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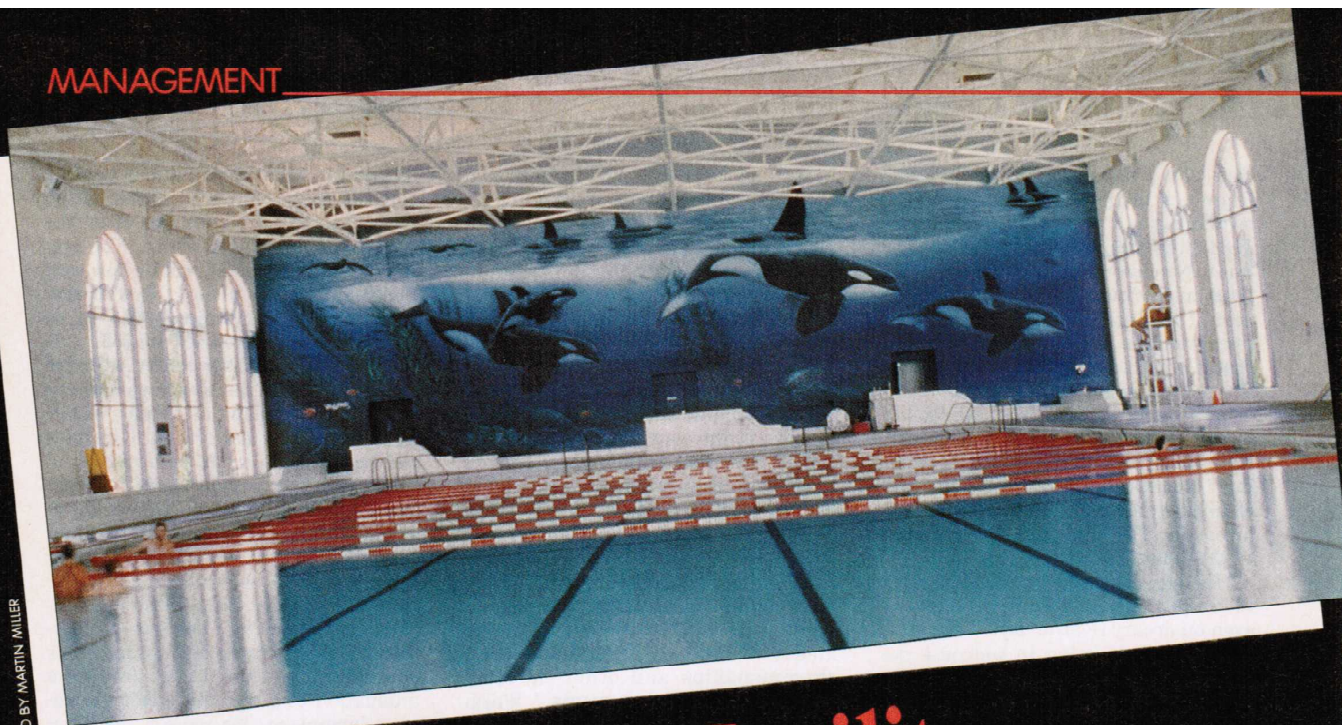
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Keeping Your Facility In the Black

Improving a facility's appearance can help attract patrons. The Mission Beach Plunge, San Diego, above, added a marine life mural by environmental artist Robert Wyland to attract new customers.

Operating a swimming pool should not be a money-losing proposition. The knowledgeable, safe and efficient operation and innovative programming of the pool allow an agency to earn a profit that will pay for the staffing, chemicals and maintenance of the pool and also help support other community recreational programs.

According to Corey Phelps, aquatic director for San Diego's Fitness Advantage at the Plunge, one of the most important things a pool manager must do is find out who his or her customers are and what makes them happy. "The majority of our customers are fitness-minded adults and we try our best to cater to this group's needs and desires. Whether it's by adding more and varied water exercise classes, more masters swimming workout times or special events such as our dive-in movies, we always are looking for new ways to increase the usage of our pool by this group."

In a little more than one year, Phelps has turned the Plunge facility, which operated at a loss prior to renovation, into a money-maker. Phelps believes that "in order to become a

profitable operation, you must treat our aquatic program as a business because, in reality, that is exactly what it is," he said. "The primary objective of business is to make a profit and aquatic facilities should be no different. The days of subsidization and cost-absorption are just about gone. In order to remain open and provide the public with recreational opportunities, we must be cost-effective and profit-minded," he said.

