

Boreal: Beginner to Season Pass Holder Is as Easy as 1-2-3

• BY HARRIET WALLIS •



Boreal Mountain Resort's "1-2-3 Ride Free" program is more than a learn-to-ski product. It's a product with a purpose, says General Manager Jody Churich. It's a commitment to grow beginners into life-long skiers, even while recognizing that they will ultimately gravitate to skiing or snowboarding at larger resorts.

Boreal is located just off busy Interstate 80 in California at Donner Summit. It's only 40 minutes from Reno and 90 minutes from Sacramento, so most of Boreal's skiers and riders commute from those metropolitan areas for the day. But given Boreal's close proximity, many guests also come for the night skiing that operates seven nights a week.

While there are larger ski areas in the vicinity, Boreal has the advantage of not only being the closest resort to the cities, but it also has its own highway exit for uncomplicated access. Boreal's motto printed on its trail map is: "Come to Boreal for a day you are likely to remember, without the drive you would like to forget."

The resort even posts an online calculator to its website in order to further emphasize travel mileage, time, and cost advantages over the other nearby resorts. Choose the name of a resort and the calculator's numbers roll like a slot machine. When they stop, the numbers show how many miles shorter it is from Sacramento to Boreal, how much drive time is saved, and its price advantage on two adult lift tickets.

The 480-acre resort has a 500-foot elevation rise, 41 trails, and four terrain parks. It attracts mostly families and those 13 to 24 years old. It receives up to 200,000 skier visits annually. The resort revels in focusing on three aspects: affordability, accessibility, and youth, says Marketing Director Jon Slaughter.

FROM BEGINNER TO SEASON PASS AND BEYOND

Boreal's beginner retention program is straightforward. Beginners who complete three lessons in Boreal's 1-2-3 Ride Free program can return on a fourth day to get a complimentary, unrestricted, all-mountain season pass valid for the rest of that season. Then, with free season passes hanging around their necks, the new skiers and riders have a lot of motivation to return to Boreal again and again to enjoy the mountain, the fresh air, the exercise, and all the benefits that go with season passes.

"The selling point is value," says Slaughter. The beginner gets three days of lifts, lessons, and rental equipment for \$120, and the free season pass is valued at \$399, he says.

The pricing breaks down this way. Newbies register online and pay full price for the first lift, lesson, and rental package (\$70 non-holiday or \$80 holiday). Then they can get two more packages for just \$25 each, bringing the three-package total to \$120. Pricing for the 2011/12 season was still under consideration at press time. ♦

CHALLENGE

Based on internal research, Boreal recognized that the average guest visits the resort just twice a season.

SOLUTION

To address the problem, the area developed the three-day 1-2-3 Ride Free program with the intention of boosting the average guest visitation. Guests must return a fourth day in order to pick up the season pass. Equipped with their season pass, new skiers and riders are more likely to hit the slopes for a fifth day or more.

RESULTS

More than 14,600 beginners participated in the program during the 2010/11 season, with 44 percent returning for additional sessions. Nearly 2,000 students, or 14 percent, completed all three sessions, and more than 1,000 of them returned a fourth time to claim the free season pass. Of those, 668 beginners, or 5 percent, returned to ski and ride five days or more during the 2010/11 season.

Everyone who takes a beginner lesson can participate in 1-2-3 Ride Free, and the program is open to everyone aged 4 and older. Upon completion of their first lesson, guests receive a card from the instructor with details of how to continue in the program. The card directs guests to register online where they receive the coupon to return for the discounted lesson package.

There are no scheduling restrictions or black-out days, so students may take their second and third lesson anytime during the season, but they must complete each lesson from beginning to end to get credit for it. With the motivation of earning a season pass, students tend to return for the follow-up lessons sooner rather than later.

The ski school is equally motivated. To ensure that guests take advantage of the program, ski instructors get monetary incentives for each guest that returns to the 1-2-3 Ride Free program.

To further incentivize beginners to continue their new sport, Boreal offers them a “killer” deal for the following season: a season pass at roughly half price.

