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Scheduling for Maximum Profit

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Whether you are in an existing ice arena or are setting up a schedule for a new facility, one of your most important responsibilities may be determining your ice usage schedule. Ice arena scheduling is an essential component of good management. Even the most promising ice arenas can fail if the schedule is poorly executed.

Scheduling is the road map of your operation. You should be planning your programming at least six to nine months in advance. Remember that in most cases our business is seasonal and you must plan accordingly: During our "winter" or prime season (October-April), demand for ice time is usually much greater, allowing less flexibility in scheduling; during our "summer" or non-prime time (May-September), demand is usually reduced, allowing greater flexibility and often requiring more creativity to make productive use of available ice time. Your "seasons" may be different, but in any case they must be carefully planned and marketed to your "guests."

Scheduling basics

- Know your operating and debt service costs. Try not to undersell your ice time or you won't be able to cover those costs.
- Identify your most profitable sessions by their average hourly income. Those are usually public sessions and your "learn to" programs, including skating school and introductory hockey classes. Set the hours needed for those programs and try not to change them. Be consistent!
- List all of your user groups and find out their needs. What they want and what you can actually offer may be two different things. Don't be afraid to offer each user group some good times and some less-than-perfect times. Try to treat all groups fairly and equitably. Remember that their needs may also change seasonally.
- Linking — scheduling different types of programs back to back — is a favorable way to reach different segments of your market and show those customers your facility's different activities (example: hockey, learn-to-skate, public, freestyle).

Important considerations

Area demographics — You need to know and cater to your particular customer base. Your area may have a higher concentration of younger children, high school students, ethnic populations, shift workers, etc.

- Drive time for different activities — Learn the area roads and highways and try not to schedule an activity when it is difficult for its target user group to attend.
- The way you schedule your staff during peak times is critical. Be aware of labor costs and schedule as needed.
- Be somewhat flexible, but remember that inconsistency can sometimes scare away your customers.

Offer varied activities and programs

- Public sessions — Make them fun and entertaining. Play games, change direction, announce "girls only" and "boys only" skates, add special effects and even consider using a DJ for an evening weekend session.
- Learn-to-skate programs — Offer multiple times and try to schedule them before or after public sessions so you can "blend" the two together.
- Birthday parties and school field trips — Each attendee at a party or field trip should leave your facility with a packet of program information and some "coupon" reasons to come back.
- Hockey games, practices and tournaments for all ages and abilities of both male and female players
- Figure skating freestyle sessions, competitions and ice shows for both recreational and serious competitive skaters
- Broomball leagues and tournaments
- Speed skating sessions and competitions
- Special events and group sales
- Fundraisers can be a community benefit if explained to all of the schools, churches and youth groups in your area. Skating parties offer a great alternative to candy sales, raffles, car washes, etc.
- Dry-floor events

Don't be afraid to try something different. Also remember that holiday weekends are sometimes very good for tournaments, competitions or ice shows, and can sometimes be worked around public sessions and learn-to-skate program times so you don't lose the revenue from those programs.

Marketing

Programming and dissemination of information within your facility should always be available to new and existing customers alike. Never take it for granted that "everyone knows" about your programs. All employees and teaching staff should be knowledgeable about programs and activities.

Don't forget your most important marketing tool: your current customers. Good referrals often outweigh an expensive advertising campaign. Our customers are our "guests" and our best ambassadors.

Remember, a satisfied customer is a happy customer and can contribute to your facility's success. Scheduling for the benefit of the majority will go a long way toward increasing the profitability of your ice skating arena.

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