

Perfect North Slopes: The Beginner Factory

• BY KELLY COFFEY



Go onto the website PerfectNorth.com and you'll instantly see a page tab at the top of the screen labeled "First-Timers." The tab isn't camouflaged among lodging deals or buried deep within the catacombs of the snowsports school subpages. The tab is right there, clear and taking up valuable digital real estate at the top of the homepage.

Click on the "First Timers" tab and you'll be directed to a page titled: "Tips for your first day." This page provides information on how to dress (layers, waterproof gloves); what to bring (snacks, sunscreen); where to go (step one: buy lift ticket, step two: pick up rental equipment); and how to have a great first experience (take a lesson).

Considering how prominent that information is on their website, you'll guess where the bulk of Perfect North's business comes from.

"We have always recognized who we are," says Chip Perfect, Perfect North's president. "That is a place where people enter the sport."

Located in the southeast corner of Indiana, Perfect North Slopes pulls the bulk of its customer base from a handful of metropolitan areas within a three-hour radius, including Cincinnati just 30 minutes away. That easy drive to the slopes means Perfect North may see more than 1,500 first-time skiers and snowboarders in a single day, according to Mike Mettler, director of skiing operations. Mind you, that isn't a record-setting, once-in-a-decade day, just a busy Saturday.

"When you go to the top of the mountain and look down at the beginner hill, it looks like a skier factory," says ski instructor Kerry Holthaus.

If converting beginners into lifelong snowsports participants is the industry's goal, then Perfect North Slopes is an ideal location for a conversion laboratory.

The challenge for Perfect North is twofold: give a great first experience for a large number of beginners and get them to come back.

DOWN TO THE CORE

The 2009/10 season will mark Perfect North's 30th anniversary, and the area has made beginners the core of its business ever since the first chairlift started turning, says Perfect. That means that its focus on beginners goes far beyond a marketing promotion.

With beginners serving as the core of the entire operation, every employee in every department knows it's his or her job to create a great experience for those new to the sport. For instance, a human resources manager can be expected to devote part of the



At any point in the season, about 30 percent of skiers and riders at Perfect North Slopes have passed through a lesson at some point that day, for as low as \$5 a lesson. The mountain's advantageous location near a number of metro areas and its ability to lower the barriers to entry for the sport means it sees a higher percentage of new skiers and snowboarders than many other resorts.

week to patrolling the base area acting as a guest service ambassador. That can also mean that ski instructors stop to help out families having difficulty gathering their gear in the parking lot, which can entail carrying their skis if needed, and taking the extra steps toward making sure their first impression of the resort is a great one.

"It takes the whole ski area to make somebody's day good," says Mettler.

LOWER THE BARRIER TO ENTRY

Flocks of new skiers and snowboarders come to Perfect North not only for its convenient location, but also because the resort lowers the barrier to entry.

Last season the resort boasted \$43 lift tickets, \$23 equipment rentals, and the staggeringly low \$5 beginner lesson. Those that completed the lesson received a \$10 "Learn to Turn Bonus" debit card good for future Perfect North purchases.

"Basically we paid them to take a lesson," Mettler says. ♦

Yet, the aspect that guests like most about lessons at Perfect North is the Snowsports School's "No Wait" policy. No matter what time of day a student may leave the rental shop, he or she is greeted by an instructor and the teaching starts immediately.

The snowsports school is able to carry out this policy for two reasons: first, because of the volume of beginners each day; second, because instructors teach in stations on the busiest days. As opposed to a traditional class lesson where a single instructor leads eight or so students, station teaching means students work their way through set areas, each manned by a handful of instructors.

The downside of station teaching is that there is less opportunity to develop the strong relationship between the individual instructor and student. But Perfect North weighs this against the advantages of station teaching. Students have the ability to start at any time and go at their own pace. Roving instructors pull out struggling students for personalized attention. All the instructors get to meet a large number of students, not just the six or eight in a traditional class.

Regarding terrain, the beginner area is large enough to house a Saturday's worth of first-timers and has been graded at a consistent slope all the way across. This allows for ideal learning terrain no matter where the stations are set up.

"We're just out there making friends," says Holthaus. "We want them to have the best time of their lives."

MAKE IT EVERY DEPARTMENT'S JOB

Of course, before guests make it to the beginner hill, they first need to go through the equipment rental process. The resort did not

Challenge: Perfect North needs to provide a great first experience for up to 1,500 new skiers and snowboards in a single day... and get them to come back.

Solution: Make beginners the core of the business. Every employee in every department knows it's his or her job to create a great experience for those new to the sport. The snowsports school offered lessons for \$5, with a \$10 debit card reward for completing a lesson.

Results: Of the debit cards given out to those taking beginner ski or ride lessons, 70 percent were redeemed to purchase lift tickets and rental equipment, showing that the cardholders skied another day.

skip making this experience fit its needs. All the processes in the rental shop are designed for high speed and are highly efficient for the volume they get, Perfect says. The rental shop is well practiced at getting a large number of people through the process without compromising any aspect of the job.

"We staff a lot of people specifically for helping with the masses," says Dustin Combs, rental shop manager. Combs makes sure there's extra staff to float around and answer questions and speed up the process where needed. They also focus on fitting boots – a common cause for a bad first experience.

"It's kind of unbelievable how many beginners come through here," Combs says. "So helping with boot fitting is tremendous. Beginners often don't have a clue about how to put on a ski boot."

Instructors will also assist in the rental shop during busy times. They're perhaps most useful toward the end of the rental process, helping to carry the guest's equipment out to the snow.

SEEING RESULTS

At any point in the season, about 30 percent of the people on the mountain have passed through a lesson at some point that day (think \$5 beginner lesson). As a result, whenever an instructor steps into the base lodge or takes a free run, he or she is sure to recognize a lot of people.

"We try to act like we know everybody," Holthaus says.

Of the debit cards given out to beginners, 70 percent were redeemed to purchase lift tickets and rental equipment. The purchases are hard evidence that the resort is creating a host of return skiers and riders.

Looking ahead, Perfect North is planning to invest in new software that allows it to better track customers, collect more data on them, and deliver targeted promotions through a number of marketing channels. With the software, the resort is looking to build better avenues for which to invite its guests back after they return home.

Moreover, Perfect North was so pleased with the results of last season that it added a free lesson to the cost of a lift ticket this season. This renewed commitment to attracting and subsequently converting beginners means Perfect North Slopes has a once-unimaginable opportunity to incubate lifelong snowsports enthusiasts. The mountain's advantageous location near a number of metro areas and its ability to lower the barriers to entry for the sport means it sees a higher percentage of new skiers and snowboarders than many other resorts.

Perfect North is beginners. When the industry now focuses its eye on converting the beginner market, this beginner factory won't escape notice. ■