

Calling All Departments: Liberty Expands Conversion Focus to Entire Staff

• BY KELLY COFFEY



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.

However, conversion doesn't begin and end with the ski school. When other departments jump in, focusing on creating a great first-time experience, those efforts complement and magnify the efforts of the ski school. Pennsylvania's Liberty Mountain Resort experienced those results firsthand.

REVITALIZING THE MOUNTAIN PASSPORT

"We specialize in teaching people to ski and snowboard for the first time," said Liberty's general manager, Eric Flynn. Located in Carroll Valley, Liberty is an easy drive from the markets of Baltimore; Washington, D.C.; and Northern Virginia. The 16-trail resort sees approximately 200,000 skier and snowboarder visits a year, according to Marketing Director Anne Weimer.

When NSAA released the Model for Growth, challenging resorts to focus on converting beginners into lifelong participants, Liberty answered six years ago with a beginner-focused product called the Mountain Passport Program, according to Flynn. The Mountain Passport is a booklet of discounts that encourage first-time skiers and snowboarders to come back again and again.

The \$45 mini-booklet resembles an actual passport and contains coupons that guests use to redeem a free "All Mountain Package" (lift, lesson, and rentals – a \$106 value) for their next visit. They also earn free class lessons and 40 percent off lift tickets and rentals for the rest of the season. The Passport is designed to fit in a wallet, encouraging guests to keep it with them throughout the winter.

For the first few years the Passport was available, only the staff of Liberty's ski and snowboard school pushed this product. Management fine-tuned the program each year, seeing incremental growth in sales. But to truly drive growth in converting beginners into loyal skiers and riders, Liberty realized they needed not just a small tweak but a whole new company-wide strategy.

It became clear that relying only on the ski school to focus on the Mountain Passport wasn't enough. The resort needed a way to get more beginners into this program. To jump-start sales of the

Mountain Passport, Liberty's leadership realized they needed to do two things to the program: First, they needed to expand the number of employees focused on Passport sales; second, they needed to be able to better track exactly how the Passport was working to convert first-timers. "We wanted a more definitive way to measure our success," Flynn said.

For the 2009/10 season, instead of relying only on the ski and snowboard school to drive Passport sales, Liberty made Passport sales the focus of every employee, in every department. ♦

Challenge:

Liberty Mountain Resort needed to figure out a way to boost sales of its beginner-focused Mountain Passport Program.

Solution:

Instead of relying solely on instructors to sell the product, Liberty made Mountain Passport sales the focus of every department. The resort also tracks sales on a weekly basis as well as coupon redemptions to monitor the progress of first-timers in becoming dedicated skiers and riders.

Results:

Sales of the Mountain Passport improved each year since its introduction. During the 2009/10 season, 28 percent of the 17,200 first-time lesson takers bought the Mountain Passport, up from 20 percent in 2008/09. Of those Passport holders, 72 percent redeemed their free second day.

Yes, the lesson experience is crucial for first-time guests to want to come back to the sport. However, those guests evaluate their whole day – from the process at the ticket window to the friendliness of the lift operator, from the hassle of parking to the comfort of their boots – to decide if the sport was worth their time, according to Flynn.

With that in mind, in the summer of 2009 Flynn gave each department head the directive to make the Mountain Passport program their focus. The goal of each department was that every person on staff would buy into the program with the same commitment as the ski and snowboard school, Flynn said.

"We started last summer to allow departments to dial in what they needed to do," he said.

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THROUGH THE GUESTS' EYES

With the new multidepartment focus, by the time students enter their lessons, they're already well into the sales process.

Here's how the guest experiences the product: When a first-time skier or snowboarder arrives at the base area, the first thing he or she sees is an informational booth in front of the ticket window. Here, an employee helps the guest figure out the right programs and where to go. This way, the guest's first impression isn't an overwhelmed feeling while staring at the ticket window's menu board.

Once directed to the ticket window to purchase a lesson, the first-time guest is given a handout advertising the Mountain Passport Program. The employee at the ticket window tells the guest briefly about the program. The employee also tells the guest that his or her instructor will talk about the program and where it can be purchased.

The guest then leaves the ticket window and heads to the rental shop and ski school. Upon arriving at the lesson meeting spot, he or she is greeted by a supervisor who reminds the guest of the program again. Once again the guest is told that his or her instructor will talk more about the program. At the end of the lesson, as promised, the instructor gives the final sales pitch for the Mountain Passport.

Complementing this multistep sales process, Liberty keeps the marketing collateral highly visible. Along with the Passport-specific brochure at the ticket window, guests read about the Mountain Passport Program on the resort's website, in the resort's main brochure, on banners and signs throughout the base area, and even on instructors' business cards.

"We've made the message as clear as we can and as prominent as we can," Weimer said.

IF YOU CAN MEASURE IT...

Following the mantra, "if you can measure it, you can manage it," Liberty tracks the results

of the Mountain Passport Program every step of the way. The resort tracks total first-time lessons, Passports purchased, redemption and usage, and future purchases like season passes and other discount cards. This allows Liberty see the effects this program has on converting first-timers into lifelong snowsports enthusiasts. It also lets the resort identify weaknesses in the process.

Because it studies the numbers on a weekly basis, Liberty is able to react quickly if Passport sales slump for any reason. If last week's sales were soft, the ticketing supervisors will reinforce to the ticket sellers to make sure they tell everybody about the program and hand out the brochures.

Since this program lives and dies with the instructor who is selling it, Liberty takes great efforts to keep the Mountain Passport at the top of instructors' minds. At weekly ski school staff meetings, resort management announces the total number of Mountain Passports sold that week, the percentage of buy-in based on lessons taught, and the top-selling instructors for that week.

"Everybody keeps track of the sales percentages – it's become kind of a friendly competition between the ski school and snowboard school, and between individuals," said Director of Mountain Services Steve Martin.

FULL RESORT BUY-IN

The Mountain Passport Program started six years ago and has been getting better results each year. For the 2009/10 season, 28 percent of the 17,200 first-time lesson takers bought the Mountain Passport, up from 20 percent in 2008/09. Of those Passport holders, 72 percent redeemed their free second day.

Weimer credits the yearly increase in results for expanding the focus beyond the ski school staff. "It just works so much better when it's a full resort buy-in and everyone's on board," she said. ■