

VOTE RALPH! - A NEW VOICE FOR WHISTLER

*Bringing Ethnic Diversity to the Slopes
Targeting ethnic minorities to cultivate a new market of skiers and snowboarders.*

When former "Crazy Canuck" Ken Read, coined the term "White Circus" he was talking about the world cup circuit, and the colour of the snow, not the athletes, but with our population growing ever more ethnically diverse Canada's ski slopes are looking conspicuously white.

When you look at the history of resort development it's obvious European immigrants built most if not all, of North America's ski resorts. Today however most immigrants are not from Europe, so the ski industry needs to find a way of reaching out to our ethnically diverse population to increase skier visits.

On July 14-15 2004, The Canada Ski Council (CSC) hosted a State of the Industry Workshop in Toronto, highlights from the two day retreat include some startling predictions about British Columbia's resorts; "Without further growth in international visits, skier/rider visits will drop from 5.8 million in 2003/2004 to 5.2 million in 2018/2019" and that "International visits may have peaked (based on data for the past 3 seasons) and competition will be fierce as the US focuses on recapturing visitation lost to the Canadian market."

The workshop however, was not all doom and gloom several positive strategies to continue growth were identified, including: "Continued focus on increasing trial especially in the under 19 segment." and "Focus on increasing trial among minority youth."

Smart resorts are looking to target these ethnic minorities to cultivate a new market of snow sports enthusiasts.

The demographic shift and the ethnic diversification of Canada's population are highlighted in a report published this past February by Frank Trovato and Zheng Wu. The report has some astounding figures including the fact that; "The visible minority population grew from about 5% of the national population in 1981 to over 13% in 2001, largely because of immigration from non-traditional sources countries."

Until 1967, non-White immigration to Canada was suppressed, by a mechanism of place of origin preference. Because of these predilections our European cultural heritage, remained predominant.

Trovato and Wu go on to explain how Canada has become so much more diverse. "Current immigration patterns are driving the ethnic diversification

of Canada's population. Of recent immigration, the top five source countries are China, India, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Iran."

Few Statistics are available on the minority participation rate at Canadian resorts, but the American ski industry reflects a national rate of less than eight percent, surprisingly the number is less than seven percent in America's best known ski state; Colorado. Ski slopes are apparently a lot whiter than we imagined.

If Canada's ski industry doesn't get serious about outreaching to the emerging minority population, it's uncertain just who will be skiing and snowboarding in 2020.

The issue is on the radar screen of many of the major players in North America's ski business. In a summary report of the CSC State of the Industry Workshop projected that our current annual "19.1 million skier/rider visits will drop to 15.5 million by 2018/2019 if interventions are not taken to retain the Baby Boomers and focus on the strong ethnic mix of Generation Y (13-19 year olds)."

During the Canadian Ski Council's Symposium held last April at sun peaks resort, National Ski Areas Association (NSAA) President Michael Berry announced plans to place a new emphasis on strategies aimed at increasing minority participation at America's ski hills and confirmed that diversity was going to be major theme at the NSAA Annual Conference in Savannah, Georgia last May.

More recently, the first ever summit on snow sports diversity was held in Steamboat resort in Colorado on February 2nd. The Outcomes of the summit were to come up with a list of best practices to attract minority groups to the sport, and initiatives that create a buzz about Skiing/Riding in minority communities.

Spearheading the summit, was North America's leading authority on snow sports diversity, Roberto Moreno, He's the President & Executive Director of Alpino a Denver-based non-profit organization he founded five years ago to increase minority participation in snow sports and mountain recreation.

Moreno laughs, when he's described as North America's leading Authority on Minorities in snow sports. "I guess that proves the point that there simply aren't enough people working on the issue of white homogeneity in the snow sports business"

While Moreno is concerned about the lack of ethnicity on the slopes he's optimistic about the future. "The most significant result of the summit was agreement on the O.R.E strategy the acronym stands for Outreach Recruitment and Enlightenment."

Enlightenment

The Ski Industry is facing serious changes as greying baby boomers begin to phase out of skiing, the echo boom population that has to replace them in no way resemble the children from the Sound of Music, but for some reason that is what most people look like in typical ski industry marketing material.

It's commonly assumed that if you're a person of colour chances are you have no heritage of mountain recreation and the mountains might seem like a distant and irrelevant experience, thus you're more likely to spend your time on urban-based activities and your dollars on consumer goods. But that might not be the correct assumption; globally skiing appears to be enjoying a renaissance. Reports in local national and international newspapers alike, confirm that places like China and India, are seeing enormous growth in the sport, even repressive Iran's slopes have been describes as "packed" with skiers and snowboarders. Despite current unrest, Lebanon is recapturing its reputation as 'The Switzerland of the Middle East'. And war ravaged Kashmir, boasts some of Asia's best mountain recreation experiences. Even sub Saharan Africa features an alpine resort, Tiffindell Ski Resort is about 8 hours drive from Johannesburg, South Africa. The truth is that skiing is a sport enjoyed around the world, by many different ethnic groups.

Moreno who's been skiing for over 40 years, and is a former Keystone Resort pro patroller and Copper Mountain ski instructor gives some unique insights into why more minorities don't ski and snowboard.

