

AQUATIC MANAGEMENT, SEASONALLY

By: Scot Hunsaker

As someone who works in the aquatic field, I'm often asked, "What do you do in the winter?" I think they expect to hear that I'm on a beach in some tropical paradise.

Although users may think pool managers do nothing but sit around in the off-season, in reality, much of the hardest work is done during the winter, preparing and planning for the hot days of summer.

A seasonal aquatic operation, with its constant starts and stops, is similar to opening a new business every year. It requires scheduling, personnel policies, operating procedures, marketing plans, staff hiring and training, and opening preparation. Then, just when all systems are in place and functioning as planned, the facility is closed for the winter and the process starts all over again.

By developing a detailed schedule with a list of tasks to open, operate and close a facility, the process can be streamlined with little room for error or omission.

The process begins in October, when the program schedule is developed to determine what programs the aquatic facility will offer patrons the following year, what days and times these activities will be offered and how much they will cost.

In developing this list, it may be helpful to survey potential user groups, current patrons and community leaders. Investigate what similar facilities offer locally, regionally and nationally, and determine what creative programming can be included to expand the attendance base.

One rapidly growing area is aquatic recreational entertainment. Leisure pool design is sweeping the country with features that create an exciting water play environment. Popular activities and features include water slides, participatory water apparatus, lily pad walks, otter slides, zero-depth entries, waterfalls, water cannons, current channels and lazy rivers – features that even appeal to the non-avid swimmer.

For competitive pools, sprays, fountains and inflatables can be used to give a different dimension to facility use and attract the 5 to 15-year old age group. Mature populations may be attracted by low-impact fitness exercise, such as water walking, aqua aerobics or fitness swims. Family programming can include swim-in movies. Picture seeing *Jaws* while sitting in an inner tube on the water. These are just some of the limitless programming options available to increase attendance and market share.

Fall is also the time to develop personnel policies and review operating policies. How do you want employees to perform at your facility? To answer this question, it's necessary to develop a complete personnel policy, including job descriptions, hiring requirements,

performance criteria, wage scales, schedules, orientations and in-service training. It's important to structure personnel policy around facility programming to ensure adequate staffing.

Once policy is defined, a recruitment plan can be developed to attract and hire individuals who will contribute to making the program and facility exceptional. Many facilities turn to campus interviews, newspaper ads, staff referrals, swim teams and lifeguard courses to identify and recruit qualified candidates.

Since each facility has different program, operational and mechanical requirements, a detailed "Standard Operating Procedure" (SOP) can provide the information necessary to each staff member as to what should be done in almost any situation. Topics include emergencies, personnel, and technical and public relations issues. This document can be invaluable when there is turnover of key personnel, or as a valuable defense tool in liability litigation, as it demonstrates, an ongoing policy of responsible performance at or above industry standards. The table below provides a sample outline for an aquatic facility.

<p>Standard Operating Procedures Table of Contents</p>	<p>Section IV: Customer Relations & Policies</p>
<p>Section I: Emergency Procedures Communication Water emergencies Chemical emergencies Fire Burglary Material safety data sheets (MSDS)</p>	<p>Sales Dues structure Dry activities Private parties Pre- and postseason Rules and regulations</p>
<p>Section II: Personnel Policies Personnel Policy Manual Introduction Organizational structure Facility programming & policy Employment policy Job description</p>	<p>Section V: Physical Plant Operation General principles: Sanitation/filtration Pool chemistry Pool filter systems Pool lighting Handling chemicals Ordering supplies Charge accounts Maintenance & repair</p>
<p>Section III: Daily Procedures Opening Closing Water chemistry reports Daily financial reports</p>	<p>Section VI: Special Events Swim meets Adult nights Special happenings Party rentals</p>
	<p>Section VII: Preseason & Postseason Responsibilities</p>

In December and January, the marketing plan should be developed. Two key questions must be answered: Who will use the facilities and how can these people be targeted?

Determining what markets your facility can accommodate relates directly to facility programming. For example, are you targeting age group, U.S. Swimming or Masters competitive swimmers? Each group may need to be approached differently.

Once the great markets have been defined, a plan can be developed to reach these groups. Some options to consider:

- Develop an easy and concise programming medium for explaining activities and fees to the community in the market area.
- Develop a direct mail program to potential customers. Mailing lists can be developed according to the number of people living in a home and the age of residents. These variables can then be used to target specific programming opportunities.
- Develop public relations contacts with local media. Submit or encourage articles regarding facility features and activities that will reach a large cross-section of the populations with little expense.
- Target specific user groups, such as public and private schools, age-group competitive swimmers, fitness lap swimmers, weight/fitness training enthusiasts or recreational aquatic participants.
- Run ads in community newspapers conveying facility features and programs.
- Promote special events at the center with the assistance of local DJs.
- Identify areas for visual displays aimed at specific target markets.
- Develop a community outreach program designed to inform local groups (senior citizens, school districts, Chambers of Commerce or Scout troops) about aquatic opportunities at the facility. Involve neighborhood groups as sponsors of special events at the center.
- Promote arrangements with hospitals and physicians for patient therapy.
- Create a simple protocol for arranging private rentals by organized groups.

Once you've developed a marketing program, you can devise budgets, prepare information and organize mailings. Lead times can be prepared to meet deadlines with appropriate staffing to phone inquiries.

March, the month to begin implementing the marketing plan, is also the time to begin preseason preparation, which in general involves three areas – inspection, pool preparation and ordering supplies.

The first step in spring start-up is to inspect facility components and identify what tasks need to be accomplished before opening day. Special consideration should be given to winter or vandalism damage. Items to inspect include.

