

How to Market Group Sales

by Susan Snyder-Davis

Group sales should be a vital part of a successful ice arena's business. Since walk-in business is unpredictable for sales forecasting, you should promote group sales. By booking group parties in advance, you can begin to project upcoming sales and then your walk-in business becomes bonus income.

How do you begin to develop your group sales business? What are the typical reasons to gather for a party? Often it's for a child's birthday, but there are other reasons. Families have parties for reunions and anniversaries. Clubs and non-profit organizations hold parties to raise funds, to get to know each other better, end-of-the-year celebrations and meetings. Schools hold after prom parties, end-of-the-year celebrations, beginning of the year parties, and after games or plays parties. (If you are looking for schools in your area, check out the American School Directory, your internet guide to 108,000 K-12 schools: www.asd.com.)

Businesses throw parties for reaching sales quotas, retirements, new product announcements and to entertain clients. Families, clubs, schools, non-profits and businesses all celebrate holidays. It's your job to notify these groups and to remind them to have parties for all of these important reasons ... and, by the way, your facility offers party packages.

There are targeted places within the community to call on for group sales. You will find business in the following areas:

- Schools - private, public, technical, home schoolers, middle, high school, community colleges, universities, PTAs, PTOs and day care centers
- Communities within the community – apartment complexes, sorority and fraternity houses, and college dormitories
- Businesses – wholesale, retail and manufacturing
- Industries – real estate, insurance, hotels, dental/medical and automotive sales companies
- Religious organizations and churches
- Civic groups – Kiwanis, Lions, Rotary, Jaycees, scouts
- Special groups – utilities, cable companies, government offices, media, fire and police departments, and medical facilities

There are endless ways to generate leads and to market group sales. Here are a few:

- Testimonials – Invite group leaders to write a note of referral on their letterhead if possible.
- Brochures – This is where you can shine. Let everyone know what kind of parties they can expect to have at your facility.
- In-house promotions – Flyers, calendars and banners are all ways to remind your customers that you can throw their parties.
- Exhibit at community fairs, festivals and events to meet and greet residents of your community.

- Cross promotions – Work with other businesses wanting to increase their business.
- Contests – Give away a party to draw attention to your parties.
- Advertise in local newspapers, school papers, club newsletters, church directories, Yellow Pages, school yearbooks, school and community theater programs, high school and college radio advertising, and community newspapers. Don't forget to promote your group sales capabilities in your facility event programs and over the public address system during shows, competitions and hockey games.
- Sales incentives – Give your staff and customers incentives for referring business.
- Web sales – Be sure to include details on your website about group sales. You may consider offering party discounts to groups who link your website to their website. Be sure to collect e-mail addresses of your group leader contacts. Don't spam your prospects with junk mail, but periodically offer e-mail party specials they can't resist.
- Sales 101 – Direct mail, telemarketing and cold calling are all methods of building your prospects database.

There are other creative ways to build your group sales. If you can't beat 'em, join 'em. Join the groups where your prospects gather, infiltrate their world and learn their ways. And, when you feel comfortable, invite them to meet at your facility. While they are there, be sure to hand out your party brochure. Throw a big party and invite group leaders and prospects to come with their families or guests. Hand out your party brochure.

If you want to give groups an added bonus for signing up for company and group parties, provide their group with your facility's logo T-shirt with their organization's name over-printed on the shirt for their event. Give the group the option of paying extra to receive the T-shirt. You will need to coordinate with a local printer who can provide the overprinting and you may need a minimum order of shirts from the participating groups.

It costs you more to generate new clients than it does to sell more to the clients you already have. Translated – offer frequency discounts to groups that sign up for parties. If they book one party, tell them that if they book three parties throughout the year, you'll give them a fourth party for free.

One of the smartest things an ice arena can do is to invest in its group sales program by hiring someone to specifically solicit group business. Send you sales person to professional sales training classes and provide your sales person with sales tracking software and bonuses, sales incentives and commissions. Take your group sales seriously and you'll enjoy serious results.

** Susan Snyder-Davis is owner of Kids Marketing Factory and author of Marketing Your Family Entertainment Center and Special Events for Family Entertainment Centers. You can reach her at kidsmktg@juno.com.*