

INSIGHTS FROM FIRST-TIMERS

SNOW Operating Shares Results of One-on-One Surveys

BY ERIC LIPTON, CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER SNOW OPERATING

WHAT WE SAY TO FIRST-TIMERS, how we interact with them, and the types of verbiage and images we convey to them, all contribute to how we are branding the sport and our own ski area, often in ways we may not even realize. *We* may think we have communications with these new skiers and riders dialed in, but what do *they* think? Are we making assumptions about what might lead them to love the sport as much as we do?

Many resorts do a good job of checking in with first-timers, but not all do. This past season SNOW Operating conducted in-person interviews with these guests at resorts in different parts of the country, including Mountain Creek Resort, New Jersey; Blue Mountain, Penn.; Winter Park, Colo.; and Solitude, Utah. In this article we share much of what we learned, and also provide some examples of successful first-timer initiatives.

Here is what guests generally had to say about their motivations to try the sport and whether their expectations were met, along with useful clues about how ski areas might rethink their branding, marketing, and lesson programming.

How We Communicate

If you're familiar with NSAA's *Conversion Cookbook of Strategies for Beginner Conversion*, the section on communication is likely one of the most well-read . . . or should be. The *Cookbook*, revised last fall, is intended to serve as a living, evolving tool that industry leaders can use to chart a course toward growth. The *Cookbook* emphasizes that our communication—essentially, how we brand our sports, resorts, and our industry as a whole—determines how new participants perceive us.

The first core principle in any conversion strategy is understanding your guest, and all customer engagement strategies must be based on the needs and wants of the guest. Seems obvious, right? Yet, speaking broadly, as an industry we do many things a certain way not necessarily because it's best for the guest but because we have, over time, evolved to serve *our own* needs and preferences.

It's not hard to prove this—just do the simple exercise of taking a deep dive into one of the many processes you follow at your resort. If you dig deeper and deeper, and keep asking why you do a certain process in a certain way, you'll likely

reach a point where the answer will be “because that's the way we've always done it.” And if you keep digging, it will turn out to be “because somebody once thought it was easier or more convenient”—for the *staffer*, or for the *process*, that is, the equipment/set-up you had at the time.

But where does the *guest* factor into this equation? A core principle of successful management is to listen to, understand, and respond to the voice of the customer. That person's voice should speak loudest, and any systems put in place should directly address that voice in the most efficient and effective way possible.

At SNOW Operating, we live the beginner conversion mission every day—turning first-timers into life-timers—and we know that valuing the customer's voice above all others is critical to our success as an industry. Resorts know this too, at their core, which is why many survey their guests and try to capture the survey data as quickly as possible post-visit, knowing sooner is better than later when it comes to collecting valuable data.

The customer's voice should speak loudest, and any systems put in place should directly address that voice in the most efficient and effective way possible.

That was our objective in the surveys we conducted this past season—to capture the customer's voice in its most immediate, truest form possible. With the permission of the participating resorts, we interviewed first-time skiing and snowboarding guests at destination resorts as well as day-trip ski areas in New England, the Mid-Atlantic, Utah, and Colorado. Each guest was asked to respond to a variety of questions about his or her experience. We allowed for complete autonomy in how the questions were answered—not multiple choice, not on a scale of 1 to 10, but in the guest's own



words—unfiltered, and *during* the actual experience. It doesn't get more timely than that.

We recorded interviews across a variety of demographics, interviewing both lesson and non-lesson takers, men and women, young and old. The inquiries returned quite an array of responses, but we found many commonalities. Here are some of the responses, along with ideas on how they can be better leveraged to help improve the guest experience and grow participation.

“What inspired you to try skiing or snowboarding?”

This most common answer certainly won't surprise you: friends and family. The best recruiters we have are current skiers and riders, and it's likely that most of you reading this were introduced to the sport because a friend or family member decided to share it with you. But it begs the question: Is your resort capitalizing on your greatest allies—your existing customer base? How can you entice your current passholders or repeat guests to bring someone new?

One resort that is doing a good job of this is Killington, Vt., which takes the Bring a Friend Campaign (BAF) to the next level. The resort posts this offer on its website: “Register a friend or family member for a Learn to Ski or Ride package, any day of the season, and get a FREE lift ticket for yourself valid on the same day.” According to Dave Beckwith, Killington's snowsports director, the resort

has had tremendous success with this very simple program. “It's been great for increasing trial and retention for our resort,” he said.

