

Beginners at Park City StartNOW

• BY HARRIET WALLIS



When you think of converting beginners into lifelong snowsports enthusiasts, ski and snowboard school is the first department that comes to mind. Beginners mean beginner lessons, and a strong pool of ski and snowboard instructors who become ambassadors of the sport to novice guests. When it comes to increasing conversion, a lot of responsibility rests on the shoulders of instructors.

Park City Mountain Resort (PCMR) in Utah blew the doors off all previous learner deals during the 2009/10 season with its StartNOW program, which offered a complete learn-to-ski package of lift, lesson, and rentals for just \$25. What's more, it invited the beginners to come back four more times for \$25 each time. The only catch: StartNOW was for Utah residents only.

"Powdr, Corp., the parent corporation of eight resorts, asked us and the other properties to address the flat and/or declining skier days in the industry," says Tom Pettigrew, PCMR's ski and snowboard school director. "We latched onto the idea and implemented the underlying message of NSAA's Model for Growth: Attract the beginners."

It worked. StartNOW attracted droves of locals. About 3,000 beginners turned out to try skiing or snowboarding for the first time during the 2009/10 season, and many came back to complete all four additional sessions. The program was so successful that PCMR is offering it again this season.

Here's how it worked. For \$25, StartNOW provided an afternoon ski or snowboard lesson, equipment rentals, and a lift ticket to Utah residents six years of age and older who had never skied or snowboarded before. At the completion of the first lesson, participants were invited to return to the resort four additional times and enjoy the entire package, or any of its parts, again. For example: Some returned just to ski, ride and explore on their own. Others bought their own equipment on subsequent visits. And still others wanted the whole package again: lift ticket, rentals, and additional instruction.

The idea for a radical and inexpensive program to get locals onto the slopes had been simmering for a long time. Prior to the 2002 Salt Lake City Winter Olympics, for which PCMR was the giant slalom and snowboarding venue, the resort leveraged the pre-Olympic media buzz by introducing learn-to-ski-and-ride programs designed specifically to attract newcomers to the sport. From that experience, the resort garnered insight into how to design a larger-scale beginner learning program.

THREE KEY COMPONENTS: COST, CONVENIENCE, AND REPETITION

In taking up Powdr Corp's challenge, PCMR decided to design the program with three principles in mind: The price point could not be a barrier, the program had to be convenient for beginners, ♦

Challenge:

Park City Mountain Resort needed to create an inexpensive program to get locals onto the slopes.

Solution:

Create a program in which the price point is not a barrier. The program must be convenient for beginners and easy for them to participate five times, as in PCMR's view, it takes five times to get someone hooked on the sport. The StartNOW price was designed to overcome sticker shock and attract beginners in spite of the down economy.

Results:

Nearly 3,000 beginners participated in StartNOW during 2009/10, and 66 percent of them returned a second time. More than 90 percent of the students gave a high rating to the program, saying they wanted to participate again and would recommend it to friends. Overwhelmingly, they said they wanted to continue with the sport. The resort hopes to track the beginners for a while to see how many actually do continue.



PCMR also used a subtle but powerful incentive to get students to return. As they went through checkout on their first day, they were photographed and given a “season pass” for four more sessions. Their future was hanging around their necks. They looked, and hopefully felt, like season pass guests.

PHOTO: PARK CITY MOUNTAIN RESORT

and the resort had to make it easy for them to participate five times, as from PCMR's view, it takes five lessons to get someone hooked on the sport.

“People often don't participate because of price, fear, or both,” Pettigrew adds. “Interestingly, the fear often comes from the price. They think to themselves: ‘I have spent a lot of money. What if I don't like it?’” The StartNOW price was designed to overcome sticker shock and attract beginners in spite of the down economy.

As to convenience, the would-be beginners registered online, and their paperwork was printed and waiting for them when they arrived. They moved through the rental shop, where staff helped kids and parents learn how to gear up, then moved on to check out and proceed to the learning area. Classes formed and moved off as soon as there were five students. Along the way, mountain hosts answered questions for the guests and shepherded them along to reduce their stress level and first-time jitters.

Repetition, however, was up to the beginners. PCMR hoped that students would have

such a great first experience they would return again and again.

An example of a StartNOW success story is Utah native and local NBC TV station affiliate anchorwoman Nadine Wimmer. Along with her husband and two sons, she lives in Park City about a mile from the resort, but she had never skied until the program caught her attention. She completed all five sessions last season and immediately went on to consider a season pass for the upcoming season.

