Wachusett Mountain's proximity to urban areas such as Boston, Providence, and Hartford is both an asset and a challenge. Located in Massachusetts, the ski area is less than an hour and a half away from these major cities, and is also a popular destination from numerous other New England cities and towns. Its potential customer base is huge. But the availability of many other leisure activities in the metropolitan New England area make a trip to Wachusett a possible one-time-only adventure for visitors. In fact, 1 out of every 20 customers at Wachusett is there for his or first time. For this reason, Wachusett has had a long-standing goal of converting as many customers as possible to repeat guests and ultimately to lifelong skiers and snowboarders.

To that end, everything Wachusett does is aimed at optimizing the on-mountain experience for skiers and boarders. Factors such as excellent customer service and compelling packages and programs are important, explains Director of Marketing Tom Meyers, but so are effective communication and the removal of as many barriers to fun as possible – particularly for guests experiencing their first day on snow. “You need to make sure that beginners are well communicated with,” says Meyers.

A BETTER TIME FOR BEGINNERS

One of the most common barriers to fun starts at the very beginning of the visit – customers arrive not knowing where to go, or what to do next. To someone wearing ski boots for the very first time, having to backtrack up stairs or even across the lodge can be a tiring ordeal. To avoid these kinds of scenarios, making the rental and lift ticket process as streamlined as possible is paramount to Wachusett’s approach. “One of our big steps last year was making videos that communicate before the customers’ point of arrival,” says Meyers. “First Time Renting Skis @ Wachusett?” and “First Time Renting a Snowboard @ Wachusett?” are instructional videos on the area’s web site that walk customers through the necessary procedures prior to and on arrival. Tips include purchasing lift tickets and learning packages online before they leave, knowing what to wear, and finding out where to go once at Wachusett, as well as how to fill out forms, pick up and put on equipment, and more. One especially helpful aspect of the videos is that they show visitors what the important destinations look like (e.g., a white
Wachusett Mountain focuses on effective communication with guests to help ensure that their first day on the slopes is as seamless as possible. This season the resort installed a new “easy-to-ride” chairlift that services its beginner terrain.

PACKAGE DEALS

Like many ski areas, Wachusett understands the importance of attractive learner packages, particularly ones that bring learners back for additional days, increasing exposure and the possibility of falling in love with the sport. Wachusett offers one-day, two-day, and three-day Level 1 Learn to Turn packages. The one-day package, which includes lesson, rental, and lower mountain lift ticket, accounts for almost 50 percent of the area’s Level 1 lessons. Numbers for all Level 1 lessons combined held relatively steady between the 2009/10 and the 2010/11 season, averaging between 5 percent and 4.7 percent of total skier visits respectively, while overall visits climbed from 323,398 to 335,855 over the same period. Areas that saw growth included Level 1 private and semi-private lessons, two-day Learn to Turn packages, and programs for school children in four- to eight-visit packages. More than 10,000 school children from Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, and southern New Hampshire take part in ski programs at Wachusett each year. To encourage repeat visits when the school programs finish in March, each student receives a discounted “Rest of Season” pass to use as many times as they like.

Three-day packages are popular as well, but fluctuate in response to different promotions. In 2009/10, for example, these packages spiked because Wachusett gave away free season passes at their completion – an incentive the area scaled back in 2010/11. A focus for the current season is increasing the number of three-day Learn to Turn participants with a new program. For 2011/12, Wachusett is upgrading its three-day package, adding free rentals for the remainder of the season, lift ticket discounts that include three more visits for $64, 50, and a 20 percent discount off accessories such as gloves, hats, goggles, and socks at the area’s ski and sports shop.

MARKETING TOUCH POINTS

Anything that gets skiers returning is a good thing, so in addition to the multi-visit packages, Wachusett follows up with coupons and handouts at the end of the visit. Those who’ve done the one-day Learn to Turn package, for example, receive a coupon that allows them to upgrade to one or two more days at a cost-effective rate, and also to receive discounts that include $100 off new beginner equipment. Wachusett also contacts visitors through direct mail postcards and email after they’ve gone. This is particularly important because many of its first-time skiers come late in the season. While it might seem logical that the vast majority of guests would take beginner lessons in December so they could enjoy the rest of the season, that’s not how it is at Wachusett. “Our volume of beginners is fairly steady year-round,” says Meyers. “On our last day of
operation – even if it is April 1 – you’d be surprised how many people are taking beginner lessons.” Getting those skiers to return the next winter is a challenge, he concedes.

Supporting the mountain in its communication efforts is a marketing program that involves touching base with the customer at five points: before they decide to come, when they buy lift tickets, when they are at the mountain, as they leave, and after they go home. Social networking is a big part of this effort, with Facebook and Twitter pages offering snow reports and more. Wachusett also runs television and radio ads designed to attract the general public – not just skiers and boarders.

“We have to be very appealing to non-skiers,” says Meyers. “The larger number of people watching the ads don’t ski, so we try to show how easy and fun it can be.” A recent Learn to Turn commercial, for example, doesn’t feature expert skiers neck-deep in powder or performing aerials. It shows a troupe of friendly instructors skiing down a gently sloping groomer. At the end of the commercial, a skier says to the camera, “They taught us to ski. They can teach you too.” Wachusett also advertises the Ski Train from Boston. On Saturdays and Sundays, skiers can travel by commuter rail in a designated “ski friendly” car to a town near the ski area, where a shuttle picks them up and drops them off later in the day.

COMING UP NEXT
Other Wachusett improvements for the 2011/12 season that will make it easier for newcomers to enjoy the mountain are improved snowmaking, a heated walkway near the main entrance to the base lodge, and new rental gear. For the 2012/13 season, Wachusett has really big plans: an enhanced Skier/Snowboarder Service Center that will add nearly 1,500 square feet to the existing space (while still maintaining the architectural integrity of the original historic A-frame structure). The new center is designed to provide more room and better flow so that customers – especially new ones – can be served more efficiently.

The new building is just another part of the area’s all-around approach toward helping newcomers have so much fun they’ll want to come back. If there is any one “magic bullet,” it’s effective communication with those first-time skiers and boarders, so they know how to optimize that day on the snow. In the words of Meyers: “We put a lot of effort into the packages and the programs, but it’s all about the experience that they have when they’re here.”

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