- *Pool shell.* Is there any evidence of frost heave or freeze damage? Areas to check closely include gutters, coping, walls, expansion joints, light niches, inlets and the main drain. Visible signs of damage include spalling, cracking or a change in elevation.
- *Pool deck.* Have the concrete slabs shifted, exposing edges that are easy to trip on? Have unsightly cracks or areas that will hold water and dirt developed, resulting in a hazardous surface?
- *Deck equipment.* Is the deck equipment clean and in good working order for opening day? Identify those items that need to be repaired or discarded.
- *Diving boards, slides and stands.* Inspect the platform/stands for structural integrity. Any mounting bolts should be tightened and checked for integrity and corrosion. If the stand is metal, it may be appropriate to paint it to protect it from the corrosive properties of pool water. The area just in front of the fulcrum is susceptible to hairline fractures and the mounting brackets need to be inspected.

All aquatic facilities should have an ongoing inspection program for these elements. By identifying potential problems in the pre-season, there's time to consult the manufacturer and make necessary repairs without inconveniencing patrons later on.

- *Safety equipment.* Is all required safety equipment – safety ropes, ring buoys, backboards, rescue tubes, first-aid kits and perimeter fencing – in good working order?
- *Recirculation system.* Inspect the motor and pump for any damage. Does the impeller spin freely? Are the gaskets, valves and gauges in good working order? Is there any evidence of a pipe break (water dripping or a visible fracture)? Are all the freeze plugs still in place or have some been removed where water could get in the lines? Inspect the filter tanks for integrity? Are the supports corroded? Are there any rust spots or pinholes in the system?
- *Support areas.* Check bathhouse walls, ceilings, windows, skylights, roofs and door jams for vandalism or freeze damage. Itemize paint requirements. Inspect floors for potential slippery surfaces and any sharp edges or objects. Verify that all drain grating is securely in place. Inspect the fresh water plumbing system, including the hot water heater, mixing valves, traps and fixtures for any breaks or required maintenance. Inspect the electrical panel and verify that all connections are secure and protective covers are in place.

Other areas that require inspection and verification include starting blocks, office and janitorial supplies, chemicals, test kits, administrative forms, keys and tool boxes.

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Once all inspections are completed, it's time to prepare the pool for use. An aquatic facility's winter environment greatly impacts the amount of preparation and the types of tasks required. Throughout the window months, pools without covers are a catch-all for leaves, dirt and animals. The pool surfaces have also been attacked by winter elements and must now be restored to operating condition.

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Preseason can be the most stressful time. Weather can play havoc with the best-laid plans. It's best to start early, be flexible (have a good and bad weather list) and be organized. Nothing is as wasteful as having five employees ready to acid wash and no one knows where the gas is for the trash pump. For each scheduled job, make a list of tools and supplies needed and verify they are on-site before the job is scheduled to begin. The table provides a partial punch list of items to be completed before opening a pool.

Pool Preparation Punch List

1. Remove pool cover – clean and store.
2. Remove winterizing plugs from skimmers and inlets.
3. Verify ground water table to prevent hydrostatic damage.
4. Empty pool.
5. Clean debris from bottom of pool.
6. Clean pool surface with muriatic acid solution and/or detergent.
7. Rinse down pool surface.
8. Sandblast, acid wash, repaint, replaster and patch to prepare pool surface as needed.
9. Paint depth markings, lane lines and warning marks.
10. Replace drain grates, skimmers baskets and inlets.
11. Reassemble recirculation system, including pumps, pipes, meters and filters.
12. Reassemble chlorinators, controllers, chemical feed pumps and underwater lights.
13. Fill pool, but if pool paint or coatings have been used, see manufacturer's recommendations for curing times.
14. Start recirculation system five days before opening.
15. Balance water and adjust sanitizers to appropriate levels.
16. Install ladders, rails, slides and diving boards.

The third component of preseason preparation is ordering supplies. A sample ordering schedule of necessary supplies appears below.

Ordering Supplies

Order	Delivery	Items
December	May	Deck Furniture
March	April	Paint and paint supplies
April	May	Utilities (electric, gas, water, phone trash pick-up)
April	May	Janitorial supplies, Maintenance supplies Pool chemicals
May	May	Office supplies
Two weeks before opening	One week before opening	Snack bar Supplies

It's difficult to step back from the day-to-day demands of operating a pool during the summer and stop and think about next year. There are many issues that are easily addressed during the summer season and almost impossible during the off-season. For example, determine if you have all the pictures you need for next year's marketing material; examine what high-maintenance areas could be improved upon, what landscaping would improve the surroundings and what space is not being utilized to its fullest; determine what new features guests might find exciting and enjoyable; and decide how duties could be structured to hold down labor expenses.

Investigate what similar facilities offer locally, regionally and nationally, and determine what creative programming can be included to expand the attendance base.

It's also important to conduct a post-season inspection of the physical plant and operating results to identify areas that need attention. Review and reinspect the preseason checklist to prepare for the coming year. In addition, inspect filters, furniture, equipment and inventory supplies. Make a list of required repairs and purchases. Compile administrative reports, such as those on chemical consumption, and look for trends that may require attention. Make a wish list of needed maintenance repairs, new features and renovations. Prioritize and develop a plan to accomplish this list before the coming year.

As a business, outdoor pool facilities are in the unusual position of starting over every 12 months. Through detailed planning, you can pass information and experience from one season to the next while continually improving upon it. Winter is the time when we only work six days a week preparing and planning for the 101 days of summer.

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