

Model for Growth: Focus on Conversion

• FOREWORD BY TROY HAWKS

At the 2009 National Convention, NSAA President Michael Berry outlined one of the primary missions of the organization; to help resorts recognize the implications of the significant demographic shifts that lie on the horizon. Simply put, as Baby Boomers – a generation that helped to build the industry into what it is today – continue to age, they will begin dropping out of the sport at an alarming rate. Without an industry-wide effort focused on attracting newer, younger participants and converting them into loyal skiers and riders, ski areas could face dramatic declines in visitation in the not-so-distant future.

The challenge can be summed up in one word: conversion. Yet it requires a much broader discussion to pinpoint an answer, and we're facing an issue that requires a whole host of solutions. No one resort department can effectively grow conversion rates on its own. Rather this effort crosses departmental boundaries. Be it guest services, ski school, rental, sales, marketing, lift operations, grooming, ski patrol, food and beverage, grounds operations, or snowmaking, all departments can affect whether or not a skier or rider returns to your resort, or any resort for that matter.

Of course, regardless of the department, there are always day-to-day concerns that take precedence, causing our long-term goals to get shelved. Yet the demographics make it clear. If we do not improve conversion rates, our visitation could decrease by 2.5 percent per season. By the 2020/21 season, our total visits could be just above 40 million, a figure we haven't experienced since the dismal 1980/81 season.

We can no longer afford to let small fires cause us to take our eye off of the proverbial ball. Our future success requires an industry-wide effort of attracting and keeping enough skiers and riders in the pipeline to continue to drive the visitation levels that we've been enjoying for the past decade.

NSAA has detailed the demographics at length. Now our effort turns toward building a discussion about the solutions. A big step in meeting this challenge is to share information. To that end, this fall NSAA sent a survey to more than 80 member resorts, asking them to share their best practices as they relate to conversion. All information provided will be posted to our new *Model for Growth, Focus On Conversion Best Practices* database on NSAA's website (www.nsaa.org). And we will continue to reach out to more resorts to build upon our knowledge base further so that the entire resort community can tap into the ideas, programs and practices that have proven successful.

Also with this issue, the *NSAA Journal* launches its new regular department, Conversion Case Studies. Each issue of the *Journal* will highlight the efforts of member resorts and their successes in converting more guests to lifelong participants. If you've realized success, please contact us at the *Journal* so we can highlight and share your story with other member resorts.

Finally, NSAA has recently updated The Conversion Cookbook, a list of 10 recommended strategies to boost beginner conversion. Though the Cookbook might not always provide the definitive answer you're looking for, it is intended to guide resorts through the process and offer some general ideas for approaching issues related to improving beginner conversion.

CONVERSION COOKBOOK **10 Recommended Strategies for** **Boosting Beginner Conversion**

Conversion is not a short-term process but rather a long-term transformation. While conversion is typically discussed in terms of an industry-wide flow of beginners into core participants, it's also important for individual ski areas to track whether beginners return. While each area is unique in its programs and customer type, having a tracking mechanism in place is very important in understanding how your area is performing in terms of moving beginners into more frequent participants.

In looking to improve beginner conversion, it's tempting to focus solely on the on-snow component of the lesson. However, the pre- and post-lesson parts of the Learning Center experience are critical as well. More importantly, the range of the beginner experience extends far beyond the actual lesson and includes pre-arrival information, arrival at the ski area, equipment rental and post-visit follow up. Of course, some beginners do not take lessons. Therefore, if your tactics for improving beginner conver-



sion are centered only on the lesson, you are very likely missing large and critical components of the beginner experience.

Your ski area may have already implemented at least some of the strategies below and also may have tried some of them in the past without success. If this is the case, it may be worth giving some of the ideas another chance; beginner conversion can be easy to lose track of in the hectic day-to-day operations of a ski area. Revisit the ideas presented here with a fresh set of eyes and a positive sense of urgency.

STRATEGY 1: Provide Information

Beginners continually express a real need for a greater level of information on what skiing and boarding will be like and what to expect overall. Resort websites are generally seen as the best tool for disseminating such information to beginners. Many resorts already have extensive pages dedicated to introducing the sport to potential participants, but some do not.

