

Boost Your Public Skating Business Ideas, Innovations & Incentives

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Public skating has always been a mainstay in ice arenas. But competition from other entertainment venues and recreational choices has resulted in decreasing public skating numbers for ice skating facilities throughout the country. Solutions have ranged from reducing public ice time in favor of more lucrative program and club rentals to stepped-up marketing and programming to promote recreational ice skating. Here's what seven ISI members say about the role of public skating in their business, and what they are doing to preserve it.

Over the past five years, what has been your facility's experience with public skating attendance?

CAMPOL: Our facility opened in November 1996 as the first twin ice skating complex in the state of Florida. Our public skating sessions for the first few years were very strong, as one would expect in a new state-of-the-art facility. Our public skating numbers tapered off and became steady after the initial frenzy.

DANISCHEWSKI: Across the board, our facilities have seen a decrease in public skating from 5 percent to more than 20 percent at a couple of facilities.

KADEN: We've seen an increase in the public skating sessions where we offer special activities. Our normal sessions have been status quo.

LANE: Over the past five years we have seen a steady decline of nearly 33 percent in our public session attendance. We did see a slight increase in 2002 after the Winter Olympics, but overall our numbers have been down.

LARIOS: Over the past five years, public session flow and interest is down. Our walk-in business is a very small portion of our business.

NELSON: One of our main problems with public session attendance is the competition among all the recreational programs. During hockey season, the majority of the public skaters are hockey players taking private lessons and practicing their skills. There are not many figure skaters who take advantage of the public sessions since they are taking skating on the club ice time.

WILKIN: Our public sessions have seen an average decline of 14.5 percent over the last four years. Our most dramatic decline was as a result of 9/11. Our most stable year was 2002, partially due to the Winter Olympics. Other factors that have contributed to our decline in attendance are major freeway construction on both sides of our exit, the lagging economy and California's gas prices.

What steps have you taken as a result of that experience?

WILKIN: We've kept our public session schedule consistent so groups, families and individuals can rely on us for availability. We've initiated a VIP program; coordinated more with our nonprofit figure skating club to gain access to the public schools via flyers; increased our promotional materials given when field trips, birthday parties and special groups visit our facility; and refocused our staff on creating themed sessions with games and prizes.

LARIOS: We offer public sessions specifically programmed for skate school, adults, Teen Night and birthday parties. With every public session focused to a specific group, we don't mix up experienced figure skaters with first-time adults and birthday children with teens.

NELSON: We moved all of our learn-to-skate classes to the public sessions. We hoped that more class exposure to the general public would encourage more people to skate, such as the parents or siblings of the skaters in class. Overall, we have not changed the amount of public skating time much in the last few years.

DANISCHEWSKI: We make the skating facility an entertainment venue by offering games, promotions, radio tie-ins, co-promotions with area business organizations and working with those

organizations on events and fundraising. We have not increased advertising that focuses solely on public skating, but we make sure our ad dollars are always well spent, and we tag public skating. At most of our sites, RMS has reduced public skating sessions during the week to only one or two nights, but we consistently hold three to four public skating sessions on Saturdays and Sundays, usually for three to four hours each session.

LANE: At Family Sports Center we have dropped one of our weekend evening public session times and at South Suburban Ice Arena we are contemplating reducing the amount of available public session time for increased rental revenue from other existing programs. Because of aging demographics near our South Suburban Ice Arena site, we are looking at partnering our programs with nearby towns that have younger demographics and do not have skating facilities.

Have you tried any new, innovative ways to increase public skating participation in your arena? Have they been successful?

KADEN: We've started a Family Fun Sunday Series at our 1-3 p.m. public sessions in January and February. We offer specials in our snack bar, coupons for future sessions, face painting, mascots, sand-art activities, local entertainment and other special activities on and off the ice. We average close to 400 people per session, compared to our Saturday public sessions, where we average between 250 and 300.