Public Awareness

To develop a cost-effective operation, it may be possible to increase revenues, decrease costs of production and generate profits through the implementation of some simple plans, including increased public awareness and improved aquatic programming.

Sending out press releases, taping public service announcements, implementing advertising, promotion and marketing programs, improving scheduling and developing eye-catching brochures are just some ways of increasing public awareness. Setting up off-site registration at shopping centers and churches and making presentations at local elementary schools

also can boost public awareness of aquatic programs.

Susanne Littleton, aquatic director at the New Hampshire YWCA, Manchester, N.H., believes "the most difficult step in programming is not to create, develop or implement the program, but to give it the good public relations kick to bring people in the door."

Jerry Ferrin, aquatic director at the Industry Hills, Calif., Recreation and Conference Center, doesn't wait for potential customers to come to him. He makes presentations to PTAs, Scout groups, school groups and dozens of other interested parties and offers off-site class registration immediately after the presentations. "We start promoting our summer classes and programs in April. Our goal is to have the summer swim program sold out by June 1. Money is deposited and the interest helps pay part of our instructor fees."

In order to improve aquatic programming, managers can inquire of local university recreation, physical education, sports management or aquatic program chairpersons about the possibility of placing interns at the

pool. Interns often can help develop new programs for the facility and high school students can be used as teaching assistants.

Lorraine Martinelli, director of the health promotion department at the YWCA of the City of New York, works with the public school system to keep swim instructor costs under budget. "After school, we have a group of children come in to take swimming classes and then these older children — considered assistant teachers — volunteer to teach younger children," she said.

The Fitness Advantage at the Plunge recently completed a customer survey. Phelps felt the results were enlightening. "They proved to me again the importance of customer feedback because management and staff are not as observant as we believe they are," Phelps said. "Only by catering to your participants and ensuring their satisfaction with your pool, your programs and your staff, will you increase revenues. The most effective advertiser is a happy customer."

Programs

To help keep customers happy while attracting new patrons to a facility, managers can schedule special events at the pool, such as pool movie nights, "beach" parties, swim-a-thons, water games festivals, officials' clinics, stroke clinics, mini-Olympics, synchronized swim shows, competitive swim meets, teen nights, company swim parties, family swims, holiday theme party swims, mother/daughter swims and underwater concerts. Well-promoted special events such as these will generate more publicity for the facility than paid advertising ever could do.

In addition to special events, facilities can offer a variety of instructional programs to help attract customers. Along with traditional learn-to-swim classes, managers can offer boating instruction, canoeing, wind surfing, boating safety, water safety instruction, lifeguard training programs, basic rescue courses, cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and first aid courses. Fitness programs such as water aerobics, swim fitness and water jogging also can be offered. Other programs that can help attract patrons include swim lessons for adult beginner swimmers, parent/infant bonding, parent and tot/pre-school water adjustment classes and private swimming lessons.

The YWCA of the City of New York offers a "Petrified People Don't Sink" class that helps people get over their fear of entering a pool and putting

BY ERIC YOUNG

Dive-In Movies Help Reel in Revenue

In the old days, a night at the movies often meant going to the local drive-in and enjoying a flick without leaving the privacy of your car or digging into a bucket of hot buttered popcorn while sitting in the cushioned comfort of a theater. Drive-ins, once an institution for dating teens as well as parents seeking to escape from the kids for a few blissful hours, have all but become a thing of the past and high ticket prices and the proliferation of the home video market have begun to take their toll on movie theaters.

However, waterpark operators have given a night at the movies a new twist. "Dive-in" movies, where park patrons can relax in the water while enjoying films such as *Jaws* and *The Creature From The Black Lagoon*, have become a popular method of attracting patrons and gaining publicity for waterparks.

White Water, a 45-acre waterpark located near Atlanta in Marietta, Ga., was the first to show Dive-in movies six years ago. One of the largest waterparks in the Southeast, White Water features a wide variety of large slides, a children's play area, a lazy river and the Atlanta Ocean — a 710,000-gallon wave pool where patrons float on inner tubes as they watch movies on a large rear-projection screen. "It has worked well for us. The movies have been a good novelty attendance draw to the park," said Ned Stancliff, vice president and general manager of White Water.

"We started Dive-in movies," he continued. "We were the first park to do it and we've been doing it for six years. The movies came about through an employee suggestion at a party."