Therefore, the first recommendation is to create a web page dedicated to beginners that provides information and answers typical questions about what to expect at the resort. For resorts that already have a beginner section of their website, we underscore the importance of routinely updating the infor-

mation to best meet the needs of those trafficking your site. Important information should include clear driving directions to the resort; where to park; directions to the ticket office, rental shop or ski school (wherever beginners should go first at your particular ski area); what clothing to wear; renting equipment; advantages to taking a lesson; lesson meeting times and lengths; lunch options; and other pertinent details. Make sure the beginner page has a prominent link from your home page so it is easy to find.

STRATEGY 2: Arrival at the Resort

The arrival at the resort is a key point in the beginner experience. Make sure all your staff who will encounter beginners (which means pretty much everyone) is knowledgeable on where beginners should go first. Parking lot attendants in particular should be very well trained in providing information for first-time visitors. Ensure proper signage is in place to direct beginners (or any newcomer to your resort, for that matter) to the right place. Mountain hosts or other staff should be on hand to greet beginners at the parking lot drop-off point or at the main beginner base area, and to answer questions that beginners might have.

One of the keys to providing the beginner with an outstanding experience is identifying the beginner in the first place. Some mountains actually place a small sticker on the lift ticket of first-timers, alerting staff members to pay attention. Asking guests if they have been to your mountain before can be an effective ice breaker as well as provide the information your staff needs to know in order to provide the appropriate level of assistance. However, staff should be trained to assume that every guest is making their first visit to your area (whether they are a beginner or an advanced rider who has never been to your resort before) until they know otherwise.

STRATEGY 3: Rental Shop

While not all beginners take a lesson, nearly all rent equipment, whether it's at your resort's shop, at the shop on the access road, or at their local retailer. Thus, the rental experience is very important because it is nearly universal.

Two factors emerge as being most important in the rental shop: the crowding/wait times that occur at capacity and the proper fit of the boots. If either is done poorly, the likelihood of conversion success can be severely diminished.

It's critical to have strategies in place to deal with crowding at peak times. Pre-arrival information can emphasize the best times to come to the rental shop (early in the morning for a day area, the evening prior for a destination area). Directing people to an alternate rental facility (even if it is not company owned) might be appropriate at times. Offering reservations for equipment, ♦

either online or over the phone, could alleviate crowding as well. Managing the arrival time of large groups is important in spreading out the rental shop demand.

Maintain good quality of equipment, properly tuned and in good repair, both pre-season and in-season. Your rental fleet should turn over every three to four years. Consider creating a separate rental line for never-ever renters. Those who have rented before would enter a more streamlined process flow, while never-ever renters would be offered a higher-touch rental experience. A ski school representative should staff this area to answer questions and encourage those not already destined for a lesson to sign up for one. An alternative could be to segregate skiers and snowboarders, as they tend to move at different rates through the rental process.

Increasing efficiency and processing time in the rental shop should not be at the expense of properly fitting equipment, especially boots. Time should be allocated to providing the proper boot fit for all customers, but especially for beginners. Research shows that better-fitting boots would have made a big difference in the experience of many first-timers.

The rental shop is another location to provide information on what the rest of the day will be like. A staff person, ideally

