

Sink or Swim



Maintaining a successful public-sector waterpark is as easy as 1-2-3



“Public-sector waterparks understand market segmentation in regard to the target market profile.”



By Scott W. Hester with Michelle Schwartz

In the ‘50s and ‘60s, numerous small neighborhood pools dotted the landscape of small towns and cities across America. Every summer, local kids biked or walked to the public pools and swam as long as they wanted, all without the supervision of parents. Typically these facilities consisted of rectilinear and L-shaped pools that offered very limited aquatic recreation.

As our world around us continued to evolve, and as household discretionary spending increased, the public-sector swimming pool was stuck in time with each passing year. Consequently, many pools fell into disrepair, some shut down completely, and others began to add features, hoping the whole family would come more often and stay longer. The industry had a choice: sink or swim.

Today, the municipal swimming pool may include fewer but larger innovative aquatic centers and waterparks that entice all the senses: the sights and sounds of families interacting in refreshing, free-form pools and wave pools, splashing down waterslides, romping in zero-beaches, lap swimming in designated lanes and laughing in inner tubes floating down leisure rivers underneath waterfalls.

A new frontier

The change began with a bang in 1977 when George Millay created the first commercial waterpark in Orlando. Wet’nWild featured water-oriented “rides” for all ages.

However, public-sector projects can differ from private-sector waterparks because they are typically taxpayer-funded facilities with varying operational expectations regarding revenue and expenses. Generally these facilities are designed with something for everyone where multiple user groups may be offered various recreational, competitive, instructional, and in some cases, wellness and therapeutic opportunities. Residents are proud of these places and are willing to “pay to play” if the proper experience is provided. In addition, the public is continually updated in environmental stewardship and knows that increasing the community

profile generates revenues and increases property value.

From a marketing standpoint, entrepreneurs know it is well worth the effort to annually update population characteristics such as growth/decline, age groups and income that may change over time. Public-sector waterparks understand market segmentation in regard to the target market profile.

For example, age-group distribution affects program attendance and opportunities, income trends affect discretionary leisure spending and population growth or decline affects attendance and overall revenue. Municipalities track if the community is aging (gray power can be a large, affluent market), if young families are moving in, if new subdivisions or condominiums are being developed and in what price range and if the per capita income is growing exponentially with inflation (a measure of how the local industry is doing).

If annual passes cost too much for some families, the park might offer weekday-only passes, weekend-only passes, partial season passes and quantity passes. Discounts may apply to those who register early or as a renewal incentive to established customers. In some parts of the country, where people are willing to drive an hour or more to enjoy a full day at a waterpark, rain checks are valid for the entire season to promote customer good will.

Making the right adjustments

Once the target market segment has been updated for predominant user groups, municipal waterparks must continually find and adjust programming through community outreach. Unlike private-sector waterparks, the public sector’s plan needs to involve the community through focus groups and surveys.

Expectations for toddlers are very unique from elementary schoolers, pre-teens are unique from teenagers, and various subgroups of adults are unique from various subgroups of senior populations. Municipalities typically do not view market analysis as merely numbers, but get to know lifecycle program users and

Follow These 7 Easy Steps to Success

- 1) Annually update population characteristics in your community.
- 2) Work with focus groups and take surveys before adding new features.
- 3) Weigh carefully how new features will fit in with the existing areas.
- 4) Ensure your design consultants have proper experience with building and zoning issues and can stay on budget.
- 5) Make sure that the costs are acceptable to the community.
- 6) Educate your staff on new services, programs and amenities.
- 7) Maintain a reputation for a clean, friendly, responsible and fun environment in your facility.



how each group participates. For example, the community may have a goal that all fourth graders learn to swim or that teenagers have a place to congregate on Sunday. If the area's demographic characteristics have dramatically changed since the waterpark first opened, features and amenities should be analyzed before rash decisions are made.

By conducting community meetings and stakeholder interviews and seeking staff input, each feature can be carefully analyzed so as to provide a design solution that will maximize revenue potential. Additional revenue streams beyond main ticket sales may also be achieved by including pavilions for party and group rentals or by providing multiple concession locations. Hot trends might be suggested for the unrepresented 12-16 or 17-22 age group, thru amenities such as large waterslides or possibly a FlowRider. Adventurous preschoolers are likely to feel disappointed as most waterslides require riders to be at least 44 to 48 inches tall (and they're too big for the tot slides). Therefore, an otter slide is just their size and may need to be added to the portfolio for this niche market.

Perhaps the community desires a natatorium that allows for year-round competitive swimming, party rentals and therapy needs. Competitive swimmers can be a very loyal group if opportunities for practice, training and meets are offered. A therapy pool can provide warm water designed to assist those with strained muscles, arthritis, and other aquatic therapy needs, as well as aerobics and gentle water exercise. Natatorium temperatures are maintained at a comfortable mid-80 degrees, allowing party rentals where natural, filtered sunlight streams down upon swimmers during the harsher months of the year.

Putting the plan into action

Once the specific aquatic amenities and facility concept has been developed, the entertainment of the selected attractions are weighed as to how the additional features will fit into the overall user comfort of the facility.

Having an experienced design team will assist you in deciding

what to put where. For example, the teen action island could go inside the configuration of the leisure river near the large waterslides. The senior water-walking environment should then be on the other side of the park to avoid disruptions. Spray features immediately invite little ones to zip around the playful, interactive fountains. So, they should be located away from the tiny tot area, so both groups are safely out of harm's way.

In addition to the logistical challenges that are ever-present when developing the facility, your architect and engineering professionals should provide architectural, mechanical, electrical, plumbing and structural design approaches that are to be long-term solutions while accommodating economic considerations.

Municipal waterparks must not only ensure that specialty design consultants have proper experience with the project's building and zoning issues but also will stay on budget. Always remember that your design partner is there to provide experience and direction but does not make the decisions; those have been predetermined by the community.

When the concept is buttoned down, the public-sector water park business plan must demonstrate to political leadership how expectations regarding facility subsidy will change and how subsequent revenue from return on investment can be used to impact other community programs. Then make sure that first-dollar costs are palatable to the community. All decision making regarding the continuation of the aquatic vision is conducted in a public forum to avoid the "ready, fire, aim" approach (decision-making prior to the proper planning).

Success also relies on the skills and craftsmanship of the licensed construction professionals. Municipalities understand the difference between qualifications-based selection and low bid. They pre-qualify the experienced swimming pool contractor and understand that a design-bid-build process includes specifications that clearly identify the requirement for contractor qualifications. Specifications must clearly indicate work to be completed by others, creating a tighter bidding environment. In addition, a specification that is not proprietary will generally



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increase competition among bidders, providing you the best opportunity to maximize your construction dollars.

Getting your staff on board

The staff at a municipal waterpark, which is typically more than fifty percent of the annual expense budget, needs to understand and convey all new processes and procedures in a positive environment. Lifeguards, front desk attendants, instructors, maintenance crews, concession operators and facility managers must provide service, programs and amenities that have been thoroughly analyzed and well-planned. In order to provide continued success, the public-sector waterpark should maintain a clean, friendly, environmentally responsible and fun reputation but also

maintain an ever-increasing entrepreneurial approach. This will ensure that your public sector waterpark will gain customer loyalty while maintaining a place where proud families make great memories year after year. **SAS**



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