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PROFITABLE AQUATIC PROGRAMS

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

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 are always looking for new ways to increase the usage of our pool by this group."

Aquatic programs can be cost effective. Reasonable program fees should be set to cover expenses, including costs of instruction, supervision, equipment, supplies, and administrative time, plus generate a respectable profit. There is no reason, other than poor management, for aquatic facilities to continually lose money.

In a little over one year, aquatic director Phelps has turned the Plunge facility, previously operated at a loss by another entity prior to renovation, into a money maker. Phelps believes that "in order to become a profitable operation, you must treat your aquatic program as a business, because in reality that is exactly what it is. The primary objective of business is to make a profit, and aquatic facilities should be no different. The days of subsidization and cost-absorbtion are just about gone. In order to remain open and provide the public with recreational opportunities, we must be cost-effective and profit minded."

It may be possible to increase revenues, decrease costs of operation, and generate profits through implementation of some of the following suggestions:

- Improve public awareness: send out press releases, tape public service announcements, advertise, promote & market programs, improved scheduling, develop an eye catching brochure, set up off-site class registration downtown, at shopping centers and churches, present assembly programs at local elementary schools.

Susanne Littleton, aquatic director at the Manchester, New Hampshire YWCA 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, aquatics director of the Industry Hills, California 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 1st. Money is deposited and the interest helps pay part of our instructor fees."

- Inquire of local university Recreation, Physical Education, Sports Management, or Aquatic program chairpersons about the possibility of placing interns at the pool. Have them develop a new program for your facility. Use high school students 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."

- Ask for patron feedback: install a suggestion box, survey patrons regularly, request completion of instructor and program evaluation forms.

The Fitness Advantage at the Plunge recently completed a customer survey. Phelps felt the results were very enlightening. "They proved to me again the importance of customer feedback because management and staff are not as observant as we believe we are. 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 for any business is a happy customer."

- 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 publicity for your facility in excess of what paid advertising could ever do.
- In addition to the traditional learn-to-swim progression classes, offer a greater variety of instructional programs. For instance: boating instruction (canoeing, windsurfing,

coastal piloting, kayaking, boating safety); water safety instruction, lifeguard training programs, basic rescue courses, CPR and first aid courses; fitness programs like water aerobics, swim fitness, water jogging; fishing, timid adult beginner swimmers, parent/infant bonding, parent & tot and preschool water adjustment, and private swim lessons; can all be taught in a pool.

The YWCA of the City of New York offers a "Petrified People Don't Sink" class which helps people get over their fear of entering a pool and putting their faces in the water. Martinelli believes that people who take this class feel they are not ready for even a novice class, and that 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 nineteen 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 our program and it's still growing."

Ferrin says that in addition to the competitive program, Industry Hills "sees over 1,200 swimmers each day, during the summer, from six month old infants to the world record holder of a number of events in Masters Swimming." 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. The extremely popular, although somewhat controversial, infant "Survival Skills Program" enrolled 350 infants and their parents last summer, and generated over \$35,000.00 for the club.

- Lease the facility to outside groups: SCUBA clubs, competitive swim teams, triathlon clubs, camps, schools, church groups, Boy and Girl Scouts, sport teams.
- Target special groups not currently utilizing or under utilizing the facility: senior citizens, downtown hotel guests, business persons for lunch time 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 start the day off on a happy note. The short noon session gives patrons time to get their exercise, eat a quick lunch, and still rush back to work within an hour.

- Apply for grants from water sport organizations, sponsor fund raising activities, seek corporate sponsorships for different programs or to make the facility available to disadvantaged individuals.
- Initiate new team activities with wide appeal: Master's swim teams, inner tube water polo leagues, underwater hockey teams, age group competitive swimming.

