



COURTESY OF WACHUSETT MOUNTAIN

WACHUSETT WISDOM:

DRAW LOADS OF BEGINNERS USING SOCIAL MEDIA, VIDEO, AND PASS PROGRAMS

By Stephanie Prince Alexander, PSIA-AASI Special Projects Editor

Wachusett Mountain is a small family-owned and operated resort in Massachusetts that is doing a lot of right things to get beginners onto their slopes. Here, Carolyn Stimpson, vice president of resort services, talks

social media, using video to help guests navigate their experience, pass programs, and more. Your resort and ski and ride school can definitely take a cue or two from their playbook.

What sets Wachusett apart?

Accessibly! Boston, Providence, and Worcester are within 1 hour of the resort. We see it as our job to create future skiers and riders for the industry; we're proud to be a feeder area.

Our demographics are also quite diverse and change about three times daily, and then again on weekends.

- Mornings: Home school students, AARP members, and soccer moms
- 2-6 p.m.: High school racers in to train, and school groups, which adds up to about 10,000 kids per week, and more than half of them take lessons.
- 6 p.m. – Close: College students and adult beginners (both for ski and snowboard)

- Weekends: Folks from surrounding cities come in on the ski train, bringing lots of diversity, all different ages, and lots of families.

Tell us how you're using video to help beginners at your area.

The beginner-package page on our website features videos that literally walk folks from the parking lot to the slopes. There are also videos on how to dress and how to load onto a chairlift. Our rental shop loops videos that show where to go, how to put a boot into a ski, how to strap on a snowboard, how to release bindings – to name just a few.

How are you using social media and traditional media to appeal to beginners?

People want to see folks who look like themselves out skiing, and we know there is nothing better than word-of-mouth

ABOUT WACHUSETT

- Family owned and operated since 1973
- Located in Princeton, MA
- 75 million people live within one hour of Wachusett
- 325 instructors (30 are full-time)
- More than 38,000 lessons were taught in 2014-15 (a bit low due to snowstorms that kept away beginners)
- Learn more at wachusett.com

advertising. To that end, our instructors take a lot of pictures with the guests' phones and cameras of them having fun on the snow. It is heartening to see that so many beginners go home and post these photos on social media and tag Wachusett.

We had quite an amazing example of this when a social media professor from Colombia University (who happened to have a large following online) visited Wachusett with his family, who were all first-time skiers. He posted about their experience on several different social channels and shared the recap with us:

"All the Sreenivasans have reached home safely and are still buzzing about our weekend at Wachusett Mountain and the Village Inn. Thank you for hosting us and making sure all of us had a great time on the slopes."

- ▶ Here is a quick "2 Days at Wachusett Mountain" video we put together: tiny.cc/nuid8x
- ▶ Our Facebook post about ski lessons: tiny.cc/93id8x
- ▶ Our Instagram post: tiny.cc/z8id8x

Another example of using social media to create a buzz is when we hosted a Blogger Day in 2015, inviting mommy bloggers and recreation bloggers to the mountain for a first-time lesson for them or their kids. We had about 12 people who each chronicled their experience on their blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.

Additionally, we convinced two local TV stations (one in Boston and one in Providence) to do a story about learning to ski. The Boston station sent a meteorologist to the mountain with a camera person who chronicled her first-time experience for a segment on a winter weather special. The Providence station sent the cast of their morning news show to all learn to ski. They aired a four-minute segment on the show highlighting their results.

How do you get your instructors and employees involved in getting more people on the mountain?

Any instructor (or any employee) that gets a positive survey score or shout-out receives a \$5 voucher (which can be used for F&B or merchandise) and they're entered into weekly prizes drawings. We have weekly contests throughout the season to see which department receives the highest survey scores; the winner gets recognized at our team meeting and gets Orson the giant stuffed polar bear to live in the department for the week. The winners have fun accessorizing Orson accordingly; the bar has put him in beer sponsor shirts with a beer

mug in bar, the rentals department gears him up with equipment, and the liftees put him in a uniform. They have fun with it.

Do you factor in whether an instructor has PSIA-AASI certifications when hiring?

Definitely! We have an instructor training clinic each fall to fill in our roster of instructors; PSIA-AASI instructors are encouraged to attend and their fees are waived. PSIA- or AASI-certified Level II (and above) instructors are automatically hired, and are interviewed only to clarify their availability and insights.

What kinds of season pass programs have you used in the past?

Wachusett sells about 3,000 Gold/Unlimited passes annually, but in order to make skiing more affordable we added a Bronze/5-Day, 7-Night pass, which has been extremely popular, selling over 12,000 annually.

I noticed an "Unconditional Guarantee" offer on your website, where anyone can get a refund within an hour of purchasing their ticket if they're not satisfied with snow conditions. Do many customers actually cash in on this?

Surprisingly few (because our conditions are superb) – mostly when their kid pukes on the lift or their old rear-entry boots blow apart on the trail, but they leave happy and come back with friends.

What would be your best piece of advice to give to other ski and ride school managers and directors out there looking to grow participation at their area and increase lesson volume and repeat customers?

Make your lessons fun – don't get overly technical. Remember, it is all about FUN! There was an interesting survey of two different beginner lesson groups: one was taught by a ski school director and the second was taught by a fun juggler who could also teach. One hundred percent of the juggler's students vowed to return, whereas only 60 percent of the director's students said they'd come back. Another tip for instructors – ALWAYS invite your guests to come back!

What kinds of efforts are you putting forth to appeal to women and get them interested in taking lessons?

We offer Women's Clinics, Break-through Clinics, and my favorite start to the season – a Wine, Cheese, Chicks & Skis event – which I'd swear has brought more women back to the slopes than the clinics have. We also have women's demo days and free clinics. This season we plan to have women-specific and AT events as well.

What has been the single most powerful measure you've taken as a resort to increase lesson volume or season pass purchases?

For volume it has been our "Bring a Friend for Fun" program, which offers a highly discounted lift ticket, a beginner lesson, and a rental for skiers who introduce their non-skier/snowboarder friends and



Beginner smiles mean Wachusett is doing something right!

family to the sports. The program won a marketing award from the National Ski Areas Association.

For season passes it has been the Bronze pass (mentioned above), which helped increase annual pass sales from 3000 to 18,000. It should be mentioned that Wachusett limits ticket sales to 4,125 at any one time, but the passholders know when not to come. ☺