"The ski industry has done too good of a job of marketing the exclusivity of snow sports. What we need to understand is how kids of colour perceive the "white folks only" images on our collateral. How many minority teens are reflected on ski area web sites and brochures?"

"I'm not sure resorts consider the "racial inclusiveness" of their web site images but Hispanic and Asian teens do. According to an AOL Study, those two groups now constitute 13 percent greater use of the Internet than do white teens."

Combine this with data from a Canadian Ski Council survey that indices that 51% of beginner skiers visited the web site of the resort they planned to visit, and it's pretty clear that most ski business marketing material could use a makeover.

Recruitment

According to Mareno another factor contributing to low minority participation, is a lack of a recruiting strategy by resorts

"I believe the lack of inclusivity we see in mountain recreation is also partly due to little to no minority representation in front line positions and almost no minority representation in any major administrative position at ski areas."

Mareno can be convincing, he's gained commitment from several Colorado resorts to hire 10 minority staff to front line positions.

When asked if Skiing and snowboarding are too expensive Mareno shuns the idea. "The homogeneity of snow sports isn't necessarily tied to the cost. In fact, people of colour in the United States now represent \$1.6 trillion of disposable income."

In fact, people of colour comprise one of the largest ski organizations in the world. Following it's first Summit, a gathering of over 350 skiers in Aspen Colorado in 1973 The National Brotherhood of Skiers was chartered. It's primary purpose: to place a black skier on the U.S. Ski Team. An ambitious goal considering it was a time when African-Americans on the ski slopes were a rarity and black ski clubs were an exception. Today the organization has grown to 84 clubs representing 41 cities with a reach of 20,000 adults and youth. The NBS is recognized by the ski industry as one of the largest ski organizations and its Summit as the largest gathering of skiers, more than any other ski convention in the United States.

There's a local club that would like to achieve similar success, The Vancouver Chinese Ski Club is a group that possesses a membership of over 60 people. The two organizations have a dramatically different membership base but the same worthy goals. Simon Tam, the clubs president explains what the club is all about. "We're just similar people form similar backgrounds that all have a passion for skiing and snowboarding"

In the past some members have gone on the get their Canadian Ski Instructors Alliance level one certification, and then work at Whistler/Blackcomb and Grouse Mountain teaching other members of the club.

Mareno & Tam share the same passion for skiing and a little of the same bewilderment that the industry in not picking up on the opportunity, that minority skiers represent.

A quick review of the statistical evidence from Trovato and Wu confirms the potential

"Vancouver's visible minority population grew to 37 percent in 2001

One-in-three Vancouver residents is Asian, with 18 percent of the city's population having Chinese and eight percent South Asian ethnic backgrounds."

Tam sometimes wonders if ski areas have a slightly myopic view of the Chinese ski community "Ski areas are looking for short term financial returns rather than the long tem benefit of attracting more Chinese people to try skiing"

Tam has been around the ski business long enough (he's also a boot fitter at Mountain equipment Co-op) to understand the realities of the industry. "I'm only guessing but my assumption is that money is tight and ski hills don't have a lot to spend supporting minority ski clubs" The exception says Tam is Hemlock Valley Resorts In Agassiz B.C.

"The past couple of seasons they have held a community day specifically targeted to Chinese people to get the interested in Skiing and snowboarding"

Outreach

Moreno has been pressuring ski areas to get on board and to partner with youth groups, churches or any other organization with high minority participation, to reach out and get them out on the hill. The first step, Moreno says, is outreach. "Currently we have over half of Colorado's ski resorts in the 10,000 Project. The goal is to get 10,000 minority children from Denver out on Colorado's ski hills over the next two seasons."

With Support from organizations like National Ski Areas Association and Ski Area Management Magazine Alpino has extended its reach to resorts in New Mexico and California. Mareno also plans to extend Alpino's reach to the eastern Ski resorts as well.

As for plans for Whistler Marino was enthusiastic "I would be on a plane tomorrow if there was an opportunity to work with Whistler/Blackcomb."

Rob McSkimming, Vice President of Business Development for Whistler/Blackcomb, agrees that tapping into multicultural markets makes sound fiscal sense. "We understand there is enormous opportunity among various minority groups"

While Whistler/Blackcomb has no specific programs targeted to minorities, McSkimming, points to the success of lower mainland Schools on snow programs. "We've been successful at exposing these second generation Canadian kids to the sport, through their schools. But for new arrivals it's a tougher nut to crack."

However, McSkimming says there is compelling evidence to support outreach. "It's on our radar and it's something we know we need to do more of" "They just need to be welcomed, and that's something we are eager to do"

Simon Tam's Club doesn't have a fancy website ore even a marketing budget for that matter, and Roberto Mareno knows it's not going to be easy getting 10,000 kids on the slopes by next April. They are reminiscent of the original pioneers and founders of ski clubs that popped up all over North America at the beginning of the last century. Those clubs created the ski culture we enjoy today, a bunch of people that love skiing and riding and want to share that with others like them. Let's hope for the sake of our sport resorts

everywhere will pick up on their enthusiasm and help them get a few friends out to try the mountains. The bottom line is simply that; the bottom line, if we don't maintain our participation rates and make skiing and snowboarding relevant to minorities our sport will be enjoyed as a pastime similar to polo or fox hunting. Tally Ho!