In sales there’s a familiar adage that states, “Don’t sell the steak; sell the sizzle.” Put into the context of marketing, the ski area as a whole would represent the meat, while for many guests, it’s the grooming that adds the sizzle. Grooming operations are a common denominator for all ski areas, large and small, east and west.

Consider that about 40 percent of respondents to the 2010/11 NSAA National Demographic Study have skied four seasons or less. The average number of days skied, according to the study, is 12. Given that, 40 percent of skiers have skied less than 50 times in their lives. Let’s face it, powder and moguls don’t mix well with beginners and lower intermediates – 34 percent of who are 45 years old or older and 7 percent of who are 14 years old or younger. What they want is corduroy they can carve. And today’s ski areas have never been better at meeting those expectations, thanks to combination of committed planning by ski areas and technological advancements in grooming machines.

“Customers expect great grooming – always,” says Aaron Kellett, operations manager at New York’s Whiteface Mountain. About 70 percent of Whiteface’s skiable acres are groomed. Echoing those thoughts is Todd Rudis, head groomer at Lake Tahoe’s Heavenly Mountain: “Customers are in tune with grooming, the vast majority of skiers want nice conditions every day. They expect a high level of grooming quality.”

Among many ski areas, grooming has evolved to the extent of requiring multiple shifts and the precise orchestration of entire fleets, and at many areas techniques specific to each trail are continually honed. What’s also evolved is the way in which ski areas communicate their grooming efforts with guests. Many ski areas now post current grooming conditions to the homepage of their websites. In Colorado, Beaver Creek’s website features “Today’s Grooming,” a section dedicated to providing real-time information on available groomed terrain. Meanwhile Whiteface posts its grooming report every day by 5 a.m., and in Vermont, Okemo Mountain promotes its ongoing grooming efforts through a variety of channels including a blog that generated some 50,000 visits last season, says PR Director Jennifer Cota (see “The 411 on Okemo Grooming” pg. 29). Okemo features 632 groomed acres, 87 percent of which is manicured nightly.

Weeks before the start of the season, Heavenly launched the first installment of a series of 2011/12 videos illustrating its “special expertise and passion for winter” that featured its head groomer Todd Rudis. The humorous video shows Rudis earnestly and meticulously manicuring his lawn atop a riding mower. A voiceover speaks of Rudis’ eagerness to get back out on the mountain for another season of grooming the slopes. The takeaway, according to John Magnon, senior director of brand marketing, is that at Heavenly, “grooming is one of the most important aspects of the customer service commitment.”

“The corduroy that you leave behind is kind of like your signature,” says Rudis.

General Manager Pete Sontag agrees: “A well-groomed slope is visually pleasing, a work of art.”

About 40 percent of respondents to the 2010/11 NSAA National Demographic Study report having skied or snowboarded four seasons or less. The average number of days skied, according to the study, is 12. Given that, 40 percent of skiers have skied less than 50 times in their lives, and it’s generally accepted that the snow surface most beginners and lower intermediates want is corduroy. Today’s ski areas have never been better at meeting those expectations, thanks to combination of committed planning by ski areas and technological advancements in grooming machines.
Whiteface’s Kellett says that today’s guests expect information on resort grooming efforts. “If we didn’t volunteer the information, they’d certainly ask for it,” he adds.

These communication efforts all support the notion that grooming is a marketable amenity of any ski area. That emphasis reveals itself in the budget commitment to quality equipment as well.

In 2009, Vermont’s Stowe Mountain Resort became the first ski area in that region to join PistenBully’s Elite Fleet program, which is offered to clients with the goal of “creating synergies for more efficient grooming fleets and establishing high-standards of operation that member resorts must meet.”

Stowe grooms 80 percent of its 450 groomed acres on a daily basis. Not far away, Maine’s Sunday River ski area and PistenBully celebrated their partnership by proclaiming Nov. 11, 2011 as National Corduroy Day. Sunday River added two new machines to its fleet this season.

Meanwhile Jack Sibbach, director of marketing and public relations at Idaho’s Sun Valley, says, “It’s all about… our groomed slopes being a ‘top notch’ product.” Towards that goal, Sun Valley’s commitment to grooming includes a fleet of 11 grooming machines including two Prinoth Bisons and a Prinoth Beast. The latter gave way to an additional activity offering for guests in the form of the Ride the Beast program. While it sounds more like a carnival or rodeo, Ride the Beast invites guests to hop into the grooming machine passenger seat and experience first-hand how the mountain is meticulously maintained. The prerequisite for the two-hour ride is attending the groomers’ meeting before heading out on the slopes. It’s just one more way Sun Valley is “keeping the customers 100 percent satisfied,” says Sibbach.