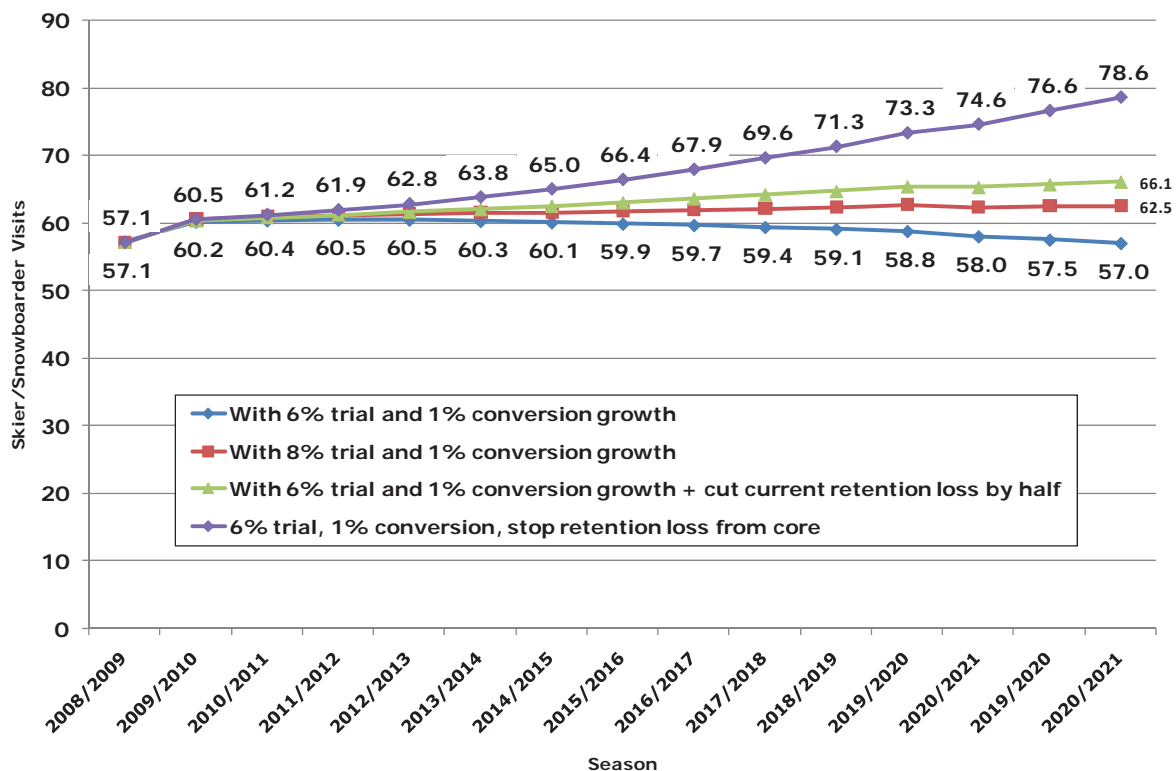
from ski school, should be on-site, at least at peak times, to answer questions, provide customer assistance, etc. Alternatively, a looping video could play in the rental shop with scenes from the rest of the day. Get creative in anticipating beginners' needs and providing what they need at the right time.

STRATEGY 4: Lesson Registration and Size of Lesson Group

The lesson experience goes beyond the actual on-snow teaching component of the lesson—it starts with registration and pre-lesson time, continues with the actual lesson itself, and concludes with post-lesson follow-up. Efficient organization of the lesson ahead of time includes: offering various options for registering or making a reservation by phone or online; upon arrival at the resort; and during the day, for those who thought they didn't need a lesson but changed their mind. Enhanced visibility and presence of the Learning Center at the mountain is particularly important for this latter group of skiers and boarders. Additionally, the registration process must be smooth, friendly, accurate and speedy.

Group size is critical to the overall success of the lesson and is among the most credible predictors of conversion. Most

Projected Skier/Snowboarder Visits Under Four Intervention Scenarios: 2008/2009 to 2020/2021



“THERE ARE RISKS AND COSTS TO A PROGRAM OF ACTION. BUT THEY ARE FAR LESS THAN THE LONG-RANGE RISKS AND COSTS OF COMFORTABLE INACTION.” – John F. Kennedy

ski areas focused on beginner conversion have a goal to limit the number of students to six to eight, a figure our research supports. While limiting group size can have negative impacts on ski school margins in the short-term, beginner conversion is more important to your resort and to the industry as a whole in the long-term.

STRATEGY 5: Grouping of Students by Athleticism and Learning Goals

The second factor in the lesson that is most essential to conversion is the grouping of students into groups of similar athleticism and desire to improve. A secondary level of criteria for group is the age of the guest, especially among kids/teens, adults and more senior guests. Most ski areas have an informal mechanism to profile students and place them in the correct group setting. Such grouping is critical to the future success of the students and sets the stage for an optimal lesson experience. You should review your procedure for placing individuals into the appropriate groups, perhaps making this process more rigorous and/or formal, and make any adjustments that might be necessary.

Additionally, you should have a procedure in place to evaluate and, if necessary, split off individuals from the group after the lesson has commenced. This reshuffling ensures that a person who slipped through the initial screening mentioned above and ends up in the wrong group can be provided with the best possible learning environment.

