

IN THE PARK, AND ONLINE

**Resorts tap park crews
for assistance with
social media management.**

By Michael Sudmeier

For resorts, showcasing terrain parks via social media is like playing with a feral cat. The experience can bring plenty of purring, but may pack a powerful bite. Resorts that understand this are more likely to overcome social media's inherent risks and reap its full benefits. Those that don't, however, lose customers and end up as cautionary tales.

Last spring, for example, Squaw Val-

ley turned to Facebook to garner votes for its parks in *Transworld Snowboarding's* Resort Poll. In addition to providing a link to the poll, the resort posted a simple message: "Help us get Squaw back on the terrain park map by voting for us in the *Transworld Snowboarding* Resort Poll!" Instead of landing a spot in the top 10, the resort got an earful of feedback and, arguably, a black eye. Some people questioned if the resort was serious, while others suggested Squaw strengthen the caliber of its parks before asking for votes.

Squaw, however, is not alone. Regardless of their size and the quality of their parks, resorts can transform their social media into weapons of self-destruction. Fortunately, they can also use them to connect with customers, provide up-to-date information, and solicit feedback.

As more and more skiers and riders head online for information, resorts are leveraging the knowledge and experience of their park managers and crews. In addition to placing rails and sculpting

takeoffs, park personnel are likely to be updating their mountain's website, posting to Twitter and Facebook, and working to build an online community. And when it comes to creating an authentic presence, "Who better to do it than the people who know how to relate best with riders?" asks Tyrol Basin terrain park manager Cody Trapp.

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Park crews are "the experts, they speak the language, and they're out on the hill interacting everyday. So they really need to be the face and voice and the ones turned to for information," says Keystone terrain park manager Kevin

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SOCIAL MEDIA

Laverty. "This work is about authenticity, and if you're faking it, you're not going to be successful."

Resorts are taking a range of approaches to share this authenticity online. Some mountains work to provide updates on both their website and Facebook page. Others, however, treat the park section of their site as a static entity, and direct visitors to Facebook and Twitter for the latest information.

Cannonsburg, for example, uses its website to provide "an overall view of our terrain parks, including each park's ability levels along with the types of jumps and features riders might encounter," explains director of youth marketing and freestyle development Marc Moline. "Our social media profiles, including Facebook and Twitter, tend to provide more of a day-by-day update." Consequently, these posts can help persuade skiers and riders to head to the mountain. For those already on the snow, these updates can help them maximize their day.

Post Early, Post Often

For park managers, the convenience of posting updates to Facebook and Twitter is especially appealing. "I have the Facebook app for my smart phone and I can update the page in real time with new features, photos, and upcoming events, all while sitting in a snowcat," notes Timberline terrain park manager Brian Stanford. (But don't text and drive: see related story, "What's Your Cell Plan?" page 34.)

Posting from the park not only ensures visitors get information as quickly as possible, but also creates a deeper level of engagement. Stanford explains, "Your customers will be stoked to see photos and video of your team out building the park. Nobody usually sees what goes on after hours, and it's a great tool to show people what it takes to build their park."

Yet creating a strong presence online takes substantial time and effort. "Because social media is such a constant flow of information, our biggest challenge is not having enough dedicated time to keep up with posts, comments, and answering questions," says Heavenly terrain park manager Mike Thomas. "Just like building a terrain park feature, one person can't do it all." Consequently,

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Thomas and other managers often collaborate with the mountain's marketing department or share responsibilities with select members of their park crew. Some resorts, such as Mount Snow, even have a dedicated park media manager.

If resorts are unable to share social media responsibilities with their park crew, they can at least benefit from sharing perspectives. These mountains may profit from encouraging their “snow reporter to devote 10 hours a week to the terrain park and have him or her ride in snowcats or learn how to rake takeoffs and salt things. If they're pals with the crew and there is mutual respect, you'll make progress,” suggests Alex Kaufman. Kaufman managed marketing and communications at Sunday River and later Mt. Bachelor. Although he now focuses on engineering business development and Skitheeast.net, he continues to consult with ski areas on social media.

