

Minority Youth Participation Key to Future Industry Growth

• BY ARN MENCONI WITH DR. DANIEL F. PERKINS, PH.D. •

Change is one of the most discussed aspects of sports and can often incite inspiration for the future. Nevertheless, implementing change is one of the hardest things to successfully accomplish and sustain in any sporting environment.

As the founder and executive director of the SOS Outreach, a sports-based youth development organization using the medium of snowsports, I need to constantly ask myself: “Are we really committed to summiting the massive mountain that is change?”

Over the last 15 years since founding SOS, we have learned about recruitment, retention and conversion, but have sometimes failed to deliver results that work. The resort business has seen financial growth from lift ticket pricing, more expensive hot dogs and sodas, and from second home real estate – but not from new customers. Total skier days increased with record numbers in the 2007/08 season through increased visits from an aging population.

These facts may not seem terribly alarming, until you consider the following statistics:

- Forty percent of youth in America are racial minorities, whereas only 9 percent of participants in snowsports are racial minorities;
- Twenty-five percent of youth in America are obese. Youth are spending a decreasing amount of time outdoors;
- Youth today are projected to graduate high school at lesser rates than the past decade.

Together, these facts point toward some conclusions that require the snowsports industry to take action: Youth participation in snowsports has decreased, and without an aggressive outreach plan aimed toward involving more minority youth, and given that their numbers are swelling, the number of youth participating will continue to decline. Thus, the future of snowsports, or at least growth within the industry, is in jeopardy. As it is, the snowsports industry is just 12 years away from experiencing a major dip in visitation if something is not done to increase youth participation.

The need for change is two-fold. First, we need to increase youth participation in snowsports in order to ensure viability and survival of the industry itself. Second, we need to take an active role in engaging youth in sports with the goal of assisting them



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According to research recently conducted by SOS Outreach, 40 percent of youth in America are racial minorities, however racial minorities only account for 13 percent of skier and rider visits nationally.

to adopt a healthy lifestyle that includes outdoor activities to promote physical health and well-being. Participation in aerobic outdoor activities has proven to be highly beneficial for youth in terms of their health, and social and emotional well-being, self-worth and self-confidence.

There are clear signs from the snowsports industry itself that there is a need for action and change. Numerous opportunities exist for recruiting and retaining the Millennials, or Gen Y. As Bill Jensen, former president of Vail Resorts Mountain Division and current CEO of Intrawest Resorts and SOS Board member states: “If we get 100 to 200 resorts with 20,000 or 30,000 new youth participants, it will create a significant long-term impact for the industry.”

Of course the potential long-lasting health impacts for these kids also have positive implications for society.

Celebrating its 15th anniversary, SOS Outreach was founded in Vail, Colo., in 1993. SOS Outreach, formerly the Snowboard Outreach Society, is a grassroots, 501(c)(3) non-profit ♦

organization. Our organization builds character in at-risk and underprivileged youth to enhance decision-making skills by utilizing skiing and snowboarding as a vehicle. During the 2007/08 season, SOS Outreach leveraged support from mountain resorts, winter sport manufacturers, youth agencies, volunteers, foundations and individual donors for a 133 percent growth to serve 3,019 youth at 28 mountain resorts nationally. Given the financial constraints of these youth and their families, the vast majority of them would not have otherwise had opportunities to participate in snowsports.

The participants SOS Outreach serves are 73 percent minority, 23 percent from single parent households and 70 percent from a household with income less than \$40,000 per year. Our goal is to use snowsports as a way for youth to achieve their potential and become engaged, active contributing members to society. Moreover, our long-term relationship with participants transitions them to lifetime skiers and snowboarders who generate a significant financial impact for the industry.

The SOS curriculum promotes academic success and incorporates snowsports as a part of their future recreation and potential career trajectory. The impact of this change in the lives of our participants is significant and well-documented. Each SOS Outreach participant completed the Protective Factors Scale, a pre- and post-evaluation of 10 protective factors. The scale was designed and analysed by professor Peter Witt of Texas A & M.

The factors measured have a demonstrated impact on increasing protective factors for youth.

During the 2007/08 season, SOS Outreach saw an increase in all 10 areas of protective factors. Significant increases were seen in five areas: interested and caring adults; liking/perceived competence in snowsports; ability to work out conflicts; identifying neighborhood resources; and positive attitude toward the future/future expectations.

Nate Fristoe, director of RRC Associates, was able to further quantify the effects of SOS participation via a survey of more than 400 past participants who completed an SOS Outreach program from the 2004/05 season and forward. Using county-wide survey data from high school students in Eagle County, Colo., (home of Vail and Beaver Creek resorts) and data from industry reports as a baseline, the results demonstrated that SOS Outreach participants:

- Convert to snowsports at twice the industry average for a 25 percent conversion rate;
- Engage in significantly more aerobic exercise than their peers;
- Test higher than their peers in measures of positive behavior and self-esteem;
- And are more likely to graduate college and eventually will have higher household incomes than non-degree holders.

