

Preparing for Dry-Floor Season

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Just as getting ready for the ice season takes six to nine months of advance planning; preparation for the dry-floor season takes an equal amount of planning. Not all single and double surface arenas operate year-round; most take at least one ice surface out for a few weeks, while others have their ice surface out three or four months for dry-floor programming. Regardless of a facility's ice schedule, much preparation must go into what is going to happen during the off-season, whether it is dry-floor programming, maintenance, or both. This article offers planning ideas to make this period successful.

One of the major responsibilities of management is to fully utilize their venues while meeting the unique needs of their community. Privately owned facilities can be more discriminating and market driven; however, given the current economic conditions in the industry, it is increasingly important for all facility managers to use their facilities totally and to generate sufficient income to be self-sustaining.

Two important management objectives to accomplish during the dry-floor season should be: 1) to create sufficient income to support full staffing and benefits during this period. Many ice arenas are forced to operate with skeleton staffs because of the lack of revenue during the three- to four-month off-season. 2) Complete the type of regular and preventive maintenance that cannot be accomplished during the ice season. Achieving these objectives requires progressive minded leadership, creative scheduling, and exceptional marketing and promotion skills.

Developing Dry-Floor Events and Activities

Ice arenas lend themselves to a wide range of dry-floor events and activities that can broaden the facility's reputation, meet the varied needs for events in the community and generate significant income. Without removing the dasher boards, regulation ice surfaces have over 17,500 square feet of clear-span, flat-floor space (with the dashers removed, over 20,000 square feet are available in most venues). Below are some typical events that could be hosted during the dry-floor season.

Dry Floor Activities

- Sports/Recreation
- Indoor Soccer
- Indoor Lacrosse
- Tennis
- Volleyball
- Inline Hockey
- Rollerskating/blading
- Pre-season Baseball
- Batting Cages
- Golf Driving Range
- Archery
- Basketball
- Exercise Classes
- Gymnastics
- Walking/Running Track

- Dance Classes
- Shows
- Animals
- Antiques
- Arts and Crafts
- Collectibles
- Flea Market
- Home
- Sporting Goods
- Vehicles
- Social Gatherings
- Commencements
- Conventions
- Banquets
- Dances
- Food Fairs
- Picnics and Parties
- Table Games

Religious Meetings

From the above list, industrious managers can certainly find a number of events/activities that are missing or under-served in their communities. To prepare for scheduling any of these events and activities, management should:

- Determine what events/activities are appropriate for their facility and under-served in the community. Don't attempt to host events that do not fit the design and layout of the venue. Stay within the scope of possibilities for the facility type and size being managed.
- Determine if the facility wants to co-sponsor, co-promote or fully operate the events. Most municipal facilities cannot risk public funds; however, where funds are available, the return is much greater than just leasing the space to outside promoters. Even when leasing space, management should negotiate a percentage of admissions, booth rentals and ticket sales, and never give away any part of the food service. Those dollars are a direct profit to the facility.
- Develop a dry-floor rental agreement that covers a wide variety of scheduling, rental and risk management conditions. Consult legal counsel for advice on the unique conditions present when hosting these activities/events.
- Develop a fee structure with specific details for recreational and sports activity programming, full and partial day rates for promoters to rent facilities for ticketed events with charges spelled out for staffing, equipment and utilities. Be sure to recoup all of the staffing costs, promoters are used to paying these costs in public assembly facilities and should be charged actual rates and benefit costs.
- Negotiate agreements with caterers and suppliers of tables, chairs, draperies and sound equipment. Firms in this business have comprehensive contracts that clearly spell out the scope of their services. Management must work closely with these companies in exchange for a small percentage of the fees they charge. Those fees are often the difference between making a profit and breaking even on some events.
- Develop safety and operational procedures for sports and recreational supervisors and event promoters. Be sure to cover such things as how to display signage, where to park, where to store equipment and where restricted areas are located.

- Establish a coordinated marketing plan to assist event and trade show promoters and community rental groups with their media coverage, advertising and promotions activities. The arena can use their media outlets to cooperatively purchase media buys and pass a percentage of the savings on to the promoter.

