

Staffing Sustainability in Tough Times

• BY DAVE WORTMAN, PROGRAM MANAGER, BRENDELE GROUP

Ski resorts are tightening their belts across the country in response to the recession and worries about the potential for lagging visitor numbers this coming winter. And as resort managers look to their staffing for potential cuts and cost savings, it might be tempting to put “sustainability” on the chopping block. After all, isn’t sustainability just about feel-good, green window dressing?

As an increasing number of resorts are discovering, effective sustainability programs offer much more than perceived goodwill. In fact, structured strategically, staffing sustainability efforts can boost both top-line revenues and cut bottom-line operating costs, leading to an even stronger market position and greater financial health. Hard-nosed business

managers are seeing sustainability and profitability not as an “either-or” proposition – instead, they’re creating “win-win” situations by improving performance and reinforcing their brand identity. Cutting such programs during tight times may, in fact, prove counterproductive.

If there’s doubt among resort managers about the value of staffing sustainability to top-line revenues, one only has to look to market research and their peer companies outside the industry. The consulting firm Arthur D. Little recently surveyed a group of North American and European business leaders and found that 95 percent of them viewed sustainability as genuinely important to their business. What’s more, 83 percent believed they could derive business value from sustainability initiatives. A Goldman Sachs study found companies considered leaders in environmental, social and governance policies outperformed the stock market by 25 percent from 2005 to 2007. Even during early stages of the current recession, companies focused on sustainability fared better – a study of 99 sustainability-focused companies by management consulting firm AT Kearney found the group outperformed the broader market by 15 percent from May to November 2008. Finally, the growing pool of “conscious consumers” –

environmentally and socially minded individuals that now account for nearly 9 in 10 consumers – are ready to give their dollars to resorts committed to sustainability and stewardship of the environment.

Sustainability programs and staff resources can also help ski resorts mine the plentiful opportunities to increase efficiency and reduce operating costs. An effective sustainability coordinator, for example, can help resorts ask the question:

“What’s being wasted?” – whether it’s energy or time, money or materials. As the NSAA’s 2008 resource guide, called *Taking Sustainable Slopes to the Next Level*, shares, resorts are finding more ways to increase efficiency, from lighting retrofits and high-efficiency HVAC equipment to more efficient snowmaking systems and recycling and composting programs. And in such lean economic times, some resorts are working even harder to maximize efficiency. “We’re doing a lot of retrofits and shutting down equipment that we wouldn’t have thought of doing a year ago,” notes Heidi Logosz, sustainability manager for Mt. Hood Meadows. “We can’t afford *not* to be sustainable in times like these.”

Melissa Rock, director of marketing and communications for Shawnee Peak agrees. “Our owner has made it clear over the last few years that reducing energy and increasing efficiency is the name of



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the game from here on out," says Rock. "Sustainability and economic savings go hand in hand."

Particularly for those just starting down the path of sustainability, how can resorts best staff their programs? While companies and resorts with successful sustainability programs offer many different tools and approaches, they all share one common trait – that sustainability is about working *smarter*, not *harder*. They're integrating sustainability across the company rather than seeing it as an "add-on" program that just means more work with no appreciable benefits.

Examples of such approaches can be found both outside and within the ski industry. Take Clif Bar, a leader in sustainability and partner with the ski industry. "Sustainability is part of the DNA of our company," says Cassie Cyphers, Clif Bar's eco programs manager. Cyphers says the company is always developing ways to engage and educate every employee in sustainability as a way for each individual to be aware of what they can do. "Think of sustainability as a must-have function, just as an organization would support finance or marketing," says Cyphers.

At Grand Targhee, Christina Thomure, director of sustainable operations, is considered part of the senior management team and is a key player in the resort's management decisions. With a modest budget, she's helping the resort become "leaner and greener" by looking for ways to reduce waste and operating costs from top to bottom. "Using less resources and improving efficiency is important in all aspects of the operation," says Thomure. "Basically, we're doing more with less by becoming more resourceful." Thomure says as a result, Grand Targhee has saved enough money in quantifiable operating costs in the past year to entirely offset her salary. When other, less quantifiable efficiency increases

are added in, Thomure says she's actually adding value to the resort.

Other resorts lean more heavily on existing staff to support their sustainability efforts. "One coordinator can't do it all," notes Mt. Hood's Logosz. Instead, Logosz has been working with the resort's communications director to make sustainability part of every employee's job description and include sustainability in new employee orientation. The resort has also assembled a Green Team composed of key "change agents" – enthusiastic, sustainability-minded and influential staff from each department – to further Mt. Hood Meadow's sustainability initiatives. Logosz admits, however, that motivating employees can have its challenges. "Employees are only empowered to a certain extent," says Logosz. "We try to keep it simple and set things up to make it easy for them."

Still other resorts have creatively turned to outside resources, funding and partners to leverage their own staff resources. New Hampshire's Mount Washington Resort has been working with two local colleges to recruit volunteer interns to help evaluate and implement resort sustainability initiatives. By providing a hands-on career building opportunity during a weak job market – along with a travel stipend and free ski passes – the resort was able to stretch dollars and provide a rewarding experience

for students. "As we found out, there are many students specifically studying sustainable business or sustainability in hospitality who were looking for opportunities," says Stacey Doll, Mount Washington's director of public relations. Mt. Hood Meadows was able to find outside financial resources for support, tapping into substantial rebates for their energy efficiency upgrades. Others may find support through existing local or state green business programs. Grants – including NSAA's own annual sustainability grants – are still another resource to leverage program success.

Whatever direction your resort chooses to take – building support for sustainability from the bottom up, bringing in a high-level sustainability coordinator, turning to outside partners, or some combination of them all – if crafted strategically, a commitment to sustainability promises to reap great rewards. For those managers wary of jumping in with both feet, Clif Bar's Cyphers suggests making a start anyway. "Start small if you have to, but make the commitment and the benefits will happen over time."

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