifth grade students who ski with an adult. That program is being extended to include a free lesson for parents, to further encourage them to get them out of the base lodge and onto the hill.

Jon Stepelton, the snowsports school director at Boston Mills/Brandywine, Ohio, another significant creator of skiers, reports that the areas are putting together a new program for next year, specifically directed at getting both parents and their children on skis for the first time, and skiing together. They've been doing this informally for a while, where the parents ski with the children during the last week of the kid's program, so the kids can show their parents what they've learned. The new program will give parents instruction while the children are getting instruction, and bring them together near the end of the program. Parents receive free lift tickets and rental gear if they need them, and those who are already skiers and snowboarders get advice on teaching their children and how to ski and ride with their kids.



YOUNG ADULTS AND BEYOND

Not all newcomers are kids, of course. And there are plenty of programs that bring older folks into the fold.

College students are one key market. Hyland Hills has a tie-in with the University of Minnesota in which college students are bused to the ski area for lessons for which they receive phys ed credit from the university. Several other colleges do the same thing; more would if resorts made this an option.

Post-grads are important, too. Boston Mills/Brandywine caters to twenty- and thirty-somethings with its "Midnight Madness" program. This provides skiing on Friday nights throughout the season, from 8 p.m. to 2 a.m. Many of these programs have a theme, and many include special prices for those with college IDs. The program is aimed at adult beginners and advanced beginners, and employs

station teaching: instructors are stationed at fixed locations around the slopes, and students stop by for instruction at their own pace.

Boston Mills/Brandywine has also had success promoting ski lessons at the large tubing hill (20 lanes) that is part of the same operational entity as the ski areas. Tubers are offered a discounted lift, lesson, and equipment rental package. Stepelton says that participation in this cross-promotion program has really taken hold this year, its third, as people have become more aware of it.

A new program offered last year by Perfect North Slopes in conjunction with a local health club also appeals to a mature crowd. The program combines an indoor fitness program with a learn-to-ski package. In its first year, the numbers were small—less than 50 participants—but 80 percent of them bought some sort

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of season-long pass, such as a once-a-week or full pass. That's solid evidence of this program's ability to attract and create committed skiers.

TECHNOLOGY

Much of the innovation that's helping put new skiers on the hill is taking place in administrative offices—and more specifically, on screens of all sizes and types. Blue Mountain in Pennsylvania is using RTP software to help communicate with ski school customers, produce ticketing that simplifies the area's lift, lesson, and equipment rental operations, and collect useful information about customers on an ongoing basis. All this while saving the customers money on their tickets and time getting on the hill. The ticket stock is reusable, is good at the lift, the rental shop and the ski school, and is "re-loadable." When a skier with

such a ticket wants to go skiing, he or she can go online and buy, say, lift access for the next day. For this, the customer gets a \$3 discount on the lift ticket, and can walk right to the lift, bypassing the ticket window.


The sizeable task of communicating with and administering the large numbers of programs run through most ski schools is being made more manageable with social media. Several have a Facebook page for each one of their programs, as well as the ski school in general. These pages are used to promote, manage and monitor the programs and their participants. Stepelton says that this work has become so important to the management of the programs at Boston Mills/Brandywine that they have created a new position specifically to oversee it.

INSTRUCTORS & TEACHING


Ski schools who are successful at turning beginners into returning skiers will tell you that putting the right instructors

in front of those beginners is a key element in the equation. Alicia Houchen and Rob Linde at Eldora Mountain Resort echo others when they say empathy, patience, and a sincere interest in the students themselves are the most important skills. Studies that Tom Pedigrew at Park City has done on his school's retention rates show that results are independent of the instructor's years of experience (beyond the first year or two), certification or personal skiing ability. Instead, he says, his rates track with the same characteristics cited by Houchen and others. With beginners, empathy trumps expertise.

Pay can pay off, too. Pedigrew cites a big increase in retention rates, from 13 percent to 23 percent, after the snowsports school instituted its Level 1 Master pay program for instructors. An instructor who has a 25 percent level 1 group lesson retention ratio (measured over a two-week period) or has participated in Level 1 Masters training is paid the





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“request rate,” which is 50 percent more than the instructor’s assigned lesson rate. Park City also pays a \$10 bonus to instructors for each level 1 student who signs up for another lesson. That, too, focuses instructors on retention.

Some ski schools also claim that they improve their product, and consequently their conversion rates, by being more open-minded and imaginative in the way they actually teach skiing. Steve DeBenedictis at Bretton Woods says the resort has found that by spending time on a wider range of walking, sliding and stepping exercises on the flat early in the lesson, students’ progress is noticeably accelerated once they get to sliding down the slope.

SolVista Basin at Granby Ranch in Colorado offers a guaranteed one-day direct-to-parallel approach that, according to snowsport school director John Rainey, recognizes and leverages the advances in ski design over the last decade to get beginners skiing less defen-

sively, and hence with less fatigue and anxiety. And they learn quickly: Rainey says that most students do, indeed, “get it” in one day.

Perfect North takes the station teaching system used in the Boston Mills/Brandywine “Midnight Madness” program one step further. It sells a “flex” lesson ticket on busy days that is good any time during an eight-hour period. A new class goes out whenever enough students have accumulated, and they then progress through teaching stations staffed by different instructors.

VALUE AND INCENTIVES

Money talks to customers as well as instructors. Anything a snowsport school can do to improve the perceived value to beginners will help attract them to lessons and induce them to keep skiing and riding.

Park City bolsters its value proposition by limiting class sizes to five and pricing its “Start Now” product at \$25 per

session, including the lift ticket. The program includes five sessions, a number chosen to match the number of times NSAA’s Model for Growth says are needed to convert a beginner into a long-term skier. Pedigrew says that of the 3,000 people who participated in the program last season, 13 percent bought some sort of product from the ski school again this winter.

At Boston Mills/Brandywine, a lesson is included in the price of the lift ticket. In the mind of a customer, that makes the lesson free—or a service already paid for. Both perceptions encourage participation. SolVista’s “Get on the Snow” program includes two days of instruction, lift tickets, and equipment for beginners—plus a season pass—all for \$199.

All of this shows that committed programs are making an impact through attention to the basics and creative thinking. Hopefully, others will follow their lead, and we will see growing numbers of skiers and riders enjoying our sports. ■

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