CONVERSION CASE STUDY

Turning First-Timers to Life-Timers at Sugarbush

BY JILL ADLER

According to Sugarbush, Vt., Ski School Director Bill McGinty, the area’s latest initiative aimed at converting guests, what it bills the “First-Timer to Life-Timer” program, has people in that area talking. Here is one such guest commentary:

“I have never snowboarded or skied in my entire life and decided it was time to pick up a winter sport since I live in New England. My first lesson was a private with Carter [Sugarbush snowboard instructor]. Carter told me about the special package you had going where I could receive an all-mountain, all-season pass because I was a brand new snowboarder. Your wonderful staff at the desk figured out how I could receive the pass even though I had purchased the private lesson outside the package.

My second lesson was with Don, who was very passionate about snowboarding and gave me wonderful technical advice. I felt bad for him, because he did his best to work with someone who was already sore and tired. My third and final lesson was with Liz, who took me on, one-on-one. We were later joined by Will. Liz and Will were great instructors who cheered me at every accomplishment and fist bumped me as I started to get it.

All I have to say is: Wow! You have a great and beautiful resort with amazing people working there. From the moment I got there to the moment I left, I’ve never felt more welcomed. At no point did I sense any kind of arrogance or snobbery. Your staff was just as excited as I was to be there, and even more excited to see someone who was brand new wanting to learn the sport.

Thanks to the all-season/all-mountain pass that I received from the package, I will definitely be back soon, so I can work on linking my turns. And I can assure you that as long as you have the kind of staff you have, you will have a customer and enthusiast for life.

Excited Snowboarding Noob,
E.S.

People will come up every day and say something to us,” says McGinty. He’s talking about guests’ reactions to one of the resort’s new First-Timer to Life-Timer program. The innovative approach to converting beginners into core winter sports lovers is making waves on the East coast and not only turning beginners into lifers but new riders into Sugarbush lovers.

“The idea [for the program] was driven by the NSAA Conversion Cookbook for boosting beginner conversion,” McGinty says. “We heard the stats.”

Challenge:
There are commonly three identifiable hurdles that can sabotage a beginner’s passion for skiing or riding: Price, a chaotic equipment rental experience, and the actual on-hill experience, particularly if that person chooses to learn from a friend rather than a professional instructor.

Solution:
Identify what makes skiers and snowboarders fall in love with the sport, and offer a lesson package that addresses and offers solutions to the complications often faced by beginners.

Results:
Last season, 113 first-timers completed the First-Timer to Life-Timer package and out of that bunch, the mountain sold five season passes for this season. By the end of February 2011, Sugarbush had already given away 167 season passes to customers who had completed the 2010/11 First-Timer to Life-Timer program.
At various industry meetings over the past few years, NSAA has presented worse-case hypotheticals that show the industry could stand to lose 20 million skier/snowboarder visits by 2019. It’s also been estimated that just 17 percent of first-timers come back to the slopes. Therefore, with Baby Boomers getting ancient and very few new ski/snowboard fans enlisting, might the ski industry face such a doomsday scenario?

In the wake of such daunting thoughts, ski areas like Sugarbush are studying the ways skiers and snowboarders fall in love with the sport and creating a methodology to utilize that information. There are usually three hurdles that sabotage a person’s passion for skiing or riding price, the chaos of renting equipment and hauling it to a meeting spot, and the actual on-hill experience (compounded exponentially by the weather as well as complications from learning from a friend rather than a professional instructor).

The First-Timers to Life-Timers program, which began last year, addresses all of these elements (except the weather, of course). The package is simple: pick up your hand-selected gear from rental technicians trained to deal specifically with first-time participants; take three half-day group lessons with skilled instructors; and win a pass for the rest of the season. The three-day First-Timer package is $230, including rentals and lift tickets. If guests’ have their own equipment, the three lessons are just $50 each. Taken separately, the first lesson costs $89, a second lesson costs $95, and a third lesson costs $105. So all tallied, the First-Timer package can save guests $59, or $139 if they have their own equipment. And of course along with that savings, they also own a pass good for the rest of the season.

But why three and not one, or two, or five days of lessons?

“The ski school chose three because it allows us to take a person that has never skied or snowboarded to a point at which he or she can be comfortable taking on terrain accessed via our beginner double chairlift,” says Sugarbush’s Candice White.

Skiers and boarders at Sugarbush are treated to a conveyor lift as they learn the various skills of the first lesson. They perfect these skills during the second lesson, while still utilizing the beginner-friendly lift. On the third lesson, guests work on more advanced skills so they can move over to the beginner chairlift, the Village Double. After that, they’re on their own with their brand new season pass. Sugarbush also provides an added bonus: on their sixth visit back to Sugarbush, participants get a free group lesson to keep them learning and motivated.

Last season, 113 first-timers completed the package. Out of that bunch, the mountain sold five season passes for this season.

“That shows that we converted five beginners into skiers or riders, which is a great story,” says White. “We’re happy with those numbers.”

White adds that by the end of February, Sugarbush had already given away 167 season passes to customers who had completed the 2010/11 First-Timer to Life-Timer program.

The program is open to any beginner over the age of 13 – whether they live in Vermont or
Florida. Unfortunately, parents can’t take advantage of it for their wee ones. White explained as to why the First-Timer to Life-Timer program starts at age 13: “We have entire other programs for kids. As they get older it’s more difficult to get them hooked,” she says. Aside from that, neither advance reservations nor a secret handshake are required to participate.

“We never know how many are going to sign up,” says McGinty. “They may come here to take a regular group lesson, but after they are informed at the front desk about our first-timer program, they often opt for this deal instead.”

And they should. Sugarbush’s top instructors are chosen to teach the First-Timer lessons. “There are no first-time instructors teaching in this program,” says McGinty. “Our instructors enjoy and appreciate this group and seeing the results. The best teach the least experienced.”

The resort also handpicks ski techs and bootfitters to form a rental team devoted to making a beginner’s gear experience as encouraging as possible. In addition, a special breakroom in the new Farmhouse ski services building segregates newbies from the generally rowdy ski/snowboard populace.

“There’s a lot of TLC in this program,” says McGinty. “There’s always going to be beginners. If you nurture them, their transition will be a lot easier.”

The resort has plans to coddle beginners beyond the First-Timer to Life-Timer program as well. There will be more beginner terrain, with more snowmaking and an upgraded lift system that makes it easier for them to ride the chairs. Overall, McGinty says there’s no end in sight for the First-Timer to Life-Timer program.

“We will only increase our commitment to the program,” he says. While other ski areas may look at the conversion of five out of 113 and wonder about the other 108 who didn’t become “lifers,” Sugarbush compares it to banking.

“That’s a 5 percent return, and from our view, that’s a pretty good rate,” McGinty says. You also have to consider that because the program isn’t limited to locals, many vacationers get in on the deal during their stay and walk away with a season pass merely as a souvenir. For McGinty, that’s even better than a pin.

And while buying a season pass for the following year might not suit all participants of the First-Timer to Life-Timer program, it doesn’t necessarily mean that those guests aren’t going to continue to ski or ride. You can bet that they still hold a special spot in their hearts (and ski lockers) for the place that got them hooked.

The emails and letters sent to Sugarbush management and staff validate that their lifetime of skiing and snowboarding has just begun.

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