Many of the guests interviewed cited BAF or the Learn to Ski/Snowboard Day on January 11 as the reasons or inspirations for them to try the sport. Pennsylvania's Blue Mountain decided to go all-in for this year's inaugural Learn to Ski/Snowboard Day, offering free lessons. Having interviewed many of those guests, we learned some valuable insights.

First, free lessons are quite a draw for newcomers to the sport, obviously. Price ranks right up there with time and commitment as the most noted barriers to entry for new participants to our sports. So, while I'm not saying we should give away free lessons, I'm also not saying we shouldn't. Is there one weekday morning, afternoon, or evening per month that—for a couple of hours—the first 100 people get a free learn-to lesson? Can we prioritize the lifetime value of the customer over the labor-revenue ratio for one day?

In January 2012, Whistler Blackcomb in British Columbia started an initiative called Never-Ever Days to introduce new participants to the sport, and the first year introduced 400 people in a Max 4 lesson format with lift and rental for \$25, even including an après party. Since then, the Canadian Ski Council has rolled out the event to ski areas nation-wide, and now more than 60 resorts are participating in the program at various times throughout the season. ▶



But since we're talking about price, let's put a different spin on it. Learning to ski or snowboard isn't expensive, it's *valuable*. If we're just advertising a product with a price, without drawing attention to the experiential values of our sports, we're selling ourselves short. What's the real value of a day at your resort? It's more than just the physical act of sliding on snow—it's the time spent with friends and family, the fresh air, the beautiful mountain views and, of course, the thrill and excitement of learning something new. We need to be selling the entire experience and the lifestyle of skiing and snowboarding and not just the block and tackle of the "lesson" component (more on this later).

Getting back to the idea of value versus cost, families frequent Disney World time and time again, and many adults even go without kids. A trip to Disney is seldom thought of as cheap. That trip has a price tag higher than most things in the course of our everyday lives, but the *value proposition* is also very high. So let's do more than just promote price; rather, let's tout our virtues more wholly and enthusiastically, and create a value proposition for *all* parts of the guest experience at our resorts.

The second lesson we learned from interviewing Blue Mountain guests is never to underestimate the power of an email list. Blue Mountain didn't dig into its ad spend to promote the National LSS Day; they just went to their email distribution list—the same list they use to publicize the wine festival, mountain coaster, music fest, and mountain biking. Most of the people we interviewed told us they

enjoy the emails they get from Blue Mountain, and that the emails they receive about other events at the mountain inspire them to visit in the warmer months too. Social media is certainly the golden child at the moment in digital marketing, but these interview responses are a testament to the fact that email can still get the job done in a huge way. Keep building and cultivating your list!

"What did you enjoy most about skiing or snowboarding?"

It may be a surprise to many of us, but the act of sliding on snow was not the most common answer—actually, *it wasn't even in the top five*. Newcomers most commonly cited the simple pleasure of being outdoors in the winter as the most enjoyable aspect of their resort experience.

They talked about "being close to nature," and "not being stuck indoors," and said things like "the scenery is amazing here!" In terms of the value proposition that we offer, we shouldn't overlook this important aspect. Take a page from the LSS(M) tagline, "Humans were never meant to hibernate," and tell the story of the sights, sounds, and smells that can be enjoyed in the winter months when you change your surroundings and spend a day outdoors in the mountains.

Don't underestimate the power of calling attention to the health benefits of fresh air, the outdoor environment, and the power of health and fitness in your marketing messages. The most recent Beginner Conversion study conducted by researchers at RRC Associates revealed that a large portion of new winter sports participants lead physically active lifestyles year-round. More than half of these survey

Is your resort capitalizing on your greatest allies—your existing customer base? How can you entice your current passholders or repeat guests to bring someone new?

respondents indicated they are gym-goers and hikers. Just fewer than half are avid runners, while nearly 30 percent are proud yoga practitioners.

With this in mind, can we position skiing and snowboarding as healthy forms of outdoor exercise in the winter months? Are there partnership opportunities your resort can

leverage with the local gym, yoga studio, or running club? Who are the influencers in those communities that could become ambassadors to your resort?

Tailoring a message that resonates with the fitness-minded, or even marketing directly to the active communities mentioned in the Beginner Conversion study, could prove to be fruitful.

“When you think of skiing and snowboarding, what types of imagery come to mind?”

Because word associations can provide a glimpse into a person’s subconscious mind, we anticipated that the answers to this question would be very telling. What we didn’t expect, though, is that the most common answers to this question about snowsports imagery were “the Olympics” and similar references to aspirational images of people enjoying the sports at the highest levels. Given that our small slice of media coverage comes around only once every four years, I suppose we shouldn’t have been surprised.