And those are just the benefits for the individuals. RRC's research demonstrates the impact that SOS Outreach is having in the ski industry is not huge, but has great potential to grow. At its current size, SOS Outreach adds approximately 6,250 skier visit days every year. Each SOS Outreach participant has a lifetime value to snowsports of about \$7,500 in lift ticket-related revenue alone. That value translates to roughly \$6.2 million per year in incremental revenue to resorts. SOS Outreach efforts are actively combating the projected 9 percent drop in snowsports participation in 12 years. With the infrastructure, curriculum and methodology in place, we are expecting to grow to 4,000 students, 20,000 activity days, and 40 ski resorts around the county for the 2008/09 season.

SOS Outreach has been identified nationally for its impact. The 2006 Active Youth Summit, sponsored by Harvard University Program in Education, Afterschool & Resiliency, recognized SOS Outreach as a best practice provider of sports-based, youth development programs. Additionally, U.S. Senator Ken Salazar (D-Colo.) joined SOS Outreach in December 2007 on Vail Mountain to acknowledge our efforts to make a difference. He highlighted that SOS Outreach is "giving young people a chance to live up to the full potential of their humanity."

After implementing an introductory program, we found that we could not abandon the participants of those programs. We developed



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In 2007/08, SOS Outreach served 3,019 youth at 28 ski areas nationwide. Here participants pose with supporter and U.S. Senator (D-Colo.) Ken Salazar, (center wearing baseball cap).

a four-year follow-up opportunity called University that requires off-hill character development and service-learning, vocational and academic development, and health and wellness improvement. These students work with other non-profits to perform community service projects. Some students have also gone on to complete certification with the American Association of Snowboard Instructors (AASI) and have gone on to work as ski and snowboard instructors. This upcoming season we are partnering with the U.S. Forest Service and Outward Bound's Experiential Learning School for vocational training and academic studies through sports, respectively.

There are numerous youth educational efforts at work now, but few are focused on long-term relationships with their participants. The key to SOS Outreach's success is being an engaging youth developmental program focused on long-term results in both conversion and positive character development. We are now seeing teenagers complete six to eight years of SOS Outreach programs in both on- and off-hill programming.

Research clearly shows that sports can be designed to promote athletic skills and healthy lifestyles, but that such promotion is not automatic, it must be designed. For example, participation in organized sports can provide opportunities for youth to learn more about specific skills and exercises associated with a particular

SOS Long-term Impacts

- **Research recently conducted by SOS conservatively indicates that one in four SOS participants will go to college and return to the sport as active participants.**
- **When they do return, it's anticipated that SOS participants will do so with annual household incomes that are roughly 75 percent greater than non-degree holders.**
- **They will enter the participant base at exactly the point where we need more youth and greater diversity, roughly seven to 10 years from now.**
- **And, they are likely going to bring friends and family to the sport, providing a multiplier effect.**

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sport, as chronicled by the National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in 1997. Many youth organizations make claims of being youth-centered and implementing a youth development philosophy in their activities.

According to Dr. Daniel Perkins however, fewer than 100 sports-based youth development programs exist that are of the quality and caliber to make a long-lasting positive difference in the lives of youth.

As Dr. Perkins states: "SOS Outreach is the only organization that I am aware of in the snowsports arena that makes such differences. SOS Outreach provides an engaging context and has specific features based on the core concepts of a community youth development program. A by-product of this is that SOS Outreach is building the next generation of snowsports participants, which is essential to the industry."

Given SOS Outreach's prominence in sports-based youth development, as well as its documented success, our organization offers a unique opportunity for the snowsports industry. There are three concrete steps that the industry can take to promote snowsports and affect a positive difference in the lives of youth. First, they can come together and speak with one voice by expanding

their support of SOS Outreach. Second, SOS Outreach can use its resources to market the opportunities snowsports provide for positive youth development. Finally, the snowsports industry can leverage its resources and influence to garner funds from the government to utilize sports-based youth development programs that are effective with at-risk youth.

The potential for change is substantial through long-term, dynamic outreach efforts. We must work together to provide high-quality introduction programs that reach out to new populations. The positive effect of outdoor efforts in the lives of at-risk youth and the long-term impact of these efforts in terms of increasing revenue and diversity in snowsports is significant. By maximizing efforts to introduce younger, more diverse populations to outdoors activities, not only will the outdoors industry benefit, but our youth will also benefit by those efforts and will experience long-lasting positive changes in their own lives.

Dr. Daniel Perkins is a professor of Family and Youth Resiliency and Policy in the Department of Agricultural and Extension Education at the Pennsylvania State University, and specializes in sports-based youth development.

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