

Growing Diversity

BY WALTER ROESSING

More Than Just Providing One-Time Opportunities, Outreach Programs are Creating Customers and Future Staff.

Minorities are becoming a growing presence on the slopes. Most encouraging are California's statistics where non-whites make up 35 percent of the snowboarders and 10 percent of the downhill skiers. Nationally about 11 percent of alpine skiers and boarders are non-white, according to the 2006/07 NSAA National Demographic Study.

Looking at averages over the course of the last seven seasons, the Southeast has the greatest diversity among its skiing and riding guests at 19 percent, followed by the Pacific West's 18 percent, the Midwest's 11 percent, 9 percent in the Rocky Mountains and 8 percent in the Northeast.

Working hard to further grow that demographic segment are community outreach youth programs from coast to coast, marketing efforts by individual resorts and coordinated agendas by ski clubs. Equally noteworthy: Colorado Ski Country USA (CSCUSA) is in the early stages of developing a significant marketing diversity program – with its initial focus on the large Hispanic population within Colorado.

It should be noted that successful proactive diversity programs have been around for some time. At the forefront of this movement into wintersports was the community outreach program founded in Boston in 1968 by YES (Youth Enrichment Services) working with ski areas in four New England states. They have been followed by other nonprofit, volunteer organizations including Vermont-based Chill and Colorado-headquartered SOS (Snowboard Outreach Society) and Alpino – all of them involved extensively at multiple resorts.

Then there are those with successful marketing agendas like California's Mountain High resort. Its strategic marketing efforts in Los Angeles – via billboards, radio advertising, other outlets – have hit the jackpot. Minorities are responsible for 52 percent of its nearly half-million skier days, with 80 percent of them snowboarders with disposable income.



SNOWBOARD OUTREACH SOCIETY

Additionally, Vail Resorts has spoken out on the need to develop marketing diversity programs that'll aid in increasing skier days.

"It's critical for our industry to reach out to include as broad a constituency as possible. Diversity is important to the future of our industry as demographic trends indicate an opportunity to expand skier days by increasing ethnic participation in wintersports." Those words were spoken by CEO Rob Katz last fall when Vail announced it was increasing its commitment to diversity.

Because of the variation of so many ongoing programs, let's begin our diversity overview with a scan of community outreach programs.

"Over 90 percent of our constituents still come from low-to moderate-income families representing a cross-section of race and ethnicity," says YES President Mary Williams. YES works in tandem with over 100 schools, youth centers, police officers and faith-based organizations in the Greater Boston region.

Each season YES transports inner-city youngsters age 7 to 18 to a dozen ski areas in Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Vermont. They include Jiminy Peak, Cranmore, Black Mountain, Killington, Loon, Pico, Pats Peak, Shawnee Peak, Ski Butternut, Sugarbush, Sugarloaf, Sunapee and Wachusett Mountain. Those ♦

resorts and New England retailers donate hundreds of thousands of dollars for lift tickets, lessons, equipment and clothing each season.

To participate, there's a per-youth fee of \$40 for the first trip, \$10 for each additional one. Also available is an \$80 season pass. Those fees usually are paid by grants and other contributions.

From December to April the program involves 15 different trips – which take place Wednesday through Sunday. “We also have access to weekend overnight facilities at Butternut and Killington,” says Williams. Before leaving on their inaugural trip, everyone receives a 90-minute orientation. Upon reaching the mountains, they receive ski and snowboard lessons from either volunteer or resort instructors.

As Williams reports, “A Harvard Business School Study in March 1997 indicated YES was generating 12,500 skier-days per year for the industry. Those skier-days represented a combination of YES participants and graduates. The study also indicated that YES graduates were still skiing 10 years after leaving our program.”

Launched in 1995 by Burton Snowboards owner Jake Burton, Chill is a nonprofit learn-to-snowboard program. To date, it has touched the lives of 14,000 at-risk inner-city kids ages 7-20. Each winter, once a week for six weeks, Chill transports boys and girls from 11 U.S. and three Canadian cities to nearby mountain slopes. They're provided everything needed to snowboard – without charge.