The quality of the management team and the energy they devote to planning and promoting their facility for dry-floor events, especially the first few years, will ultimately determine the programming and financial success of such events and activities. Changing the facility's image from a single to multi-purpose venue is not easy. Once it is achieved, however, it can boost the visibility of the facility in a community and meet the financial objectives for that part of the season.

Facility Maintenance

Although maintenance is more than a once-a-year objective, there are many tasks that are best done when the ice is out. It is not possible to cover every single aspect of maintaining an ice arena in a brief article, but the following list presents some annual tasks that most facilities must undertake. Each facility is unique, so managers need to start by identifying the different pieces of equipment and structural components of their building. Then, they must develop detailed plans and methods for accomplishing the maintenance tasks during the dry-floor season. Below is a suggested outline, by area and task:

- Parking Lots, Front Entrance and Vestibule - Paint entrance; strip, clean and seal floors; adjust door closers and tighten hinges, oil and grease locks and striker plates; re-pave or seal parking lot surface.
- Lobby Floors and Walls - Paint walls, benches and doors; replace worn floor tile, carpeting and baseboards.
- Stairways and Seating - Strip and reseal concrete floors, inspect and repair seats, anti-slip strips and railings.
- Public Washrooms and Team Rooms - Replace flooring, paint walls, doors and benches; replace light bulbs and worn tissue paper holders; repair or replace plumbing fixtures.
- Office - Replace worn carpet; replace light bulbs and clean fixtures; paint walls and doors; install or upgrade computer hardware/software systems.
- Concession Stands - Remove all equipment and furnishings; paint walls with high gloss paint; clean floors and equipment, and disinfect drain lines and hoods.
- Ice Floor and Dasher Board Area Maintenance - Check the floor slab for heaving; repair and replace kick plates, cap rail. Clean and repair acrylic as needed, inspect stanchions and glass holders; remove cuts and nicks and clean the dasher board plastic; inspect and replace dasher board fasteners; repair and/or replace dasher advertising panels.
- Ice Resurfer and Ice Edger - Completely dismantle and paint; replace auger bearings and hydraulic hoses; flush out fluids and recycle tanks; replace dasher board brushes; follow manufacturer's guidelines for all annual maintenance, including engine overhaul.
- Refrigeration System Compressors - Tear down and inspect compressors; drain and clean seals from holding tank, inspect condenser and lines (engage a refrigeration contractor well in advance so needed parts and schedules can be coordinated).
- Cooling Tower and Evaporative Condenser - Drain tower; clean and remove scale from troughs, coils and tower floor; inspect and clean holding tank, water flow valves and drains; replace fan belts; replace strainers and intake screens.

- HVAC System - Thoroughly clean all intake and exhaust fans and louvers; clean plenum chambers; replace fan belts and check motor and air handler bearings.
- Arena and Building Lighting - Re-lamp over-the-ice fixtures and record date; clean ballasts; clean fixtures; replace light bulbs over seating, inspect emergency and exit lighting systems; replace worn out switches in offices, locker rooms and washrooms.

It is commonly accepted that users and spectators take better care of well-maintained facilities and that this translates into lower operational costs. Managers cannot rationalize not properly maintaining facilities because of being too busy or being understaffed. With what is being charged for ice time, ice skaters and hockey players deserve and should expect clean, well-maintained facilities.

Keeping Up with Changing Times

In the past, many managers may have used the dry-floor season to work at a slower pace, to take a break after a busy ice season. Many may have been told that their only responsibility was to do the repairs for the next season. Others were transferred to other duties and barely given enough time to complete the minimum repairs. With present economic conditions, every effort needs to be made to better use our facilities while at the same time continuing to bring in a steady source of income.

Community leaders are beginning to recognize that ice arenas need to be used year-round. With creative marketing and well-organized management, the dry-floor season can be a programming and financial success. Management needs to recognize that having dry-floor events, even while they are performing maintenance for the next year, does not require them to sacrifice their vacation. In fact, a productive dry-floor season can be justification for a permanent, year-round management team. It also enhances the image of the manager and the facility in the community. Indeed, the income from the dry-floor season is becoming an important supplement to a facility's budget.