STRATEGY 6: Lesson Closure

You should consider structuring your lessons such that the instructor has enough time at the end of the lesson to provide individualized feedback for each student, including some encouragement to take another lesson in the near future. We recommend that each student be given a formal progress card indicating the accomplishment in the first lesson, helpful hints for the next-stage improvements and topics that would be covered in the next lesson. The progress card should also have a coupon for a follow-up lesson so that you can track your lesson retention rate.

Some resorts have created a program to offer a season pass and season rental equipment following the completion of a series of lessons. Such a program provides incentive for the beginner to stick with the sport, and it also allows for tracking of usage of the season pass once it is issued. While the creation of such a

program might be too complicated for this coming season, it is a strategy that should be considered for the future.

STRATEGY 7: Roving Instructor

One of the most popular ideas from consumer focus groups and other research was having a roving instructor in the beginner area or elsewhere on the mountain to help those not in a lesson. Recall that nationally about 40 percent of beginners do not take a lesson the first time out, and that figure may be even higher at your area. Many consumers who did not take lessons their first time out now realize that in retrospect they should have taken one. The roving instructor could offer a tip or two for a few minutes and then hand the skier or rider a business card/coupon for a lesson. This interaction could either provide the impetus to take a lesson or merely get the person over the hump enough to continue on his or her own. Either way, the free tips will certainly be appreciated, will foster loyalty to your resort, and will improve your conversion rate. The redeemed business card/coupon could be used for tracking the effectiveness of the “Rover” program and to compensate instructors for successful conversion to lesson takers.

STRATEGY 8: Staffing Beginner Lesson with the BEST Instructors

Some of your instructors are better suited than others to teaching beginners. But which ones? The answer might not be the same as your gut instinct. Identifying which instructors at your ski area have the highest rates of success is very important in improving your rate of beginner conversion.

The best instructors for teaching beginners tend to be the ones who are the best teachers – they possess good listening skills, empathy, an understanding of a variety of learning styles, enthusiasm and other attributes. Your best instructors might be young or old, male or female, skiers or snowboarders. Put in place a program to determine the best instructors for teaching beginners at your ski area. Placing value on teaching and converting beginners starts with the culture of the ski school. You might consider altering your compensation structure based on conversion rates, or merely provide a list of return lessons that is posted in the instructor locker room for “bragging rights.”

STRATEGY 9: Post-Lesson Follow-up

Many ski resorts have some structure in place for following up with lesson takers. Ideas for follow-up with students include ♦

sending a thank-you postcard or email with an invitation to return, a free gift bag with resort paraphernalia, or other information that a beginner might find useful. Use some creativity in thinking of what might appeal to a person starting in the sport. Whatever you choose to do, the most important thing is to collect some contact information so you can stay in touch with the beginners who come to your resort.

Another source of beginner names and addresses is the rental equipment forms. Some customers who rent beginner equipment do not take a lesson, and these skiers and riders will slip through the cracks if you use only your lesson database for follow-up. Consider integrating the Level I equipment renters into your follow-up strategy.

STRATEGY 10: Overall Training of Staff

Beyond the ski school, it's critical that your entire staff is supportive of first-timers and beginners. Creating a culture that values beginners, rather than diminishes them, is a real challenge. Make sure your staff understands the value of these individuals, and that they go out of their way to pay a little extra attention to them. Some mountains actually place a small sticker

on the lift ticket of first-timers, alerting staff members to pay extra attention.

Consider adding to your customer service training a module on first-time skiers. Such a session might include the common questions beginners have, how to identify and serve beginner participants, and the importance of providing an excellent overall experience for these individuals. A brief review of Model for Growth findings could also be part of the training, to communicate the long-term importance of beginners to the industry. Make sure the message is heard, and follow up during the season with employees from other departments on any issues or questions they might have.

In addition to commitment and coordination at the customer service level, it's important that senior management/ownership is bought in to the conversion goal. Setting up regular meetings or other communications with ski school, rental shop, owner/general manager and other related managers to discuss the conversion progress is critical to success. While at most ski areas these functional areas are separate, everyone at the resort is on the same team and needs to share in the vision of conversion. ■

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