Chill works with about 20 agencies in each city. And its intervention program is supported by many firms, foundations and individuals.

“Snowboarding also is used to help kids accomplish goals they never thought they could while teaching them some of the most important lessons of life: patience, persistence, respect, responsibility, courage, integrity and pride. That's achieved through positive adult role models,” says Michele Boguslofski, the director of Chill. She adds, “In the U.S., 34 percent of our minority kids are African American, 27 percent Latino, 8 percent Asian and 1 percent North American Indian.”

The 14 participating resorts in 10 states and two Canadian provinces range in size from Keystone, Colo., to tiny Four Lakes in Lisle, Ill.

“Four Lakes may be small, with a 100-foot vertical served by a couple of tow ropes, but the kids and volunteers have a great time,” said Jude Gonzales, Chill's representative in Chicago. “Sixty percent are African American and 30 percent Latino. They do their snowboarding after school on lighted slopes.”

Other Chill areas include Big Bear Mountain, Calif., Bolton Valley, Vt., Brighton, Utah, Mountain Creek, N.J., The Summit at Snoqualmie, Wash., Timberline, Ore., Wachusett Mountain, Mass., and Whitetail, Pa.

In Colorado about 900 snowboarders – 50 percent Hispanic – have passed through the SOS program on the slopes of Arapahoe Basin, Beaver Creek, Breckenridge, Copper Mountain, Durango, Eldora, Keystone, Steamboat, Sunlight and Vail since 1993. SOS has served another 412 youths nationally from areas such as Hunter Mountain, N.Y., Waterville Valley, N.H., and Mt. Lacrosse, Wis.

Through SOS, this season 2,500 kids will be attending a multi-day program and 500 will be in a five-year follow-up curriculum. SOS focuses on youth development through a long-term relationship that has outcomes benefiting the snowsport industry and kids' lives beyond the sport.

“SOS has goals to increase the diversity of the sport and provide the highest conversion rates. We've seen almost 60-percent diversity and tested over 60-percent conversion to core riders after SOS. On the other hand, our grants funding is due to SOS's ability to achieve long-term relationships with youth that achieve higher graduation rates, vocational experiences and community service. This is a win-win investment between snowsports and foundations to leverage greater results for ski resorts,” says Arn Menconi, founder and executive director.

“Our organization's focus is on sports-based development serving the at-risk and underprivileged from the fourth through 12th grades,” says Jon Garrou, youth programs director. Two Hispanic graduates of the SOS University program, who completed instruction through the Rocky Mountain division of the Association of American Snowboard Instructors Education Foundation at Beaver Creek, worked last season as Vail instructors. SOS will add a skiing curriculum in 2007/08.



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Meanwhile the Alpino community outreach program, based in Denver and co-founded by Roberto Moreno, provided skiing and riding experiences to nearly 3,500 multicultural youngsters ages 5 to 20 at Beaver Creek, Breckenridge, Echo Mountain Snowpark, Eldora, Keystone, Loveland and Vail in 2006/07. Moreno says he is looking to further expand his program in 2007/08.

Also in Colorado, Purgatory at Durango Mountain Resort also plans to further expand the Southern Ute Community Action Program (SUCAP) Ski and Ride Program it introduced last season to native American and Hispanic youths living on the Southern Ute Reservation.

As Loryn Kasten, public relations director, points out, “Durango Mountain Resort teamed with SUCAP – a non-profit organization that funds community efforts in Ignacio, Colo., home to the Southern Ute Indian Tribe – to provide an opportunity for tribe members and Hispanics age 12 to 18 to ski and snowboard at our resort. The result was the Ski and Ride Program, which also was open to adults.”

The program for participants ran four times last season, with each person offered lift tickets, half-day lesson, rentals and transportation for a discounted rate.