Another waterpark that has capitalized on the idea is Raging Waters, a 44-acre waterpark located in San Dimas, Calif., that features dozens of water rides, a

freeform activity pool, a large pavilion, food services, an accessories shop and a wave pool with a large sandy beach where the movies are shown. "We've been doing it for three years now," said Ken Kowalski, Raging Waters' marketing sales manager. "We found someone who agreed to sponsor the movies the first year, so we put the screen up and gave it a try. It went over big."

Raging Waters' movie program has indeed gone over big. The park's movie program has garnered publicity for Raging Waters not only in local news, but in national publications — including *Time* magazine. According to Kowalski, the Dive-in movies marketing effort began with putting up flyers in the park and printing announcements in the local weekend calendar magazine. What began as a modest marketing plan blossomed into a publicity goldmine.

"Most of the publicity for the Dive-in came from publications like the *Los Angeles Times*, local papers, local news channels and then *Time* magazine," Kowalski said. "It spread like wildfire. When one network saw another network covering it, they wanted to be involved with it also. The movies were a neat concept, a different idea. Before we knew it, all these different media were doing a story on it. You can't buy that kind of publicity."

Despite the recent publicity Raging Waters has received, Stancliff feels that Dive-in movies at White Water may be a good idea whose time has come and gone. "It's actually kind of burned out for us," Stancliff said. "We have done it for so long and we have gotten a lot of publicity like Ken at Raging Waters did this past year. Ever since then, the novelty has kind of worn off. Now we market the movies by word of mouth and some radio promotion."

their faces in the water. Martinelli believes that people who take this class feel they are not ready for even a novice learn-to-swim class. Using the catchy title "Petrified People" has helped the class to be successful.

The Plunge's Phelps feels "it's extremely important to stay in touch with the trends in the industry. Right now, water fitness is extremely popular and is still developing as a viable means of exercise. We have a very popular water fitness program at the Plunge with 19 classes a week and we're looking to expand upon that by adding deep water exercise and water walking classes. Last month, we had 1,142 participants in our program and it's still growing."

In addition to the competitive program, Industry Hills "sees more than 1,200 swimmers each day during the summer, from six-month-old infants to the world record holder in a number of events in masters swimming," Ferrin said. The program includes infant programs, Kinder Swim, adaptive swimming, fitness swimming, a selection of Red Cross classes, water aerobics, power walking, "Mommie to Be" conditioning and various types of recovery programs for heart patients. Ac-

cording to Ferrin, the extremely popular, although somewhat controversial, infant "Survival Skills Program" enrolled 350 infants and their parents last summer and generated more than \$35,000 for the club.

Leasing a facility to outside groups such as scuba clubs, competitive swim teams, triathlon clubs, camps, schools, church groups, Boy and Girl Scouts and sports teams also is a way of boosting pool revenue.

When seeking new patrons, facility managers can target special groups that currently are not using the facility. These groups can include senior citizens, downtown hotel guests and business people interested in lunchtime or after-work swims.

The YWCA of the City of New York, located in a busy Manhattan business district, offers both a "Learn-to-Swim Before Work" class and a "25-minute Noontime" class. The morning class is scheduled to allow participants time to get to work and the short noon session gives patrons time to get their exercise, eat a quick lunch and still rush back to work within an hour.

Pool managers also can generate revenue by applying for grants from water sports organizations, sponsor-

ing fund-raising activities, seeking corporate sponsorships for different programs or making the facility available to disadvantaged individuals. Initiating new team activities that have a wide appeal, such as masters swim teams, inner tube water polo leagues, underwater hockey teams and age group competitive teams, also can help attract patrons.

The Industry Hills Recreation and Conference Center's competitive program, the Industry Hills Aquatics Club (IHAC), maintains 250 competitive swimmers who represent Industry Hills worldwide. Another 200 swimmers are being trained as pre-competition swimmers who hope to join the Aquatics Club in the near future. During the past nine years, IHAC has produced several Olympic swimmers and national-level swimmers and currently is rated as the number three competitive program in the nation. Fees for participation in the program range from \$110 per session for first phase pre-competition swimmers to \$1,000 per year for regular aquatic club team members.

The YWCA of the City of New York offers a special masters swimming program for participants over age 50.