“We found that when people try the sport and like it, they are willing to commit to it,” Slaughter says.

In addition to its innovative learn to ski program, Boreal looks to the future with an extensive plan that will continue to encourage youthful athletes. It plans to build a \$5-million, 33,000-square foot, year-round training center at the base of the resort in 2012 where young and elite ski, snowboard, skate, and BMX athletes can train. The Woodward Tahoe facility will be the largest of its kind in the United States with an indoor skate park, ski/ride ramps, foam pits, and trampolines as well as an outdoor park and pipe riding facility.

COOKBOOK VARIATION

While the NSAA beginner cookbook defines a “core” skier or snowboarder as a guest who participates five or more days a year, Boreal had to take its guests’ purchasing habits into account when it designed the program. Based on internal research, Boreal recognized that the average guest visits the resort just twice a season.

Therefore, it decided to make the 1-2-3 Ride Free a three-day program with the intention of boosting the average guest visitation. Then, resort officials reasoned, with a season pass, new skiers and riders would have good reason to hit the slopes for a fifth day or more.

Also based on its research, Boreal learned that 62 percent of the participants learned about the program through family or friends, while another 22 percent read about it on the internet.

Boreal introduced its 1-2-3 Ride Free program during the 2009/10 season and again offered it in the 2010/11 and 2011/12 seasons.

“The most important thing is that we build a program with a purpose, not just a product,” says Churich. “We recognize that we are a ‘feeder’ resort, so we made a long-term commitment to stimulate and grow beginners.”

TARGET AUDIENCE

Information from the 1-2-3 Ride Free registration provided Boreal with a host of consumer data, so the area could really narrow down who was using the program, Slaughter says. “We have zip codes and ages. It’s mostly 8- to 12-year-old kids and their parents aged 35 to 44. They come from very specific areas that we can now target with marketing.”



Consumer information gathered from the 1-2-3 Ride Free registration process allowed Boreal to analyze which consumers were taking advantage of the program, including their age and zip code. The bulk of the participants are made up of 8- to 12-year-old kids and their parents aged 35 to 44.

Boreal sent e-blasts to 1-2-3 Ride Free participants announcing great deals on rentals, future lessons, and season passes, and the resulting sales were robust.

WORKING OUT THE KINKS

As with any new endeavor or program, some systematic glitches arose. As Slaughter explains, Boreal assumed that all of its guests were simply there for the day.

“We didn’t take into account the people who were staying in nearby hotels and rental ski houses,” says Slaughter. “We soon found that they also wanted to participate in the 1-2-3 Ride Free program, but they couldn’t register online because they didn’t have a computer and printer where they were staying. So I let them come into my office and register, and I had a line of people going out of my office door.”

Boreal found a quick solution by installing kiosks in the rental shop so guests can easily sign up for the program. Another snag came in the form of too much snow. During the 2010/11, the program’s second season, heavy snowfalls created problems. Boreal, which averages 400 inches of snow a year, received 780

inches instead. It got 30 feet of snow in March.

“We live or die by the interstate, and there were lots of road closures and times when chains were required. It stifled the day travelers,” Slaughter says. Subsequently, participation in the 1-2-3 Ride Free program was lower than anticipated during those periods.

THE RESULTS

During the 2008/09 season, when 1-2-3 Ride Free was introduced, more than 10,500 beginners took ski school lessons. During the 2009/10 season, the number of beginner ski school visits shot up dramatically, and in 2010/11, more than 14,600 beginners participated. And despite the effects of too much snow hampering access to the resort, 44 percent of the 14,600 beginners returned for additional sessions. Nearly 2,000 students, or 14 percent, completed all three sessions, and more than 1,000 of them returned a fourth time to claim the free season pass. Of those, 668 beginners, or five percent, returned to ski and ride five days or more during last season. That’s a significant increase over the strong 2009/10 season, a winter without heavy snow interference, when just 431 beginners returned five days or more. ■

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