The "Industry Hills Aquatics Club maintains 250 competitive swimmers who represent Industry Hills worldwide. Another 200 swimmers are being trained as 'pre-comp' swimmers who hope to join the Aquatics Club in the near future. Over the past nine years, IHAC has produced several Olympic swimmers, national level swimmers and is currently rated the number three competitive program in the nation." Fees charged

participants range from a low of \$110.00 per session charged first phase pre-comp swimmers, to approximately \$1,000.00 per year for regular Aquatic Club team members.

The YWCA offers a special masters swimming program for participants over age fifty. "Most places tend to lose the older population which is why we now offer 50+. 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."

- Set up a small boutique to sell exercise clothing and swim accessories such as swimsuits, bathing caps, goggles, nose clips, kickboards, mask, fins & snorkels; pull buoys, hand paddles, WEBs™, Ultra Swim™ shampoo, warm-up suits, Sammys™, Aqua Joggers™, Wet Vests™, Hydro-Toners™, H₂O Watches™, and towels. Many clubs find this a very 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 to sell various swimming and fitness products such as suits, caps, and t-shirts. "We currently carry an inventory of approximately \$2,000.00 and realize an average monthly profit of over \$450.00," says aquatic director Susanne Littleton.

A similar success story is told by Corey 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, swim suits, hand paddles, caps, Aqua Joggers™, and Aqua Socks™. The time I spend on inventory, ordering, and displaying is minimal and the revenues have been great. In 1990 we should do \$10,000.00 to \$12,000.00 in sales from the aquatic merchandise alone."

- Visually and aesthetically improve the appearance of the complex. Add color and graphics, plants and flowers, benches or other small seating areas around the pool. Make the pool a place where people want to be, even those who don't necessarily want to come and swim. It should be a pleasant, quiet place where people can come to relax, socialize or read.

"I really believe the attractiveness of the facility plays a major role in the satisfaction of our patrons," says Phelps. "At the Plunge, we are blessed with a beautiful newly renovated facility with mammoth windows, an ocean view, and a gorgeous in-laid 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 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 embalmed palm trees as well."

- Arrange with medical doctors, sports medicine specialists and physical therapists to refer patients for needed rehabilitation, and post operative or post injury exercise.
- Contact the Arthritis Foundation, the Epilepsy Foundation, the Society for the Blind, the MS Society, Easter Seals Foundation, and other agencies who provide opportunities for individuals with a variety of physical and/or mental handicaps. Let them know that you can provide recreational and therapeutic programs for their clients.

Outside groups that come to use 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 one half hour, and then those that 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 says "we are showing people that we offer all types of programs and we have a class for everyone."

- Conserve energy: temporarily drop water temperature for the summer, install a pool cover to retain heat already generated, backwash more frequently--it's more efficient, install an automatic chemical monitoring and control system.
- Try some of these more unusual ideas that have been successfully implemented by other pools: rope off pool jogging lanes, install coin lockers, set up food & drink stands, vending machines, or popcorn carts; offer indoor tanning, sell reserved parking spaces, engrave the names of donors on plaques and affix them to the wall at the end of a swim lane, guaranteed one person to a lane lap swim rentals, shorten class length to fit more classes in to the same amount of time.
- Most importantly, remember to perform regular safety audits, practice risk management, and avoid lawsuits by foreseeing potential problems, and identifying, eliminating or minimizing hazards.

Susanne Littleton believes the Manchester YWCA aquatics program is successful because the instructors really care about the children they teach--they emphasize caring and safety.

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 whatever 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."

Aquatic directors who provided direct quotes:

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Alison Osinski is currently in private practice as an aquatic consultant. Her firm, **Aquatic Consulting Services**, located in San Diego, California has as clients: health and fitness organizations, service agencies, aquatic sporting equipment manufacturers, attorneys, and municipal park and recreation and safety management departments. Dr. Osinski's specializations within the field of aquatics include: aquatic risk management, aquatic facility design and renovation, swimming pool chemistry, maintenance and operation; and lifeguard, boating and water safety training program development.