

How Are You doing?

Formula for Success for All Basic Skills Programs

How well a Basic Skills program is administered affects every rink manager, figure skating club, hockey association, skating instructor and community in which it is involved, not to mention the millions of people who are interested in learning to skate. It is vital that all group lesson programs realize their importance in the skating community and deliver a positive image of skating to the general public. It is not only a matter of bringing new customers into the rink but also keeping them interested, motivated and educated. It really comes down to only one question: are they having fun? With all the other (and, in some cases, less expensive) alternatives to families today, why would they continue skating if they are not enjoying themselves?

How do we build the ideal group lesson program? The answer is really quite simple:

- Outstanding customer service
- Tremendous staff
- Creative and consistent programming
- Safe environment to learn and excel
- Rewards
- Fun!

At this level of skating, instructors and directors should not be selling skating; they should be selling FUN. If children and adults do not enjoy their beginning skating lessons, our sport will lose them. The chances of them trying it again are slim to none. Lessons need to be safe, educational and fun. A healthy balance is necessary, regardless of the age or level. All group lesson curriculums need to be designed so skaters can achieve success at an early stage and progress through the curriculum in a rapid fashion, offering rewards along the way.

Bottom line: teaching skating lessons is a business providing a service, and how you treat your customers is vital to the key of your success. Who are your customers? They are skaters and their parents/guardians alike.

What is customer service and how does it relate to your group lesson program?

- Reliable and punctual classes – always start and end on time!
- Awareness of customer expectations and goals
- Exceeding their expectations
- Giving feedback to customers
- Communication about upcoming events, changes in the schedule and promotions
- Teaching correct skating techniques
- Listening to your customers and correcting mistakes immediately
- Fair price for services

Customer service is making customers feel special. You always want them to feel they are an important part of your business. Try not to take these beginning skaters for granted. They are the future of your business and the future of our sport.

Here are some tips for better customer service in your group lesson program:

Training your staff

Your staff is the ultimate key (or failure) to your program. They are the ones who have the most influence with your business since they are the “frontlines” and directly communicate with your customers on a daily/weekly basis. At this level, attitude is more important than credentials. Characteristics of your staff members that are essential for success are: a fun personality, safety conscious, reliable, professional in manner and dress, being a team player, having integrity, committed to the success of the facility, motivated, enthusiastic, love children and always available to talk with your customers. Put the right people in the right jobs for the best possible success. Match their technical skills with the level of instruction required. You can train the testing standards and teaching tips and technique, but you cannot train personality.

Write a job description before you hire with all the expectations clearly stated (when to arrive, what to wear, what is expected of them, how much they will be paid). Host regular in-house training sessions and staff meetings for all to attend. It is important for your staff to be current on all upcoming events, policies and troubleshooting. Be loyal to your staff, and they in turn need to be loyal to you.

Constantly evaluate their performance by looking into their re-enrollment records and class drop-off within the session, and listening to what your customers are saying about them. Listen to all feedback you receive and discuss both positive and negative comments with the staff member directly. Keep a written record of this in a file for future reference, if ever needed.

The ideal staff is set up as a tiered structure with a pay scale based on experience and credentials consisting of senior staff, junior staff, assistants and volunteers. If you offer a tiered structure, make sure that you set up an incentive program with specific criteria for upward movement in the status of the staff.

Creative and consistent programming

Keep your pulse on the community and your market. Always charge a fair market price for lessons and evaluate your fees semi-annually. Make adjustments if necessary with proper notice to your customers. Your brochure should include all the information for the entire year so families can plan for each session and special events (competitions, exhibitions, ice shows).

Having a yearly registration fee will pay for annual membership dues to organizations plus a little extra for advertising or overhead expenses.

Customers should be able to register by phone, mail, fax, Internet, in person and walk-ins the first day of the session. Waiting lists are not recommended, but if you must use one, make sure to prorate the fees if they begin after the session has started.

Offer a core of classes each session and add on specialty ones where you need a boost. These may be extra fun classes like introductory synchronized, choreography classes before a scheduled competition, hockey skills, power skating, off-ice conditioning for beginners, pre-school and kindergarten classes, parent and tot, ice dancing clinics, special focus, and workshops. This keeps their interest, gives them a chance to develop their skills at a faster pace and brings them to your facility for more than one class per week.

Organization

Allow five minutes in between class times to have your staff pick up their class rink side and drop them off again. This helps with congestion at the entryway to the rink and is a safe way to transport the skaters to their class zones. Every staff member, whether an instructor, assistant or volunteer, should wear some type of identifiable jacket or top so when a customer walks into a facility, he or she knows immediately who is on staff and where to turn their attention. Allow time for the parents to consult with the instructor before or after the session to discuss concerns or questions. Allow for “booster” lessons on public skating to assist skaters with a difficult skill. An extra five minutes of personal attention may make all the difference in that person’s success with skating.

Offer rewards/incentives to the skaters

Post a “Success Chart” at the rink for everyone to see the progress of the skaters in your program. Give out the badges free of charge to the skaters. Distribute report cards at the end of each session with comments about performance, things they did really well and tips for improvement. Give stickers to the kids for good efforts, good behavior and a job well done. It is the little, thoughtful things we can do that make such a tremendous difference and keep them coming back for more.

Re-enrollment bonuses

It is much cheaper to keep a repeat customer than it is to always spend money recruiting and advertising for new ones. Offer family discounts: \$5 off for the second family member, \$10 off for the third family member, etc. Give a re-enrollment discount for multiple sessions. Have a “Brag Board” of all the students who have passed through the group lesson program or joined either a figure skating club or hockey program. Work on keeping your current customers happy and returning to your facility for more services.

Communication

This is the area where the greatest pitfalls occur. It is very difficult to keep everyone updated, so use flyers and handouts on brightly colored paper so people notice the sheets. Post everything on a bulletin board, in the lobby, at the skate rental and at the entrance and exit to the arena. Use a registration table every week and have someone available to answer questions. Offer “Open Houses” during the sessions to invite potential customers to observe the lessons.

Word of mouth is truly your best form of advertising. It carries more weight than all other forms of advertising put together. Find out what your reputation is in the community. Give your customers a simple survey at the end of each session and follow through with their comments. Those that take the time to fill them out deserve to know that you are acting on their comments.

A lot of hard work is necessary to administer a top-quality, group lesson program. Through attention to detail, teamwork, a well-trained staff, creativity and being responsive to your customers, you can build a terrific program.