

Marketing Your Group Lesson Program

By Susi Wehrli

Marketing is much more than advertising! The American Marketing Association defines it as “the process of planning and executing the conception, pricing, promotion and distribution of ideas, goods and services to create an exchange that satisfies individual and organizational objectives.” So what does this statement mean to our group lesson ice skating programs? EVERYTHING!

Marketing is a technique. It focuses on identifying the customers you will serve. If you can honestly answer the following questions, you have a good start. Who is your market? What do they want? And most importantly, what are they willing to pay for? Sitting down and thinking through some of these questions will help you identify where to put your resources and how to develop a plan and stick to it. You will always learn new things along the way and each area of the country is unique. Focus on your strengths, what sets you apart from the competition and concentrate only on the things that you have control over.

Who is the customer? For all group lesson programs, the customer is the child or adult enrolled in lessons. If the child or adult has a good experience in your group lesson program, it is likely that they will return for the following classes. Customers are people who need or want your service. Lucky for you, you have a service to sell.

Bottom line: are they having fun? When a child walks off the ice from their lesson, what is the first question asked by the parent/guardian? “How did it go?” If they have a huge smile and say that they had fun and learned a new skill called a swizzle, landed a new jump or mastered their stop and can’t wait for the next lesson- what will happen? On the flip-side, if they say that it was cold, their feet hurt, skating is too hard or their teacher was mean- what will the return be?

Learning to skate is not a skill that is mandatory to survive. Therefore we must make skating enjoyable from the start. For the general public, skating is a fun, recreational, seasonal activity. Whether they wish to learn to skate backwards, show off to their friends at the next birthday party or have aspirations for Olympic caliber competition, skating can and should be for everyone!

Where to look for customers? The ideal place to look for customers is right inside your own rink during the current group lesson program. Keeping those people happy and coming back for more is much easier and less expensive than always finding new customers. Skaters should always know what the next step is, like working toward that next badge or signing up for more lessons. A healthy program has a return business rate of 60-65%. People will always drop out due to scheduling conflicts, too high expectations or because they simply didn’t like it. If your return rate is less than 30%, it is time to start asking some serious questions and acting upon the answers.

Hosting a registration night with an open house is an ideal kick-off of every season. Invite the public, serve snacks and have tours of the facility. Allow people to ask questions about the program, meet some of the staff members or try on rental skates. If possible allow for a free hour of ice with supervision and booster lessons. Each family should leave with all of the information about your program, special events and parties.

Other ideas for promoting your program:

- Flyers
- Welcome letters
- Calendar of events and public skating
- Free introductory lessons on public skating
- Newspaper ads — Rule: 5-10% of total profit from the program should go back into advertising
- Local free shoppers
- Yellow pages
- Web sites — Try for community links
- Public schools (depends on the school district rules)
- Girl scouts & Cub scouts/Boy scouts have a skating badge/belt loop requirement
- Answering machine at the rink
- T-shirts/Club jackets/sweatshirts with skating program name on it
- Special appearances of elite skaters in the area
- Birthday party packages- 20% off first session for new skaters
- Coupons — Discount for multiple family enrollments or multiple session discounts
- National Skating Week campaign
- Community appearances
- Video display in the lobby
- Brag board — Wall chart with all skaters recognized for accomplishments

Hands down the most powerful way to advertise is a personal recommendation, or more commonly known as “word of mouth.” Whenever I am looking for something to do or a new place to go, I always ask a friend for a referral first. We all hate to waste time and money unnecessarily. Word of mouth carries more weight than most forms of advertising and it costs you nothing! Ask around to find out what your reputation is in the community and what your customers are saying about you. One disgruntled voice can and will have a damaging effect on your business for years to come.

Ten Tips for a Great Group Lesson:

- Keep all skaters moving.
- Give short, precise instruction.
- Break down all skills into easier steps.
- Positive feedback — Find something that each skater does right.
- Deal with discipline issues immediately and tactfully.

- Be organized! Have all supplies, materials and lesson plans done ahead of time.
- Know your stuff! Know your business inside and out.
- Give rewards after class: stickers, tattoos, certificates, badges, kudos
- Have fun, smile and enjoy what you are doing.
- Be on time!!