

Yet, the aspect that guests like most about lessons at Perfect North is the Snowsports School's "No Wait" policy. No matter what time of day a student may leave the rental shop, he or she is greeted by an instructor and the teaching starts immediately.

The snowsports school is able to carry out this policy for two reasons: first, because of the volume of beginners each day; second, because instructors teach in stations on the busiest days. As opposed to a traditional class lesson where a single instructor leads eight or so students, station teaching means students work their way through set areas, each manned by a handful of instructors.

The downside of station teaching is that there is less opportunity to develop the strong relationship between the individual instructor and student. But Perfect North weighs this against the advantages of station teaching. Students have the ability to start at any time and go at their own pace. Roving instructors pull out struggling students for personalized attention. All the instructors get to meet a large number of students, not just the six or eight in a traditional class.

Regarding terrain, the beginner area is large enough to house a Saturday's worth of first-timers and has been graded at a consistent slope all the way across. This allows for ideal learning terrain no matter where the stations are set up.

"We're just out there making friends," says Holthaus. "We want them to have the best time of their lives."

MAKE IT EVERY DEPARTMENT'S JOB

Of course, before guests make it to the beginner hill, they first need to go through the equipment rental process. The resort did not

Challenge: Perfect North needs to provide a great first experience for up to 1,500 new skiers and snowboards in a single day... and get them to come back.

Solution: Make beginners the core of the business. Every employee in every department knows it's his or her job to create a great experience for those new to the sport. The snowsports school offered lessons for \$5, with a \$10 debit card reward for completing a lesson.

Results: Of the debit cards given out to those taking beginner ski or ride lessons, 70 percent were redeemed to purchase lift tickets and rental equipment, showing that the cardholders skied another day.

skip making this experience fit its needs. All the processes in the rental shop are designed for high speed and are highly efficient for the volume they get, Perfect says. The rental shop is well practiced at getting a large number of people through the process without compromising any aspect of the job.

"We staff a lot of people specifically for helping with the masses," says Dustin Combs, rental shop manager. Combs makes sure there's extra staff to float around and answer questions and speed up the process where needed. They also focus on fitting boots – a common cause for a bad first experience.

"It's kind of unbelievable how many beginners come through here," Combs says. "So helping with boot fitting is tremendous. Beginners often don't have a clue about how to put on a ski boot."

Instructors will also assist in the rental shop during busy times. They're perhaps most useful toward the end of the rental process, helping to carry the guest's equipment out to the snow.

SEEING RESULTS

At any point in the season, about 30 percent of the people on the mountain have passed through a lesson at some point that day (think \$5 beginner lesson). As a result, whenever an instructor steps into the base lodge or takes a free run, he or she is sure to recognize a lot of people.

"We try to act like we know everybody," Holthaus says.

Of the debit cards given out to beginners, 70 percent were redeemed to purchase lift tickets and rental equipment. The purchases are hard evidence that the resort is creating a host of return skiers and riders.

Looking ahead, Perfect North is planning to invest in new software that allows it to better track customers, collect more data on them, and deliver targeted promotions through a number of marketing channels. With the software, the resort is looking to build better avenues for which to invite its guests back after they return home.

Moreover, Perfect North was so pleased with the results of last season that it added a free lesson to the cost of a lift ticket this season. This renewed commitment to attracting and subsequently converting beginners means Perfect North Slopes has a once-unimaginable opportunity to incubate lifelong snowsports enthusiasts. The mountain's advantageous location near a number of metro areas and its ability to lower the barriers to entry for the sport means it sees a higher percentage of new skiers and snowboarders than many other resorts.

Perfect North is beginners. When the industry now focuses its eye on converting the beginner market, this beginner factory won't escape notice. ■