Meanwhile Vail Resorts has increased its commitment to diversity. As Bill Jensen, president of Vail Resorts’ mountain division, explains, “The first thing we did last season is establish a scholarship program for the local, in-county fourth-, fifth- and sixth-grade kids. We offered 25 scholarships each to eligible kids at Vail and Beaver Creek in Eagle County and 25 at Keystone and Breckenridge. Each scholarship includes lifts, lessons, rentals, lunch and 15 weekend days on the slopes per child. We are a mountain ski community and have wanted to forge that connection with the local children, many of whom are Hispanic.”

Jensen adds, “We will continue that same scholarship program next season, including bringing back anyone wanting to participate again. By the time some of the kids have been in our program five or six years, we expect some will be working on our mountains with the ski patrol and in other capacities.”

Furthermore, Vail Resorts provided 2,177 visits – lesson, rental, lift ticket, lunch and subsidized bus transportation – last season to Front Range kids, those living in cities such as Denver, Fort Collins and Colorado Springs, to encourage more multicultural diversity on the slopes.

“We also want to broaden the umbrella on diversity marketing by reaching out to college students and those with high household income. And we’re working with Colorado Ski Country for them to take more of the lead in a statewide marketing diversity program,” says Jensen.



YOUTH ENRICHMENT SERVICES

CSCUSA is the newest organization to move onto the diversity scene. The association reports it’s now in the preliminary stages of formulating a marketing program that is designed to attract winter sports participants from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. The organization, which represents 26 Colorado ski resorts, is intent on developing new skiers and riders who will enjoy winter sports for many years to come rather than simply be satisfied with a one-time experience.

“Initially, we plan to target the Hispanic population within Colorado,” said former CSCUSA Communications Director Molly Cuffe.

She added: “Just based on sheer numbers, we think this is a group where we may see some shorter-term, more immediate results. We have partnered with a nationally recognized Hispanic marketing, advertising and public relations agency to guide us in this process. The process is designed to increase awareness and develop a familiarity of the sport among the acculturated Colorado Hispanic population. That’s not to say we are neglecting other ethnic markets. We are reviewing a variety of other programs, too.”

As far as a youth approach is concerned, Cuffe says it is too preliminary to discuss any details.

Elsewhere in Colorado, a one-day marketing event called El Primero Descent – co-sponsored by Burton Snowboards and the

Sports Authority – was introduced at Colorado’s Copper Mountain last season. The grassroots snowboarding event was targeted at Spanish and bilingual speakers living in the mountains west of Denver. Over 50 riders, ages 12 to 45, took advantage of the \$50 program that included lesson, lunch and transportation.



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— Vail Resorts CEO Rob Katz.

Marketing programs have achieved success, too, with increasing minority involvement at resorts from California’s Mountain High, Northstar-at-Tahoe and Sierra Summit to Massachusetts’ Jiminy Peak.

Phillipine-born Ramon Baguio, who came to the USA at age 5, is the ski area manager at Mountain High. Explaining the resort’s multicultural mix of employees, he says, “We have instructors or ski patrolmen who speak Japanese, Korean, Mandarin, Vietnamese

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and Spanish. Sherman Lett, an African American, is our resource manager and a Hispanic supervises our ski patrol. That shows our minority guests that we hire their people, which makes them feel more at home at our resort.”

Baguio, a former ski patrolman at Hunter Mountain, continues, “We benefit because we are close to Los Angeles, with the largest minority population in the U.S. Our aggressive marketing program has involved putting billboards all over L.A. in places like Little Korea, Japantown and Chinatown. We advertise on ethnic radio and provide free video footage that’s shown on Asian and Spanish-language TV weather segments. We give season passes to hip-hop disc jockeys in hopes of additional plugs.

“One of our targets has been minority groups like Asian kids who go to college. They have money to spend just like white people. They want to ski, snowboard and be in the mountains. They’re dressed to the hilt and have the best in Burton equipment. Asians come up to Mountain High with their entire family because it’s a resort where there are no language barriers and nobody looks at you as being different.”

Walter Roessing is a wintersports columnist for The Dallas Morning News and member of the North American Ski Journalists Association (NASJA). ■



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