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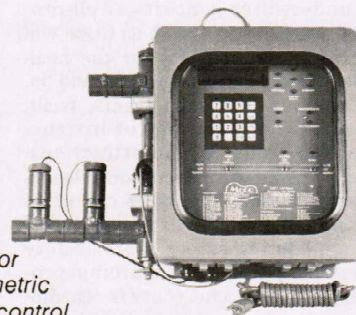
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"Most places tend to lose the older population which is why we now offer a 50+ (program). This group does not want to compete with the younger swimmers. We also combine our masters program with Body Shop membership. This way the swimmers can get a complete workout by using both the pool and the weight training room," Martinelli said.

Merchandise Sales

Setting up a small boutique to sell exercise clothing and swim accessories is another way of increasing revenue at an aquatic facility. A shop can sell items such as swimsuits, bathing caps, goggles, nose clips, kickboards, masks, fins and snorkels, pull buoys, hand paddles, shampoo, warm-up suits, water exercise equipment, watches and towels. Many clubs find this a lucrative sideline and patrons like the convenience as long as prices are in line with local sporting goods stores.

The Manchester YWCA has a retail sales department that sells various swimming and fitness products such as suits, caps and T-shirts. "We currently carry an inventory of approximately \$2,000 and realize an average monthly profit of more than \$450," Littleton said.

A similar success story is told by Phelps. "One of the biggest surprises to me has been the success of our merchandise sales. We use an area about eight feet by eight feet to display and sell such items as goggles, swimsuits, hand paddles, caps, etc. The time I spend on inventory, ordering and displaying is minimal and the revenues have been great. In 1990, we should do \$10,000 to \$12,000 in sales from the aquatic merchandise alone."

Appearances

Visually and aesthetically improving the appearance of the pool complex is another way of keeping customers satisfied while helping to attract new patrons. Adding color graphics, plants and flowers, benches or other small seating areas around the pool can help make the facility a place where people want to be, even if they don't necessarily want to come and swim.

"I really believe the attractiveness of the facility plays a major role in the satisfaction of our patrons," Phelps said. "At the Plunge, we are blessed with a beautiful newly renovated facility with mammoth windows, an ocean view and a gorgeous inlaid tile pool. To enhance this, we just had an enormous marine life mural painted on an interior wall by famous environmental artist Robert Wyland. The impact this

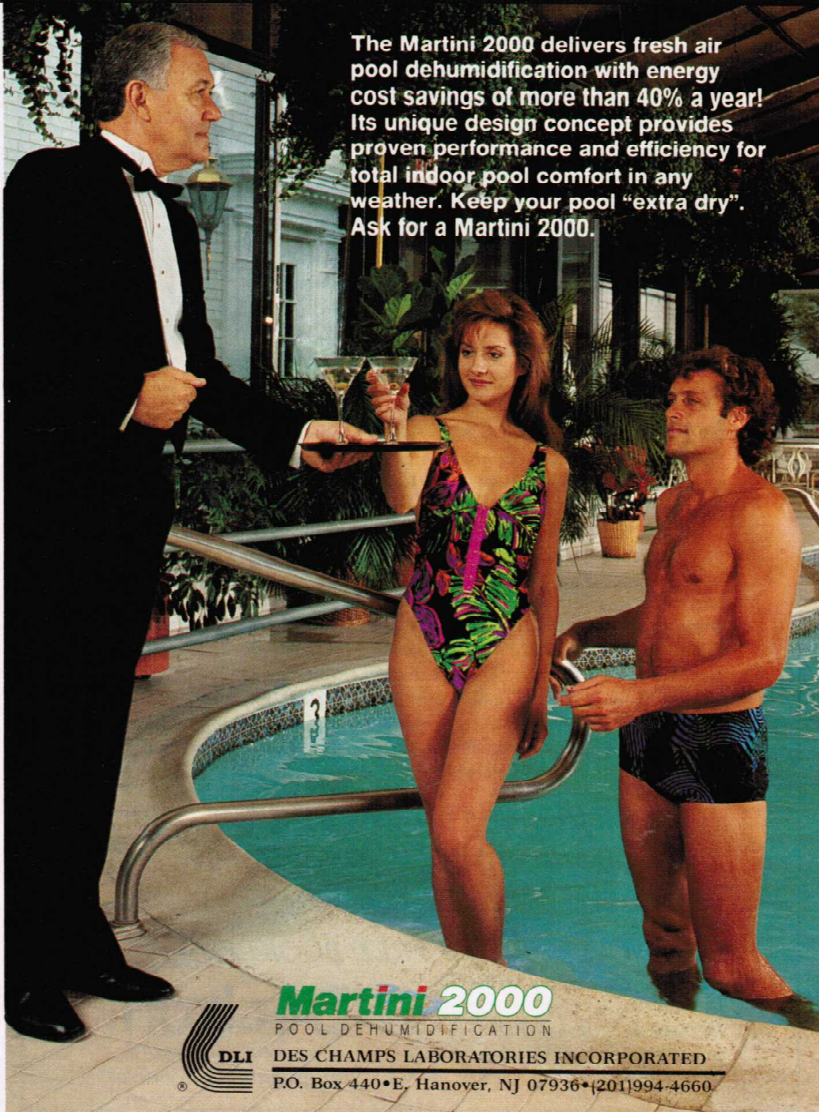
made on the interior aesthetics is magnificent and the best part about it is that it cost us very little. We sought a corporate sponsorship and the artist donated his time as a gift to the city of San Diego. Another step we took to make the pool more inviting was the addition of attractive patio furniture on the deck. In the future, we plan to add large silk plants or palm trees as well."

