

Face, Embrace and Keep Up with the Pace of Tomorrow's Trends

by Jodi L. Rudick

There's nothing new about the idea of trekking trends. Historically, the most successful organizations capitalize on the ever-changing needs of their customers and communities by keeping a watchful eye and listening ear on the world around them. Finding and facing trends is one thing. But it's the true market leaders who lovingly embrace trend indicators, apply information and program their agency to proactively exceed future needs.

What are the Trends?

The park and recreation profession is impacted by hundreds of trends ranging from technology to our increasingly diverse population. Over the next few months in this newsletter we will explore some of these trends in terms of how they will affect our programs, our constituents, our communities and the way we "do business." The trends we will explore are:

Customerization - No one needs to tell you that today's customer is more demanding than ever before. Not only is the customer in the driver's seat, but they are also in control of our navigation, planning and more often than not, paying for our fuel. What can we do to better solve customer problems, meet future needs and really listen to what they want? Look to the success and introduction of super-customized entertainment options like TiVo, personal ring tones and iPods to ask, "How are we helping customers custom create their recreation experience?"

The Aging of America – You'd have to be living under your couch without access to your remote control to have missed this trend. Aging baby boomers are both exiting the workforce and changing roles at a frantic pace. (According to the US Census Bureau, Baby Boomers are turning 50 at a head-spinning rate of one every 7 To 10 Seconds. That's more than 12,000 each day and over 4 million a year for the next 20 years! More importantly boomer account for about for two-thirds of all consumer spending -- \$4 trillion U.S. dollars.)

Look to the Past – As boomers age, they (like every generation before them), long for the joys of their youth. Listen and learn from your boomer customers (many of whom have grandchildren, children and teens in program today) what types of activities they loved in "their day." Programs and events such as dodge ball, summer and overnight camps, classic rock concerts and grown-up proms may be the perfect way to attract this group.

Doing More with Less - Park and recreation agencies nationwide are faced with major changes in terms of leadership, funding, revenue generation, competition and fees. How do we embrace,

rather than fight these changes, with innovative partnerships, alliances and joint ventures? Further, how are you training and guiding emerging leaders to expand and practice critical leadership skills they may not have learned in school such “Power Schmoozing, Persuasive Communications Skills, Meeting Management, Negotiation and Sales.” ([Click here to check out workshops to train up-and-coming leaders.](#))

Reaching the Remote Control Society - Today’s consumer attention span is almost non-existent. Most infants know how to work a remote control before they can crawl. We have a huge variety of choices from around the corner and around the globe. How can you create loyalty and excitement for your programs and services?

TechnoFrenzy – People are moving through every part of their life visibly and invisibly plugged in and wired to their music, friends, families, lives and the world. People know they are never more than a click or text message away from just about anything they need – from Information, schedules, ideas, products and services. The information age has become the age of instant access and connectivity. What was novel and amazing in the 90’s is common and expected today. How will you make sure you don’t get lost in the technodust? Will the park and recreation profession teach people how to use the power? Most importantly, how will we help people balance hi-tech sedentary lifestyles with hi-touch active activity?

Changing Face of Society - Our society is more ethnically diverse than ever before. Today’s youth and young adults seem to prioritize interests over ethnicity when looking to build friendships and family. In February 2006 USA Today ran a cover story entitled “Color-blind – A new generation doesn’t blink an eye at interracial relationships.” White males are the new minority and most communities are comprised of neighbors who speak hundreds of different languages and dialects. But diversity comes in many forms. Cultural diversity is only one component of the changing diversity picture. To succeed, make sure you are reaching all members of our community no matter what their age, gender, religion, physical and emotional abilities, income, education and lifestyle.

No doubt the new century will bring vast challenges and opportunity for the park and recreation profession. To thrive we must learn to stay one step ahead of the changes and become increasingly proactive. While this column will shed some light of today’s trends it’s up to you to look for clues into the future. Each of us, no matter what our position within the department, must become a “Trend Trekker.”

Trend Trekking Made Simple

Sure, you know you should stay on top of changing trends. But how do you begin and where do you find the time. The good news is you don't need a magical crystal ball. Trends are all around you in the form of news stories, articles, opinions, statistics, surveys, research, comments, feedback, and even, customer complaints. There are three simple steps to "Trend Trekking."

1. **Spotting Trend Cues** - Watch, listen, hear and overhear articles, news stories, conversations, speeches, comments or even customer complaints. Encourage (even reward) customers and staff to share complaints, suggestions and ideas. Think of complaints as unmet needs and look for emerging trends.
2. **Capturing information** - Create a system to warehouse and file trend information. Use a physical box, computer folder on your desktop, handwritten notebook or journal – whatever combination works for you.
3. **Applying** trends to your area of responsibility - As you develop or enhance operations, programs, services or facilities retrieve and apply trend information.

For example if you see a story in Parenting magazine about obesity in children. You clip the article and put it in your Trend Log under the heading "Children's Fitness." Down the road, you apply that information by creating a program targeted at out-of-shape kids who might feel intimidated in a traditional sports setting.

If you see a cover story in your local newspaper about people who completely change careers after the age of 60, put it in your file "Boomers" file and send a copy along to your staff members who specialize in programs for older adults. Or maybe you hear a fascinating statistic about the increasing number of home-schooled kids in your community. That information might spark an idea for an art or physical education program aimed at home-schooled kids and their teacher-parents.

Obsessive Customer Listening

Another way to stay "on-trend" is to get into the "heads and hearts" of your customers so that you can meet their changing needs:

- Create a system to capture information from your customers and your front line staff. After all, your front line staff have the most direct and best access to your customers.
- Meet or talk with front line staff to find out:
 - ◆ What suggestions they have to better serve their customers?
 - ◆ What positive or negative comments (or outright complaints) have customers made to them about ANYTHING (hours of operation, lack or space in

particular programs, cleanliness, staff, room set-up, quality, ease (or lack thereof) of registration or enrollment, etc)?

- Ask all staff, especially those on the “front line” to keep track of customer comments in a very accessible “Customer Comment Log”
- Let everyone in the department (part-time, full-time, volunteers, seasonal, maintenance, managers – everyone) know where the log is kept and enthusiastically invite them to record comments.
- Encourage negative comments as well as positive ones.
- The log is a good place for people to insert articles they come across which could affect your department. Look for articles about crime, stress, family life, fitness, senior citizens, teens, children, education, the environment.
- Ask customers for direct feedback via post-program or event evaluations. Don’t just ask whether they were satisfied with the program. Find out what other types of needs they might have.
- Interview, survey or engage your customers in conversations which ask them about their lives, needs and problems.

Again, the idea is to recognize information that *could* affect you and your customers today and in the future. As you build your Trend Trekking file and “Comment Log” you are collecting information to help you build future programs, products and services.

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