“We were right on target getting the people we want to learn the sport,” says Pettigrew.

CONTROLLING THE OUTCOME

PCMR designed its StartNOW program to eliminate issues that could cause unhappy students and program failure.

“A lot of learn-to-ski programs are compromises,” Pettigrew says. “They might have huge classes or unprepared or inexperienced instructors, or the students are set up with older equipment. Students are often treated like second-class citizens. And we want to prevent those issues and overcome those conditions.”

First of all, StartNOW beginners were required to register online ahead of time, and that allowed PCMR to control the number of students who would participate each day and be prepared for them. PCMR determined its daily limit of StartNOW participants by projecting the rental shop's capacity and factoring in the instructor-to-student ratio.

As for the equipment, all the students' equipment came from the PCMR rental shop, where the quality is controlled and the equipment is well maintained. This eliminated the problem of having students come to class with ill-fitting boots, poorly maintained equipment that was rented from somewhere else, or obsolete skis and bindings borrowed from a neighbor. StartNOW students got off to the right start with the right equipment.

Lessons were conducted by the same experienced staff that taught the destination guests, and what's more, class size was lim-

ited to five students per class – just as it is for all PCMR classes. The resort wanted to make sure that the guests who were trying skiing or snowboarding for the first time had a top-notch experience, even though the learner package cost them only a song.

BY THE NUMBERS

Nearly 3,000 beginners participated in StartNOW, and 66 percent of them returned a second time. About half the participants were skiers, and the other half snowboarders – quite different from the resort's usual ratio of 82 percent skiers and 18 percent snowboarders. Also, about half the participants were males, and the other half was represented by a lot of mothers and older females trying the sport for the first time. About half of the participants were 18 years old and younger.

WHY IT WORKED SO WELL

PCMR prides itself in having strong inter-departmental communications and a cooperative staff. Using a team approach, the resort brought together managers and supervisors from all the departments that would be affected by StartNOW, including representatives from the ski and snowboard school, mountain hosts, rental shop, and ticketing. The program was explained, and they bounced ideas around and made adjustments.

“We have a lot of smart people who are really good at their jobs, but a big strength is they also talk to each other,” Pettigrew said. In addition, the resort invested considerable time in training the front-line staff on how to deal with the onslaught of StartNOW participants.

PCMR also used a subtle but powerful incentive to get students to return. As they went through checkout on their first day, they were photographed and given a “season pass” for four more sessions. Their future was hanging around their necks. They looked, and hopefully felt, like season pass guests.

But StartNOW also had some rough spots. Getting the program off the ground was the

biggest issue. The marketing didn't start until November, so word got out slowly. In addition, winter in Utah also got off to a slow start. However, in January the program started to sizzle.

OFF-THE-WALL ADVERTISING

Right after the 2009/10 season ended, PCMR began to market the upcoming season's StartNOW program by distributing a small, convenient marketing piece to its off-season guests. The glossy, playing card-size mini-brochure, which gave all the basics on how to sign up for StartNOW for the 2010/11 season, was distributed at the resort's food outlets, retail shop, season pass office, and ticket windows, and was created to pique the interest of summer guests who might never have tried winter sports before. And PCMR designed the card to be so attractive that guests would hopefully pass it along to their friends.

In addition, PCMR uses a down-home approach to advertising. It has a StartNOW ad in direct marketing packets that are mailed to all local residents. StartNOW is right there along with ads for tire discounts, nail salons, and lawn services.

Furthermore, in another unusual approach, PCMR Marketing and Communications Director Krista Parry took the stage before a showing of the film "New Moon" at a theater in Salt Lake City. Close to 1,200 people attended the event, including many mothers and daughters. Parry explained the details of StartNOW and gave away complimentary StartNOW packages.

TRACKING THE PROGRAM AND THE FUTURE

Since would-be students registered online and provided their email addresses, PCMR sent out

a welcoming pre-arrival email. Then, after the first day of class, it followed up with an email survey. The results were astounding, with more than 90 percent of the students giving a high rating to the program, saying they wanted to participate again and that they'd recommend it to friends. Overwhelmingly, the respondents said they wanted to continue with the sport. The resort hopes to track the beginners for a while to see how many actually do continue.

"We'd like to see what happens to these people over time," Pettigrew says, adding that they hopefully will have a positive long-term affect on the industry. The short-term view, he says, is that PCMR took a loss at \$25 a head, but the long-term view is that it's an investment in the future of the ski industry.

Harriet Wallis is a freelance ski writer who was named Ski Utah's Journalist of the Year. ■





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