There are different ways to interpret this common response, and it does raise some questions. The most obvious one is, are we sufficiently leveraging the power of the Olympic Games, Warren Miller Entertainment

Should we beef up our efforts to communicate the *other* attractions we offer at our resorts to make the experience about more than just the act of sliding on snow?

films, and other ski/snowboard all-stars who could help us move the needle on participation? If that’s our one big shot at making an impression that sticks, are we seizing the opportunity?

Another other question is, should we beef up our efforts to communicate the *other* attractions we offer at our resorts to make the skiing/snowboarding experience about more than just the act of sliding on snow? Again, the great outdoors and time with family are key, but we can also promote après events, featured restaurants, and music shows, etc. Can we break out of our typecast and ▶

become more things to more people? Imagine if when skiing and snowboarding comes to mind, participants equate it to families enjoying nature and the outdoors, picnics in the sunshine, and selfies with a pristine backdrop—not just the world’s best athletes charging off a snowy peak.

“Where do you go to access information about skiing or snowboarding?”

Newcomers almost always turn to friends and family as the first source of information when it comes to when and where to take their first turns. As for the primary source of what and how, it’s YouTube. The hands-down favorite for education as well as entertainment—whether you need to fix your clothes dryer or learn to snowboard—YouTube is the place to go, and this group of respondents confirmed it. In an era where a solid half of first-timers elect not to take a lesson, it’s high time we embrace other ways to get participants the information they’re seeking.

The Professional Ski Instructors of America – American Association of Snowboard Instructors (PSIA-AASI) knows this, which is why they teamed up with the SNOW Operating team and Halley O’Brien Media to create a three-part consumer-facing YouTube video series to deliver

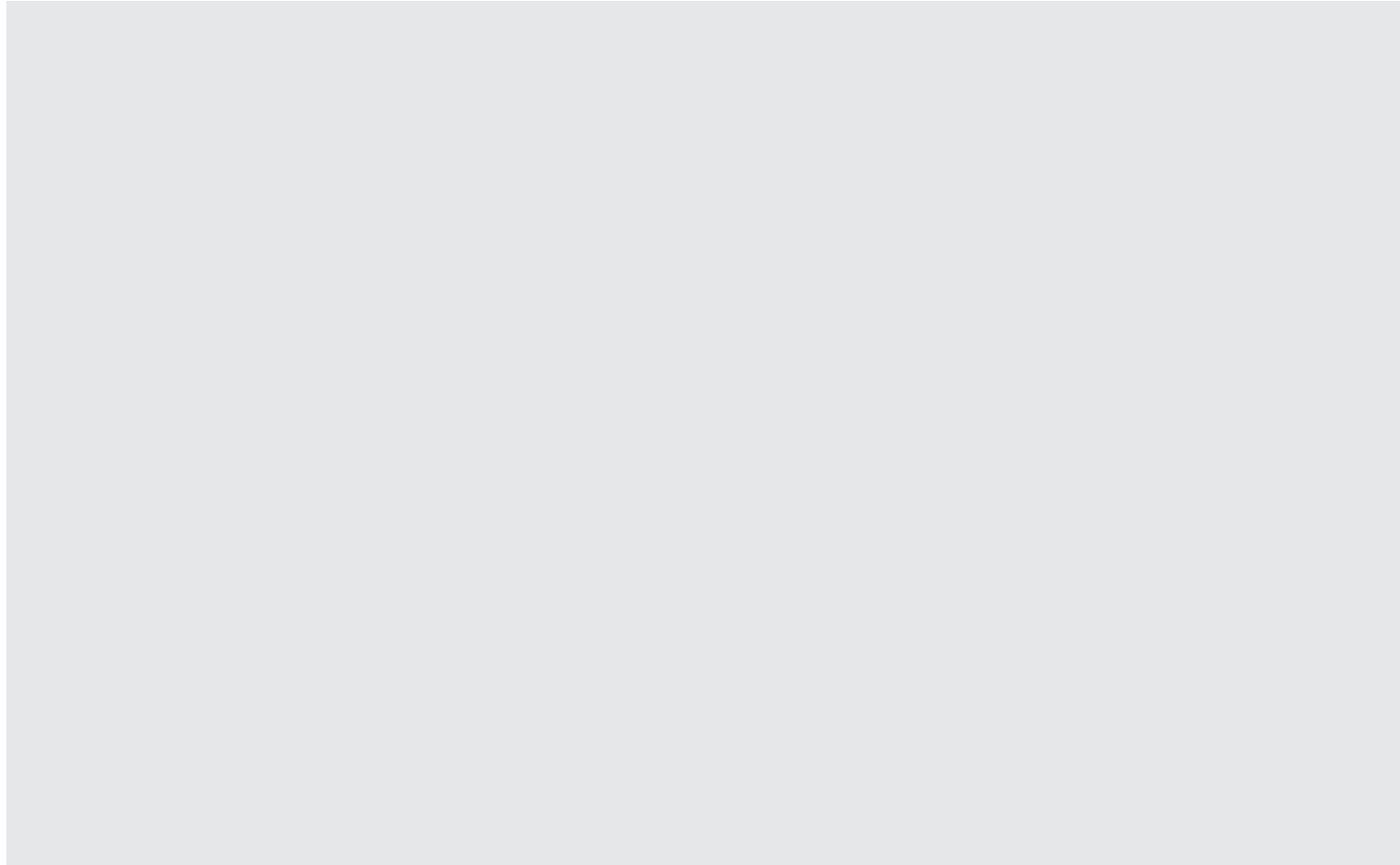
information and entertainment to the first-time participant. The project is called “How to Ski: A Beginner’s Guide” and “How to Snowboard: A Beginner’s Guide.” Check them out on YouTube and look for a second round of videos coming this fall. People want to learn things on their own terms, so who are we to judge? Let’s give them what they want!

