

Drawing the Line on Lines: Cascade Mountain Optimizes the Rental Process

• BY KELLY COFFEY



To engineer a good snowsports experience, first-time skiers and snowboarders need an easy way to navigate the base area to get their lift tickets, rentals, and lessons. But the experience doesn't end there. Even the best base area layout falls flat when those guests have to wait in four different lines before they ever step on snow.

Cascade Mountain, located in Portage, Wis., is 150 miles from Chicago. It gets the bulk of its customers driving from the Windy City, Madison, and Milwaukee. The 10-chairlift resort sees 150,000-200,000 skier/snowboarder visits each year, according to Randy Axelson, vice president of sales and marketing. Their sculpted beginner area, sporting three chairlifts and a conveyor lift, is a top draw for new skiers and riders looking to enter the sport. To make sure those new guests get to that spacious beginner area with smiles on their faces, the managers at Cascade challenged themselves to look deeper than just their infrastructure and layout.

2,500 RENTALS

"It used to be typical for a customer to come here on a Saturday morning and have to wait in line for 15 or 20 minutes to give us their money," Axelson says.

Busy days make the rental process a key bottleneck, since more than 30 percent of skiers and riders rent their equipment from Cascade's rental shop, according to Axelson. On a single busy Saturday, Cascade sees more than 2,500 customers go through the rental process, says Rental Shop Manager Dave Madsen. In the past, these busy days required 40 rental shop employees to fit boots, handle registration, adjust bindings, match up skis, and ring up sales. With that process, guests waited in four or five different lines before exiting the shop.

"We used to have lines going out our front door, wrapping around down the sidewalk to the main lodge," Madsen says.

It was apparent that Cascade needed to figure out how to help its guests, especially first-time skiers and riders, get from their cars to the chairlifts faster.

'NO LINES' POLICY

In 2006, Cascade took a hard look at every step of its overall guest experience. The resort identified bottlenecks in the guest's flow through the base area and onto the hill, says General Manager Rob Walz. From that detailed self-analysis, Cascade created its "No

Lines" policy, where the goal is for guests never to have to wait in a line while at the resort – even on the busiest of days.

With that vision in mind, Cascade invested heavily in improvements that would create a better guest experience in the base area. Small changes, like reducing the number of lift ticket options and simplifying their discounts, meant that ticket window transaction times were reduced. ▶

Challenge:

Cascade Mountain needed to streamline its first-time experience from car to chairlift. New skiers and riders were spending too much time in line before hitting the snow.

Solution:

Cascade pushed a resort-wide "No Lines" policy, as part of which it identified bottlenecks and looked for creative ways to eliminate lines in the base area – even on the busiest of days. The resort took particular focus on the rental shop, investing in a specialized rental equipment fleet system and redesigning the layout.

Results:

Cascade reduced the time it takes a guest to get through the rental process from 20 minutes to 12 minutes for first-time guests and to 2.5 minutes for returning guests. The resort cut the rental staff on the busiest days from as many as 40 employees to 16, and also improved its "satisfaction with the rental process" score from 7.9 to 8.7 on a 10-point scale.



In its efforts to streamline the process of getting new skiers and riders on the slopes, Cascade invested \$500,000 to upgrade their rental fleet. With this system, all boot sizes fit within three sole lengths, allowing rental techs to grab the matching ski and hand it to the customer without any adjustments to the binding length or DIN setting. In addition to the new equipment, Cascade remodeled its entire rental shop, looking at details as small as how many steps it takes an employee to grab a pair of skis. Now, when a first-time family walks into the rental shop, the standard employee greeter is complimented by televisions running a video loop that walk those first-timers through the process. Guests head straight to the self-service boot aisle. They have the option of fitting themselves or to be helped by a few rental staff members tasked with manning that area.

For instance, ticket sellers now round off purchases to the lowest quarter. While that policy means Cascade sometimes takes a hit on the sales tax, it more than makes up for those few cents by speeding up the sales process. Ticket sellers no longer waste precious minutes fumbling with pennies, nickels, and dimes.

To improve guest service, Cascade ironically focuses on creating an environment of self-service. This seemingly contradictory approach means guests have the choice to go the self-service route and speed from parking lot to snow, or seek help from available employees at each step along the way.

REINVENT THE RENTAL PROCESS

The most drastic change toward this self-service solution happened in the rental shop. Cascade invested \$500,000 to upgrade its rental fleet, according to Director of Operations Dave VonBehren. With this system, all boot sizes fit within three sole lengths. This allows rental techs to grab the matching ski and hand it to the customer without any adjustments to the binding length or DIN setting.

To leverage that investment in the new

rental system, Cascade remodeled its entire rental shop. Looking at details as small as how many steps it takes an employee to grab a pair of skis, the resort recreated the layout from scratch.

Now, when a first-time family walks into the rental shop, the standard employee greeter is complemented by televisions running a video loop that walks those first-timers through the process. Guests head straight to the self-service boot aisle, where they have the option of fitting themselves or being helped by a rental staff member.

With boots in hand, guests head to the color-coded section that matches their boot size (black, yellow, or silver). With the new shop layout, the rental tech manning each section no longer needs to walk up to 20 steps through the tight, crowded storage area. He or she only has to turn around to grab the correct-length ski.

Because returning guests already familiar with the process have the option to speed through the rental shop by themselves, staff is thereby more available to focus their attention on giving the first-timers a great experience.

“We can pick out the family who needs help and walk them through the process,” says Madsen.

BETTER CUSTOMER SERVICE WITH LESS STAFF

Once Cascade completed the rental shop renovation, what was once commonly a 30- to 45-minute wait through four different lines now takes an average of 12 minutes for first-time guests and a lightning-fast 2.5 minutes for returning guests, according to Walz.

Aside from the speed of the process, Cascade also saw huge benefits in reducing staffing numbers. On the busiest days, the rental shop could drop its staff level from nearly 40 employees before the renovation to 16 today, says Madsen. “This is my 15th season now, and it’s running smoother than ever before.”

And what about the service?

“We’re actually creating better customer service with less staff,” says Walz.

A big reason for this, he says, is that every Cascade employee is empowered to stop whatever they’re doing and help a guest in need. The self-service focus frees up more floating employees to help those who really need assistance.

Before the renovations, an annual resort study conducted by Boulder, Colo.-based RRC Associates showed Cascade earned a 7.9 on a 10-point scale for “satisfaction with the rental process.” After the changes made to the rental shop, the resort saw its score bump up to 8.7 during the 2008/09 winter, when the national average was 8.3.

When you invest as much money and energy into the guest’s base-area experience as Cascade did, it’s gratifying to hear about the positive first-time experiences you’re targeting. David Holm, a guest who coordinated a group of kids and parent chaperones, wrote the resort a raving e-mail about his group’s experience through Cascade’s rental process.

Holm wrote: “All were amazed by how quickly we got 75 people through the rental shop. We were on the snow only 20 minutes after getting off the bus.” ■