We've partnered with a local radio station, which targets young families, to help promote our public sessions. In exchange for our promoting the station in our print ads, they provide us with free radio time. We've also worked with a local fast-food restaurant to give away kids' meals to the first 30 kids with paid admission in exchange for advertising at our facility. The restaurant promotes our Family Fun Series through posters we provide them.

NELSON: We purchased a "border patrol" so we can divide the rink up into segments. Last season we tried a remote-control racing club. We provided some of the cars but encouraged participants to bring their own. We ran races around obstacle courses.

One of the most popular things we have tried is a trivia contest. Rink employees come up with a tricky question, usually hockey-related, and give out prizes to those who answer correctly.

We tried a word-search puzzle during our Easter party. I made up five different grids (about 10 rows and 10 columns) and hid five words in each puzzle. I drew each puzzle directly onto the ice using a glass paint. I then gave each participant a sheet with all 25 words and told them they were to find which words were in which puzzles.

We are working on restructuring staff shifts so that we can free up someone to hit these ideas harder. We do see a positive reaction to the ideas from the public.

LANE: Starting this fall we are going to hire an instructor to offer short, free class lessons on some of our weekend public sessions, to be available for walk-in private lessons, to market our learn-to-skate programs and to host games and exhibitions during the public sessions.

WILKIN: We started "Sunday Snowdays" last December. It was such a big success that we continued it. We dump two tanks of snow from our Zamboni at the blue line and mold it into a snow slide. We have the plastic snow discs that enable skaters to slide down, and we have a snow bumper and a skate guard at the end of the run. Our staff assists skaters onto the disc and gives them safety instructions. We've also held snowman-building contests.

Another fun activity is called "Human Shuffleboard." We have three to six teams of two people each. One teammate sits in the snow disc and the other one pushes the disc. The disc is released at the designated line, and the one stopping closest to the finish line wins. We give small in-house prizes to the winners, such as a soda or hot dog from our snack bar.

CAMPOL: We installed a 16-ft. video wall that drops down for public skating sessions and creates

an MTV-like atmosphere. We named it "Club Incredible" and it has jump-started our public skating sessions. We have a professional DJ on Friday and Saturday nights, and the two together have been instrumental in resurrecting our public skating.

LARIOS: Our strategy has been to "force people to come and skate" through a very solid birthday party program that takes one family to decide to celebrate their birthday here and invites at least 10 more families to our facility.

DANISCHEWSKI: Though the idea is not new, we've found that radio promotions seem to be very successful if you partner with the right radio station for your marketplace. Also, having games on ice with giveaways from area merchants and businesses has helped. Promotions with area sports teams ("Skate with the St. Louis Blues") or local service organizations, with some of the proceeds going to the team's favorite charity tend to bring in the public that normally doesn't think about skating. Then it is important that the staff know how to sell the new customer on facility programs or events, one of which is public skating.

What methods or incentives have you used to keep public skaters coming back?

LARIOS: With themed, programmed public sessions you can cater to certain groups consistently. For example, in our birthday program we run over eight different games on the ice, like the Chicken Dance, the Giant Parachute, Cha-Cha Slide, and during our Teen night we have a DJ, disco lights and snowball fights. We run activities to hook people into coming back until they join in another program like skate school or hockey.

CAMPOL: We have utilized and cross-promoted our affiliation with the NHL Florida Panthers Hockey Club. Panther game tickets have been distributed; the team mascot, Stanley C. Panther, has made appearances; and radio partners have been utilized.

NELSON: We give out "fun stuff" to the kids. We order a bunch of inexpensive goodies in bulk from Oriental Trading Company that we keep on hand all the time. Skaters that are helpful to others or who are displaying good behavior get rewarded.

Our pool staff at the rec center figured out how many laps someone would have to swim in the rec pool in order to swim the length of our local river. Once a swimmer "swims the river," they get a certificate. Things like that are great incentives.

DANISCHEWSKI: We use bounce-back coupons with short expiration dates; discounted public sessions for families and weekday sessions; discounted punch cards for public sessions; and promotions such as free skate sharpening after attending 10 public sessions. We also vary our music selection for different age groups during different times of the week to keep the public skater groups happy.

