



[Ito1 Magazine](#)

08/31/2006

Issue: September 2006

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## Data Capture: Stowe Creates a Total Ski Experience

Companies are using creative marketing methods to acquire customer information and build robust, cohesive databases.

Stowe Mountain Resort wants to make sure its visitors are satisfied, not only on the mountain, but at every possible touchpoint, from parking to ski rental.

Unlike many ski resorts, which rely on the typical winter syndicated research that compares basic elements like "snow making" across resorts, Stowe Mountain Resort recognized the importance of measuring its entire mountain experience on what matters most: its visitors.

Stowe began a \$100 million revitalization project last year that includes a new base area, hotel, ice skating rink, golf course, and art center. But the transformation to full-service resort, Stowe realized, would not occur with investment alone. It requires a shift in the culture and operations, and a better understanding of customers' expectations. So the resort implemented a guest satisfaction and loyalty tracking mechanism to measure that experience.

With the help of LRA Worldwide, a training and research company that specializes in customer experience management, the resort implemented the Stowe Ski Experience tracking study. A few days after guests depart they receive an email invitation to participate in the study. Depending on their level of activity while at the resort, the survey questions may range in number from 10 to 50. The survey consists of experiential questions that gauge the customers' satisfaction levels, their likelihood to return, and the possibility of making a recommendation. For example, if the visitor went skiing, the questions may ask about the friendliness of the lift operator and the knowledge of mountain hosts.

The resort also attaches a survey-participation incentive: a drawing for airline tickets. "One of the pitfalls of doing surveys is you run the risk of getting feedback from really angry or really pleased customers," says Zach Conen, director of marketing at LRA Worldwide. "What an incentive will do is smooth out the data to make sure you have the bell curve of distribution covering the full range of activities that took place."

Conen says the survey carries with it immediate benefits. "Collectively, we feel empowered to react quickly to individual guest needs and wants during the season, and are assured that a post-ski season analysis of the aggregated data will help steer the resort's long-term guest strategy," says Michael Colbourn, Stowe's vice president of marketing and communications.

As a result of the comparative tracking study, Stowe Mountain Resort made enhancements to its guest services, initiated capital improvements, engaged in guest recovery, and addressed customer communications procedures. Stowe cannot currently comment on specific changes because they're

ongoing, but Conen says the resort has been looking at how the front-line employees are aligned in the organization to deliver an optimal customer experience.

In addition to collecting the feedback, the resort and LRA conduct analyses on the three components Stowe uses to determine visitors' loyalty: What is their intent to return? Are they satisfied? and Will they tell their friends? This is unique in that Stowe Mountain Resort focuses on the customer experience. Conen explains that in a typical guest satisfaction survey, companies examine the lowest-scoring areas without determining the impact on the guest experience. "The process with Stowe is [the focus] may not be on the worst-scoring areas, but on what will have the most impact on the customer methodology," he says.

The resort also administers an employee engagement study that asks questions that range from, "What are their thoughts about the leadership?" to "How do they see their future within the organization?" By department, Stowe determines the engagement level of the employees and links those levels to the guest satisfaction levels. From there, Stowe can see how guest satisfaction and employee engagement correlate. Colbourn says that so far, the employees have been active about monitoring and acting on the data. He says, "The program has been a revelation."