Winter Park: Putting the Beginner Experience Under the Microscope  • BY KELLY COFFEY

There’s a Jekyll-and-Hyde identity crisis with the two mountains that make up Colorado’s Winter Park Ski Resort. While Mary Jane’s steep, long bump runs are famous the world over among high-end skiers, Winter Park Mountain is best known for its family- and beginner-friendly terrain.

At about a 90-minute drive, this 142-trail resort is the closest major resort to Denver. Because it’s an easy day-trip from Colorado’s Front Range, or a simple road-trip vacation from the Midwest and Texas, Winter Park sees approximately 1 million skier visits a year, according to Communications Manager Mistalynn Lee.

This past winter, the resort celebrated its 70th anniversary. Based on that longevity, they claim to have taught the most people to ski in North America. At Winter Park Ski Resort, beginners have always been their focus. In fact, NSAA chose Winter Park as one of the resorts to study when creating their Model for Growth.

WHERE DO WE GO NOW?

In order to convert a first-time skier or rider into a lifelong snowsports enthusiast, a resort has to do two things successfully: first, it needs to deliver a great first experience for that guest; second, it needs to convince that guest to come back for other trips.

Each year, Winter Park puts a microscope to all elements of the beginner experience, seeing where they can improve that experience and how they can get more guests to book future trips.

The company sees their best chance to create lifelong customers when those new guests go through ski school. Compared to do-it-yourselfers — those who feel they can “just figure it out” on their own — the longer ski school students are guided through the beginner experience by professionals, the more likely they will have great experiences and get a picture of everything that is available to them.

Winter Park’s commitment to converting beginners into lifelong snowsports enthusiasts meant they needed to figure out how to attract more of those do-it-yourselfers into taking lessons, make the beginner lesson experience even better, and get students to come back beyond just a single day.

SNAG THE DO-IT-YOURSELFER

At Winter Park, ski school and the marketing department keep a close relationship, said Marketing Director Mary Woolwine. There is a dedicated staffer in the marketing department whose main focus is taking care of ski school. The result: more effective messages on the website, in the brochures, and in targeted emails.

Challenge:

Keeping their focus on delivering top-shelf beginner experiences and converting first-timers into lifelong snowsports enthusiasts, Winter Park needed to drive do-it-yourselfers into ski school lessons, improve the beginner lesson experience, and get more lesson takers back for more than a single day.

Solution:

Each year the company puts a microscope to all elements of the beginner experience, seeing where they can improve. The result are programs like shuttling beginners to the bunny hill instead of making them walk, multichannel marketing messages that highlight the benefits of taking lessons, and a top-of-mind focus in all departments that the beginner is king — from lift operators to ski patrol to the rental shop.

Results:

The ski school earned a 17-point bump in their net promoter score for beginner lesson-takers. Overall, Winter Park earned a total conversion rate of 20-25 percent, meeting the national goal of NSAA’s Model for Growth.
One product of that close relationship between marketing and ski school is an email campaign geared at lodging guests. Each guest who reserves lodging at Winter Park receives two emails prior to arrival. With the intent of snagging do-it-yourselves, these emails ask the guest if they have booked their ski school lesson, highlight the benefits of taking lessons, and offer a 10 percent discount if they book in advance.

That 10 percent discount looks even more attractive when the guest sees the price of a beginner lesson. With their “Easy Start” half-day lesson, it’s cheaper to purchase the lesson-lift-rental package ($89 for an adult) than it is just to buy a normal lift ticket ($93). And a guest will purchase all three in the same spot, a convenience that’s a huge part of their positive experience, according to Tom Carey, director of guest experience.

A full-day beginner lesson isn’t much more expensive. Using the specialized equipment from Burton Learn to Ride or Salomon Learn to Ski programs, an adult will pay $135 for the lesson, rental, and lift ticket.

“The pricing of all the lessons helps drive business in,” said Buck Holland, who has been a Winter Park ski instructor for the past 40 seasons.

For those do-it-yourselfers who aren’t lured into ski school by marketing promotions, the next lines of defense are the employees working on the hill. From lift operators to ski patrollers, a beginner focus is embedded in Winter Park’s culture. In each of their safety talks to guests, patrollers highlight the benefits of taking lessons.

“We have some long-term ski patrollers who know the product well,” marketing’s Woolwine said. “They want people to get better, and they want people to be safe.”

LOOKING UNDER THE MICROSCOPE

“We’re always looking for ways to make their experience easier,” said Bob Barnes, director of Winter Park’s Ski and Ride School.

When the Ski and Ride School reassessed their beginner experience after the 2009 season, they saw one major obstacle to consistently delivering a great beginner experience: for first-timers to get to the beginner area, they needed to walk (and schlep their equipment) 200 yards from the main base village.

To solve that challenge, this past season Winter Park created a beginner shuttle: a snowmobile towing two wagons that comfortably carry up to 16 adults. It was a hit on the guest service side, since it started lessons off on the right foot. “They have more energy to put into learning to ski,” Barnes said.

Along with the beginner shuttle, this past season Winter Park also invested more that $500,000 in a new fleet of rental skis. With this system, the boots are presized to the skis, eliminating most adjustments in the rental shop. This investment helped cut the time guests spent waiting in the rental shop significantly, spokesperson Lee said.

At the end of each lesson, instructors hand out a coupon good for 10 percent off the guest’s next lesson. This coupon is a hit with guests and helps to increase repeat customers. But instructor Holland is quick to point out that it’s not the money savings that drives this item’s success. “It’s the product that you’re selling, not the discount,” he said. “The coupon just reminds skiers that you care.”

INCREASING PROMOTERS

Five years ago, Winter Park conducted an in-house conversion study. That study showed Winter Park converts 20-25 percent of their new skiers and riders into lifelong participants, according to Barnes. The national average, according to NSAA, is 15 percent.

But it’s this past season’s improvements that show the effects of Winter Park’s commitment to improving the beginner experience. Regarding their net promoter score, it’s a success for a company to inch up a single point. Winter Park’s net promoter score for beginner lessons jumped 17 points over the prior year – a 40 percent increase – according to Barnes.

That number is a testament to the quality of the guest’s first-time experience. On top of that, Winter Park also sees success with their efforts to get guests back for more. The referral cards instructors handed out to their students, offering a 10 percent discount on their next lesson, had success also. The redemption rate on these cards was 44 percent for private lessons and 18 percent for group lessons, according to marketing’s Woolwine.

Yet Winter Park won’t rest with their beginner experience. They will continue to bounce around ideas, reassess all points of a new skier or rider’s vacation, and invest in areas where they can improve.

“Beginners and families are feeding our families,” said Woolwine. “And every department knows that.”