WILKIN: Our VIP program was designed to give our customers added incentive to return on a more frequent basis. Upon registration, customers are given a punch card with special offers for public sessions, skating school, snack bar, pro shop and hockey. We also post monthly offers on a bulletin board in our box office and e-mail them to our VIP database.

KADEN: We offer coupons for skate rentals and/or admission. At the conclusion of skating during our Family Fun Series, we offer a "gift" for the kids to take home - a pencil, change purse, water bottle, keychain, etc. with our logo, phone number and Web site printed on it. We also send each person away with flyers on upcoming events along with brochures on hockey and skating classes. In addition, we've started asking for e-mail addresses and giving out prizes during the sessions. Our main goal is to give the skaters an "entertainment" experience, and not just have them skate around and listen to music for two hours.

What have you found to be the most effective methods of marketing and promoting public skating?

NELSON: The school system! We have an e-mail list of all the teachers in the local schools and we shoot out an e-mail to them about any special upcoming events. We also strongly encourage them to bring their classes to skate.

Our Web site is kept updated with detailed information and a lot of PDF downloads. This enables the customer to print out an easy-to-read schedule of public skating, freestyle and drop-in hockey without having to call us or come in for one.

We are members of the local concierge information group. All the area hotels are given guides to all the activities in the area twice a year and we make sure we are a part of that.

KADEN: Our partnering promotions with the local radio station and fast-food establishment; marketing to the people who are attending so they continue to come back; our Web site; and sending e-mails.

DANISCHEWSKI: The most cost-effective marketing that RMS uses is radio and cable advertising.

LARIOS: Our best marketing methods are word of mouth and partnerships. We have concentrated on improving our entertainment product so that our existing customers can help us sell it. It works! We also brand everything we do with our mascot, the "Ice Qub," including our in-house hockey teams, our Web site, flyers, goodie bags, T-shirts, banners, Scout programs, fundraiser program and learn-to-skate program. We have consistent mascot appearances. Everything and everyone in our facility is "Quberized."

WILKIN: The most important marketing tool is word of mouth. If your guests have a great experience, they are going to talk to their family and friends about it. Be creative with your public sessions. The introduction of a novel idea for the public session will produce a reaction from the press - free publicity! However, you have to send out press releases to let them know about your new program or service.

How important is public skating to your community, your business plan and your bottom line?

LANE: I always preach that public sessions and learn-to-skate classes are the lifeblood of most successful facilities. Most medium-size arena facilities are heavily dependent on public session attendance and learn-to-skate numbers to maintain the base of their programs. I believe that all successful facilities must have multiple pillars for their financial viability and success: public sessions, strong learn-to-skate programs, figure skating and, of course, youth and adult hockey programs.

WILKIN: Public sessions are essential to our business plan. New skaters coming for public sessions feed our skating school and hockey leagues. It is critical that we remain focused on generating more community awareness of our facility and our programs, especially the public sessions. We must keep them at convenient times for the customers, (not for ourselves), affordable and most important, fun!

DANISCHEWSKI: Public skating is an important part of all our facilities' bottom lines and the success of our facilities. It can be as much as 10 to 20 percent or more of the bottom line. At our outdoor facilities, it is in the range of 85 to 95 percent of our business. Public skating also dictates your skate rental income, birthday parties and group sales, and helps put skaters into your learn-to-skate programs.

CAMPOL: In South Florida, ice skating is largely treated as a novelty. We continue to introduce as many people as we can to skating and hockey, and public skating is usually their first experience. It is critical to our business and it is also a feeder to our group lessons and involvement in hockey.

KADEN: Public skating is very important to our business plan and budget.

NELSON: Without public sessions, it would be hard for an individual to try out skating before committing to a larger program. If we were to wipe out public skating, I am certain that we would see an overall decrease in the enrollment of our user groups.

LARIOS: Without public skating, we would have no feeder and consequently all our programs would be down. So this is still the most important program in our business and to our bottom line.