

Design Corner

Managing a Cutting-Edge Aquatic Center

By Kevin Post & Michelle Schwartz

While community swimming facilities continue to evolve and emulate the waterpark and hospitality industries, municipalities must determine if they can compete for the sought-after aquatic professional who can manage these types of facilities or risk contract management to a third party.

Rising Expectations

Residents are responding to a growing travel culture, vacationing in destinations with imaginative pools and spa-like amenities. Thus, when their community echoes these experiences at the new community aquatic center, they show up in droves and expect the same standards and pampering they experienced abroad where the foundation was impeccable service.

The American Academy of Hospitality Sciences is renowned worldwide for awarding excellence in the travel and luxury services sector. The academy, which started as a restaurant rating bureau, now reviews restaurants, chefs, airlines, cruise lines, spas, hotels and resorts. One of the main categories for the coveted award is staff, including pool staff. Standards that the academy uses for this award include:

- Telephone answered promptly and with a proper greeting
- Overall maintenance
- Service overall
- Tremendous attention to detail in every aspect of the operation
- Staff: polished, suave, grace, tact, dignity

This is not to say that the municipal staff must spritz sunbathers with mist and offer towels, fresh fruit and chilled sorbet throughout the day, but after the aquatic attractions, a professional staff becomes the focus when vying for discretionary leisure spending.

Cutting-Edge Pool Staff

Whether it's a \$3 million dollar facility where a few people perform all the functions or a \$30 million dollar facility where numerous teams depend upon one another, today's public aquatic center will likely incorporate an aquatic director. The aquatic director (no matter how large or small the aquatic center) is accountable for the overall operation and management of the facility. Qualifications include a four-year college degree in the field of aquatic management and experience in park and recreation administration, physical education, marketing, management or a related field. The aquatic director develops the training of all staff and develops and implements all operational procedures and detailed emergency action plans while overseeing operating policies and procedures.

He or she develops annual budgets and an effectively communicated measuring program for the coordination/monitoring of revenue collection that includes daily activity records of all participants, events, cost-control disciplines and attendance reports.

The customer relations team includes customer service, sales functions, program development, promotion/marketing and branding—vital to the financial success of the facility. Staff qualifications include creativity, initiative and education necessary to expand the customer base through customer outreach to ensure that the aquatic center is seen and used as an asset in the community. Encouraging residents to use public facilities requires helpfulness of the promotional materials, perceived value against other providers, and public awareness that the facility addresses the prevailing needs of the aquatic community. Further, the community must be educated that the aquatic center is stimulating business attraction and retention, the creative economy, and tourism.

The deck management team supervises lessons, recreation and competition programming activities with a

staff of aquatic instructors, coaching and sports staff, and lifeguards. Staff qualifications include Certified Water Safety Instructor, Certified Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation (CPR), Certified Aquatic Fitness Professional, and first aid. Highly trained lifeguards must possess a lifeguard, CPR and first aid certificate by the American Red Cross, YMCA/YWCA or Ellis and Associates. Lifeguards must be screened, and it is recommended that they be at least 18 years old to possess a desired maturity level for potentially saving lives.

The pool operations team includes the overall maintenance of the pool system and waterpark features for risk reduction to the users, employees and facility. Pump room technicians include a unique skill set, including Certified Pool Operator (CPO) or Aquatic Facility Operator (AFO) for day-to-day chemical knowledge in order to operate the facility in compliance with the local health department requirements. Operations include industry knowledge for pre-season inspection to identify and fix necessary parts and repairs prior to opening. The team must meet critical needs during the season, complete the closing of the facility in the fall, perform post-season inspections to help identify and fix necessary repairs and major renovations during the off-season, and perform winter maintenance during the winter months.

Aquatic Consultant Assistance

Hiring an experienced aquatic consultant can be a plus when deciding how to find experienced professionals to manage a new aquatic center. A consultant can offer professional placement, whereby they conduct a local and national search as directed by the owner to fill key positions. Through nationwide networking capabilities, they may be in contact with soon-to-be-graduates in the aquatic field looking for professional placement. As the market demands more aquatic professionals, colleges and universities are responding by providing additional curriculum for aquatic professional career choices. Additionally, the rise of campus conjugal recreation and competitive aquatic facilities provides "on the job" training.

The U.S. leisure market is fueled predominantly by baby boomer spending and young professionals with an interest in travel, attractions and activities. While not competing for the American Academy of Hospitality Sciences award (at least not yet), municipal aquatic centers must strive for excellence in impeccable service due to the increased importance of leisure goals. Managing a cutting-edge aquatic center is contingent on a professional staff with enormous responsibility and a growing skill set.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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