An alternate approach, he suggests, is to “allow the park manager to budget

for a 20 hour per week content person. There are plenty of smart, young people out there who would love to mingle with the park crew and marketing [department].”

Regardless of who handles a resort's social media, clear expectations are essential. “Talk with your staff about what will and will not be tolerated,” offers Granite Peak terrain park manager Bobby Smith. Moline also emphasizes that staff can turn to colleagues for feedback prior to posting. He notes, “If there is ever any doubt in what someone is posting or responding to, all they have to do is ask.”

In addition to addressing the nature of social media content, resorts stand to benefit from establishing clear expectations about consistency. According to Elia Hamilton, director of freestyle terrain at Peak Resorts, “If you don't post consistently, people don't rely on that [outlet] anymore . . . and they go to somebody else who is better at it.”

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

In the midst of providing updates on park features and promoting events, many resorts overlook social media's role as a mechanism for feedback. All too often, resorts view social media as “just another tool in the marketing toolbox,” says Kaufman. “The reality is, when treated with respect and intelligence by skilled and reasonably authorized stewards, it can be the primary feedback mechanism as well as a powerful advocate creator for the entire resort. It's an ongoing focus group comprised of a cross section of your guests and potential guests that can improve nearly every facet of the operation, if engaged for that purpose.”

Although guests are not shy about sharing opinions online, resorts need to carefully consider how they solicit feedback. Kaufman warns, “If you ask ‘what should we change?’ you'll get a million different answers, very few of them actionable. If you ask ‘what feature would you like in location X?’ you'll get smart

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Park managers are also quick to emphasize the importance of differentiating between constructive criticism and sheer negativity. Although both require action, the latter can be especially dangerous. According to Mount Snow freestyle terrain manager Day Franzen, unmonitored criticism “can turn into a forest fire of negativity.”

Thomas notes, “People have the right to speak their minds, but it needs to be done in a positive manner. We also need to be sure to deal with criticism in a professional manner.” For Thomas and his team, this can involve responding to negative comments via a private message. Fortunately, resorts can also work towards keeping dialogue civil through Facebook settings that prohibit select language. Park managers note that some comments, however, can only be addressed with the delete button.

Nonetheless, intense criticism can

provide valuable opportunities. According to Clayton Shoemaker, director of park development and youth marketing at Bear Mountain, responding to criticism provides “a great moment to educate your critic on why you operate the way you do.” This can involve everything from explaining the rationale of a park’s setup to outlining the factors that led to an increase in pass prices.

Regardless of the criticism, responding to it also provides an opportunity for resorts to demonstrate that they listen and care. To capitalize on this opportunity, resorts need to respond to criticism in a timely fashion. Even if an initial response simply acknowledges an issue and buys time, it demonstrates a resort’s concern far better than silence. It can also prove crucial in preventing further criticism and speculation.

Furthermore, legitimate concerns need to serve as a catalyst for introspection. “If you’re getting your shit handed to you, then you likely have something

you need to fix,” says Kaufman.

In such instances, resorts may be wise to heed comments as a call to action. Perhaps the park crew needs to do more raking, honor the park’s stated hours, or change the layout of features to improve the safety and fluidity of the park. Or perhaps a resort simply needs to apologize and take responsibility for its mistakes. “If you’re honest and do the best you can with what you have, people will recognize this and support you,” offers Smith.

Thanks to social media, guests are empowered to serve as effective advocates. “You can’t make everyone happy, so we’ve certainly had criticism,” says Lavery. “But more often than not, one of our riders will defend us before we make any kind of response. And that’s awesome, because then there’s no doubt that it’s 100 percent genuine. It’s really cool to see kids who have a sense of pride and ownership in the park.” And it is this pride and ownership that keeps guests smiling, and bullwheels turning. ■

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