



Guest Column

AQUATICS

Planning for a Successful Operation: Part 1 Off-Season Duties

BY KEVIN POST

Many people believe that seasonal pool operators have a “seasonal” job. But, while users may think pool managers do nothing but sit around in the off-season, in reality, much of the most important work is done during the winter, preparing and planning for the hot days of summer.

A seasonal aquatic operation, with its regular 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 running smoothly, 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 and will help ease the stress of the general manager.

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 is important to look back at the past season and find areas for improvement. 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.

Mature populations may be attracted by low-impact fitness exercise, such as water walking, aqua aerobics or fitness swims. Family program-



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ming can include swim-in movies. Picture seeing *Jaws* or *Finding Dory* 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, social media 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 responsi-

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ble performance at or above industry standards. (For an example, view this article at RecManagement.com.)

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 swim lesson users, U.S. Swimming or Masters competitive swimmers, senior program users, etc.? Each group may need to be approached differently.

Once the 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 population 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 centers using social media.

- 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.

Now that the planning is done, operators begin the fun task of implementing everything they've created. The next three to four months will test their patients, sanity and love for aquatics. **RM**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kevin Post is a project manager for Counsilman-Hunsaker, focusing on feasibility studies and operational assistance. Post's aquatic experience includes pool management, feasibility study analysis, facility audit coordination, launch operations training and CPO training. This broad base of experience has allowed Post to offer his knowledge to communities interested in planning new aquatic facilities across the United States.

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