Each night Sun Valley grooms more than 400 acres, and all summed it boasts a whopping 2,054 acres of groomed terrain. “Grooming is a high-premium on budgeting,” says Heavenly Mountain’s Magnon. “We allocate a high amount of capital on expanding our fleet.” Heavenly has built up the largest Prinoth fleet in the world.

Another key aspect of raising the bar on grooming at areas from coast-to-coast is the dedicated and qualified staff who take a personal interest and pride in offering expertly groomed slopes to their guests. Of course, the majority of groomers are passionate skiers and snowboarders themselves. They play on the slopes by day that they maintain at night.

“Our groomers ski these trails and ask ‘would we want to ski this?’” says Whiteface’s Kellett. He goes on to explain that those groomer-slash-skiers interact with guests on the mountain, and use that first-hand information to keep apprised of conditions on the runs.

Heavenly obtains guest feedback by conducting daily on-mountain satisfaction surveys that include several questions regarding grooming conditions. Daily meetings with operations and maintenance staff help determine grooming needs throughout the mountain. An offshoot of such attention to conditions is shared with customers in a daily live lodge broadcast entitled “Pick of the Day” where groomers use their current knowledge to suggest the best skiing slopes each day.

**GROOMING RESULTS**

So what’s the response when areas approach their grooming as part of the overall product? According to Sibbach, Sun Valley’s investment in equipment and marketing strategy has helped it maintain a guest return rate of more than 75 percent.

Clearly customers care about grooming, as Okemo’s Cota affirms. According to him, in the
past two years Okemo has grown visits to its blog – which features segments dedicated to grooming – by 532 percent. Cota credits Okemo’s transparent communications with guests for allowing it to be “on a level we have never been able to achieve before. We engage them [guests], educate them, and hopefully in the end make them life-long Okemo fans.”

The 411 on Okemo Grooming

The following is an excerpt from the Official Blog of Okemo Mountain Resort.

For this week’s post we reached into our mail bag. The topic? Grooming. We get questions about our grooming often, so we turned to Eb Kinney, our mountain manager of 21 years, to fill us in on Okemo’s grooming philosophy. Here is what he had to say:

After last season we took a hard look at our grooming and snowmaking techniques. Making changes in the way you have done something for years is never easy, but we knew it had to be done. To give you a little background, we run two shifts of seven snowcats from 3:45 p.m. to 9 a.m., and we groom more than 500 acres a night, most of which is groomed twice. We have changed three major components in our grooming and snowmaking philosophy. What we have learned is that timing is everything when dealing with snow.

The first thing we changed in grooming is our mountain tilling program. A mountain tiler is a drag-behind cultivator, or as we like to call it an aerator. It breaks up the hard surface into chunks and will cultivate snow 4 to 6 inches deep. The reason for doing this is to keep the surface from getting hard and eventually icy. Even with as much natural snow as we’ve been getting, without doing this, the surface would get hard as a rock. The next step is to run a power tiler over this, grinding up the snow and leaving the corduroy finish. The timing of this is very important. In the past we did the entire mountain tilling on first shift, from 3:45 p.m. until midnight. What we found was that this allowed the mountain tilling to set up hard, not allowing the power tillers to grind it up. This also seemed to leave the small ice balls that all skiers dislike. So, this season we never let our mountain tillers get more than two to three hours ahead of the power tillers. This seems to have made a noticeable difference to the surface and our guests.

The second change we made was in the timing of opening the snowmaking trails. Whenever possible we let our heavy snowmaking trails leach out for 24 hours before pushing them out and opening them to the public. What I mean by leach out is to let the excess water drain out from the snowmaking piles. By doing this, the snow is less dense, drier, and makes for a better product on the first day we re-open the trail. The first runs will be a little rough, but will typically ski-in very quickly. This in turn makes for a great surface the second day after we’ve mountain tilled and power tilled. This again has been well received by our guests.

I hope that helps explain our grooming strategies at Okemo. As always I look forward to and appreciate all comments – both good and bad – so keep them coming!

Best regards,
Eb Kinney
Mountain Manager
Okemo Mountain Resort

The following is a guest comment to the blog post.

Sandra said...
You are doing a great job, but last weekend I noticed a split ridge on Sapphire that hadn’t been there the week before. But my second run down I avoided it and took it down it had been well-traveled and was not as noticeable.

Yes, I do like that “silk” feel when you have made the fresh snow! Yeah! Keep up the good work and remember: “Practice makes perfect” and Okemo has been one of the top mountains in the East for its grooming and loved by us senior citizens, especially. – Sandy

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