When seeking new groups to target

for aquatic programs, managers can contact medical doctors, sports medicine specialists and physical therapists and ask them to refer patients for needed rehabilitation and post-operative or post-injury exercise. Managers also can contact the Arthritis Foundation, the Epilepsy Foundation, the Society for the Blind, the Multiple Sclerosis Society, the Easter Seals Foundation and other agencies who provide opportunities for individuals with a

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variety of physical and/or mental handicaps. Aquatic administrators should let these agencies know that their facility can provide recreational and therapeutic programs for the agency's clients.

Outside groups that come to the New York YWCA pool include the New York Arthritis Foundation, Lighthouse, the Young Adult Institute, the Association for the Help of Retarded Children and the National

Multiple Sclerosis Society. "On Tuesday evenings, we rent the pool to the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA). They partake in water exercise for a half-hour and then those who have no swimming ability are learning and those with some swimming skills are working on improving what skills they have. This program is not offered anywhere else in the city. Hopefully when they finish this program, participants will feel

comfortable with us and take other courses," Martinelli said. "We are showing people that we offer all types of programs and we have a class for everyone."

Besides increasing revenues, decreasing the cost of pool operations can make aquatic facilities more profitable. Pool operators can conserve energy by temporarily dropping water temperature for the summer and/or installing a pool cover to retain the heat that already has been generated. Operators also can backwash according to manufacturer's guidelines and install an automatic chemical monitoring and control system to help cut pool operating costs.

Some of the more unusual money-saving ideas that have been implemented at other pools include roping off water jogging lanes, installing coin-operated lockers and setting up food and drink stands, vending machines or popcorn carts. Some facilities have installed indoor tanning booths, sold reserved parking spaces, engraved the names of donors on plaques attached at the end of swimming lanes, offered one-person-to-a-lane lap swim rentals and have shortened water classes to fit more classes into the same amount of time.

The most important factor in operating a successful aquatic facility is safety. Managers should remember to perform regular safety audits and should practice risk management. Operators can avoid lawsuits by foreseeing potential problems and identifying, eliminating or minimizing hazards.

Phelps reinforces this tenet of successful aquatic directors in his statement that no matter "how much time I spend on marketing, program quality or whatever, I never forget the importance of proper risk management policies and this practice permeates every decision I make. I must feel comfortable that what we do at the Plunge will not sacrifice the safety of my staff or our patrons. If there ever was a major accident or incident, this company might not survive the financial ramifications of a lawsuit or the terrible image created by bad publicity."

Alison Osinski, Ph.D., operates Aquatic Consulting Services, a San Diego-based private consulting service for health and fitness organizations, service agencies, aquatic sporting equipment manufacturers, attorneys and municipal park and recreation and safety management departments.

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East Bank Club, Chicago, IL



One of America's largest health spas, the beautiful East Bank Club overlooks the Chicago River. The 1,500 square foot pool is a favorite spot for a relaxing swim or work-out. But club owners Daniel E. Levin and James McHugh were unhappy with several problems in the pool enclosure area.

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Building Manager Peter Demas solved the problems by installing Dectron's DRY-O-TRON DS 54 dehumidifier and pool water heater. Now the air is kept at 55% RH, the pool water is heated at an estimated savings of \$17,000 a year and deterioration has stopped. But the highest praise comes from the members themselves. Says Demas "We've been complimented so many times... if that's all we'd gained it would have been worth it."

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