You might consider developing your own customized videos that can help prepare beginners for their visit to your area—what to wear, where to park, what to do when they arrive, where to find the rental shop, and so on.

“What were your expectations for today, and were your expectations met or exceeded?”

The good news is that nearly every respondent said their expectations were met or exceeded. Interestingly, many respondents interpreted this question to be about the *difficulty* (or lack thereof) of skiing or snowboarding. Although the question was intended to find out how they felt about their *overall* experience, they responded with whether they expected skiing/snowboarding to be easy or hard.

When it comes to difficulty of the sports, responses were split somewhat evenly among the group: “It was easier than ▶



I thought” versus “It was harder than I thought.” We interviewed a combination of lesson-takers and non-lesson takers, skiers and snowboarders. Generally speaking, the lesson takers said it was easier than they thought, and the go-it-aloners struggled a little more.

Additionally, almost all commented they would definitely return; however, the data tells us that’s not likely the case. The Beginner Conversion study, mentioned above, speaks to the fact that the intent to return is highest immediately following (or in this case, during) the experience. So, how do we leverage that intent? The timeliness of your follow-up matters. Think about how you can get a future commitment before the guest even leaves the resort. How can you make first-timers feel like they belong here, like it’s their home mountain?

“What do you wish you knew before today?”

This follow-up question was answered with comments relating to knowing how to better dress for the elements, as well as some saying they wished they knew how easy it was, or wished they had known how much falling there would be (one participant suggested that chest and shoulder pads be given as part of the rental package!).

Think about how you can get a future commitment before the guest even leaves the resort. How can you make first-timers feel like they belong here, like it’s their home mountain?

Areas should consider adding a website page or link to information on how to dress. It’s also a good idea to keep a stash of gloves and other snowsports clothing that beginners can borrow or rent, if not purchase, so they’ll be more comfortable.

A first-timer welcome video is a good start—whether it’s the snowsports director speaking to the camera while touring the resort, or even just B-roll footage with text and music. Regardless, a short video clip that shares helpful beginner tips/tricks along with general information about the resort is an easy addition to your website. This falls under the category of “low-hanging fruit” to help transform your site from an online brochure into a more efficient, modern information source.

Conclusion

The answers to these questions may (or may not) surprise you. You may or may not agree with what these first-timers had to say, but accept that this group of respondents is representative of at least some part of your guest base. I encourage you to take the time to conduct your own research and go out and interview your guests, then take action. It’s not enough to collect the data, you have to act on it.

Are you communicating with your guests in the manner they want, capitalizing on the elements of skiing or snowboarding that they truly value, utilizing your current passholders to bring new people to the sport, and speaking to a wide variety of demographics in your marketing? The Voice of the Customer is the only voice that matters. Are you listening? ■

Eric Lipton is the Chief Operating Officer of SNOW Operating, a company dedicated to growing the sports of skiing and snowboarding by working with resorts to improve the first-timer experience. He is also a three-term member of the PSIA National Alpine Team. Contact Lipton at Eric@snowoperating.com.