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Looking for a public session booster? Put the WOW into your parties!

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by Gaston Larios, San Diego Ice Arena

Most in the ice arena industry would agree that our public sessions are low in attendance. So what are we doing about it? Not enough! We need to change our business culture, break tradition and try new approaches to attract the public to our facilities.

Let's be realistic: We operate our businesses in a world where our competition is no longer the ice arena or the bowling alley down the street, but other businesses in other industries such as theaters, theme parks and water parks, to name a few. These competitors are viewed as fun, exciting and innovative. Ice skating rinks are commonly thought of as traditional, strict and cold. In order to compete, it's time we position ourselves as professionals in the entertainment business, not just the ice-selling business.

At San Diego Ice Arena, we have increased weekend public session attendance by 75 percent through fine-tuning and focusing our efforts on promoting and producing terrific birthday parties. This has resulted in increased public session revenue, new skating school enrollments, repeat parties and increased awareness of our facility.

Parents consider a birthday party one of the most important days of the year for their child and they feel pressure to make it a success, regardless of their economic level. On average, when parents choose to have a birthday party in our facility, they are bringing in 10 other families.

Goals and strategies

The primary goalsshould be to create an unforgettable birthday experience that will thrill parents and create special memories for the children, and to create awareness of the rink facility, resulting in increased usage and skating school enrollments. To do this, we must create a strategy that will differentiate ourselves from our competition:

- Booking parties with a computer software system, such as Frontline Solutions, allows you to open a scheduling department to get maximum reservations. Such a system helps you manage operations, track cash flow and collect valuable customer information in an integrated database. Open your reservation department to all of your frontline office clerks, supervisors and managers. All should have access to the birthday party reservation modes. Give your customers the opportunity to make a live reservation throughout business times. Answer all inquiries promptly.
- Create a package with the guest's point of view in mind. Eliminate as many frustrations as possible: Address the issues of birthday cake, other food and drink, party rooms, supervision, ways the child is made to feel special, assistance with invitations, arrangements for parents who wish to stay and observe, safety precautions, etc.
- Create an imagewith a mascot that children can relate to, and use it to brand your programs. At San Diego Ice Arena, we participate in the Ice Rink Owners of California, whose members share the popular mascot "Ice Qub."

- Birthday parties can also fit into regular theme sessions such as Teen Night, family party sessions, Adult Night, etc.
- Promote the party program through in-house flyers, advertising at local events and local, targeted family magazines — one of the most powerful vehicles.Depending on media costs in your community, mass advertising may or may not be feasible. However, the most effective marketing happens with every action that takes place during the day-to-day operation of the arena. Look at ways to promote birthday parties through your existing client base.

Delivering the WOW

The "WOW" is when our clients walk out of our ice arena saying, "WOW, I can't believe they did all that just for me!" Party honorees should be the center of attention throughout their celebration. Create a culture to make their experience one they will never forget and that others will desire. Here's how:

Scheduled events —A scheduled sequence of events should be mailed out days before the party along with the confirmation sheet. This will show that you are organized, assuring parents that you will eliminate their frustrations and deliver what you promised.

Hosting the party — Host with restaurant-style professionalism, but make sure to add the tender-loving-care touch. Personalize every birthday experience.

Skate Heroes — The highest form of interaction at our parties is the "human touch." This occurs when a child leaves our facility having made a new friend on our party team, and looks up to him or her as a hero. So, turn your skate guards into "Skate Heroes"! A Skate Hero should possess excellent skating ability, physical strength, patience, innocence, a wacky sense of humor, a big heart, loyalty, great presentation, a genuine smile and generosity — the kind of person you should be hiring anyway! Assign a Skate Hero to each party from beginning to end. Have the Skate Hero help lace up every child in that party, starting with the birthday child.

Group lesson time — Lessons are a must for these novice programs. Make your Skate Hero responsible for teaching a lesson to the group, giving your program the instructional value. Make it fun and, again, keep the birthday child the center of attention. A 15-minute lesson is recommended, starting with off-ice time covering learning how to fall and stand up as well as basic ice skating skills.

Successful birthday parties will increase your public session revenue. There is a large market for this service. Making the effort to properly set up your marketing, planning and execution of parties will result in additions to your skating school and future repeat customers. Don't forget to promote your party packages through whatever means your marketing budget allows. And most of all, make sure your staff is well trained in the reservation process and that each party is treated with care and respect from the beginning through the completion of the party.

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Fun & Games

Freeze Game

This is an ice-breaker game, designed for getting guests used to the DJ's voice and commands. The game is simple: Every time the DJ says "FREEZE," all people stop. Make it special with other commands like: "Everybody FREEZE except birthday children." This game is played for the length

of a song, and can be used throughout the session with other games.

Chicken Dance/ Hokey Pokey

Have your DJ and Skate Heroes set up this game by simply placing everybody in a circle, Leaving a mascot and Skate Heroes in the middle to help the children with the activity. After the song, the mascot can exit the ice accompanied by a Skate Hero.

Parachute Game

This is the safest, most colorful and organized game that I have encountered on the ice. Gather everyone in the middle. Bring out the parachute and open up the chute, inviting every child to join in to grab it. Start the game by pulling the chute up, then down. Tell all the girls to skate under it and the boys to bring the chute down to cover them up. Switch, letting the boys skate under and the girls cover them up. After that they can skate to the right, then skate to the left , then have just the birthday children in the middle. It's a slow-paced game that can take quite a bit of time if desired, and it's lots of fun.

The Beach Ball Game

It's recommended to schedule this game toward the middle of your public session, just before a resurface, when the ice is no longer slick. The game is played in the middle of the hockey face-off circle. The Skate Heroes are responsible for making sure the ball always stays in the middle of the circle while in play. This game lasts approximately the length of two songs, depending on participation and level of danger. If at any time a Skate Hero feels the game is becoming unsafe, the DJ will fade out the game time.

Turkey Bowling

This is the perfect traditional game to make birthday children stand out and shine. Simply clear the ice and leave only the birthday children. Set up some bowling pins, give them a frozen turkey and let them bowl away. The birthday children should then get some special token as a prize for their wacky achievement.

Zamboni Time

It's still a mystery why children so love to see this, but they do!

Cha-Cha Slide

This dance should be played in the second half of your session when children feel more stable on their feet. The game is organized like a line dance, led by the Skate Heroes. It requires the basic skills skaters have learned throughout the day: slide, jump, skate to the front and skate to the back. Fun for all ages.

Monster Basketball

This game is played with an inflatable hoop made from the same material as whitewater rafts. The hoop has four sides. One Skate Hero with a ball should be assigned per side. Organize one line on each side and have the children shoot one by one with light, inflatable basketballs.

Tunnel Train Game

Tunnel Train is played with the Monster Basketball prop used as a tunnel. Each train should be led by one of the Skate Heroes and each birthday child should have their own train with their guests. The DJ announces each train's turn (by the birthday child's name) to go through the tunnel. The game can last through approximately two songs.