

THE VOICE OF THE ROLLER SKATING INDUSTRY!

# RINKSIDER

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## Create winning party packages that will roll over the competition



Wigwam Skate & Event Center in Terre Haute, Ind., remains competitive by offering a special experience customers can't get anywhere else.

By Pamela Kleibrink Thompson

**R**ink operators know that parties should be an integral part of the business. But how can you compete with other Family Entertainment Centers (FECs) that also offer parties?

Most FECs don't offer roller skating, so centers that do need to promote it proudly. It's one way to differentiate yourself from other party options in your area. One difference between your rink and other FECs is that skating is a healthy activity that's easy to promote.

"Offering parties helps every facility in that 'if you WOW them' it transfers to gaining public skaters," noted Dan Wortman, Owner, United Skates of America Family Fun Center in Rumford, R.I., who doubles as a skate management consultant. Wortman purchased the United Skates of America

rink in 1993 and offered parties from the beginning. "Birthday Parties are 33 percent of our revenue but only 25 percent of our customers," hosting 26,000 birthday guests last year. Wortman estimated that several hundred customers also enjoyed corporate parties at his facility. "We've had the New England Patriots twice, banks, restaurants and businesses of all kinds. We promote them through word of mouth referrals and online. Also in-rink where most people say they decided to have their party with us." He pointed out that your reputation for providing great service will lead to booking both private group parties and corporate parties. "People remember service."

Wortman added, "We try not to compete with other entertainment entities. We just try to offer the best party our facility can put together and the best possible service. You find yourself copying another business if you

try to compete. Do your own unique party that fits your facility and make it perfect."

Robert Kramer and Henry Ledezma have co-owned Wigwam Skate & Event Center in Terre Haute, Ind. since 2013, and has plenty of competition. "We are in a town of about 60,000 people with one other skating center, plus four bowling centers, one family entertainment center, a laser tag facility, and an inflatable bounce facility among other entertainment venues as our competitors," stated Kramer. "We compete by offering a value-priced party package with an attractive price point, but more importantly, we compete by offering customized party packages that are different from, and better than our competition. While we have a traditional roller skating center, we have a boutique birthday business model, provid-

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# How to win sales and influence spending

By Connie Evener

Anyone involved in running a skating rink knows it is unlike any other business. For some rink specific information The RINKSIDER contacted two operators, one from the South and one from the Midwest. Billy Thompson, whose sales skills are practically legendary, operates, along with his sister, Kate's Skating Centers in Gastonia, N.C. Rinks really are unique, Thompson told us, because people have expectations that they don't have with other businesses. For example, they expect you to watch over their children as though they are family.

"Sometimes, I think what you're really selling is yourself and your staff," said Thompson. "To run a skating rink, you have to understand that you can't just open the doors, take people's money, and not give good service. Because they just will not come back."

Joshua Lennon, General Manager at Fort Frenzy in Fort Dodge, Iowa said his FEC stays "very, very busy year round" with their crown jewel, the Cardiff Center: a 6,000 sq. ft skating floor/event venue.

General sales know-how is so important for any business that RINKSIDER also contacted Frazier Hughes, a Roanoke-based sales specialist, trainer, radio personality and popular emcee for helpful advice that might come in handy in a rink setting.

Here's what they told us:

## First and last impressions count.

Hughes has made a thorough study of his guru, Dale Carnegie, whose 1936 book, "How to Win Friends and Influence People," is still the basis for training seminars all over the world.

"Dale Carnegie always said to smile. If you're not smiling, you're going to lose their trust," said Hughes. Since people generally respond to a smile with a smile, and it's considered a natural mood lifter, it can make a powerful first impression.

Conventional wisdom has always suggested that not only are customers always right, they should be treated like royalty. These days celebrity is the new royalty, so Hughes uses that natural desire everyone has for their seven seconds of fame in creating what he calls "The Frazier Hughes Experience" for his car buying customers. He runs a photo with a clever caption of them and their new car on his Facebook page. He also posts on Instagram and YouTube.

## Shut Up and Listen.

When Hughes initially meets with a prospective buyer, he doesn't immediately dazzle them with how much he knows about luxury cars. "You need to try to find out about them before you even talk about what they're buying. Ask about where they're from, what they do for a living, about their family, some of their hobbies," he said.

Then you can move on to specifics about the product. When someone makes an appointment for a consultation about booking the Cardiff Center at Fort Frenzy, said Lennon, "We just sit down with them and start asking questions: Tell us about your business. Tell us what your goals for this event are. Tell us why..."

After a tour of the facility, he trots out the Cardiff Center portfolio, which demonstrates how the space has been transformed into the perfect venue for everything from corporate team building events to wedding receptions. Lennon and his team listen hard and watch for nonverbal reactions. Later, when they present the detailed proposal, "We make sure they realize they'll get everything they could possibly imagine – and more," said Lennon.

## Know your products.

"If you're talking about product, you need to know what you're talking about," said Thompson. "You have to be confident about it, and that would apply to anything in your snack bar, group sales, party packages, even skates." If you don't have the answer, don't fake it. Find it. Because a wrong answer could damage your credibility and lose the customer's trust.

After so many events at the Cardiff Center, Lennon's crew isn't likely to let a customer forget to order a podium or provide menu options that are vegan or gluten free. And because Fort Frenzy has become such a fixture in the north central and north west Iowa regional hub, they can recommend other area businesses because they've built a full list of referral partners. Local wine? That would be Soldier Creek Winery. Local beer? Shiny Top Brewery. Bakery? Creative Cakes.

One of the biggest blunders Thompson sees, in rinks and elsewhere, is when a customer says "I'm just looking," and the salesperson says "okay," and walks away. "Get personable," he said. Strike up a conversation. Ask what kind of skating they do. "There are times our people will spend 30 to 45 minutes with someone trying on skates," he said. "It takes time to make sure a customer understands exactly what they are getting." And sometimes, as their customer learns more and more about the differences in the skates they've tried on, "they go from looking at a \$90 pair to buying a \$200 pair."

## Upsell everything.

Lennon is really thrilled with the pizza buffet recently introduced at the Frenzy Cafe. "We always recommend it because if you buy the buffet, you get however much pizza with whatever toppings you want, plus pop and salad, for your entire stay here," he explained. At \$6.99 per person, \$24.95 for a family, customers love it, and "we are selling more food now than at any time since we opened."

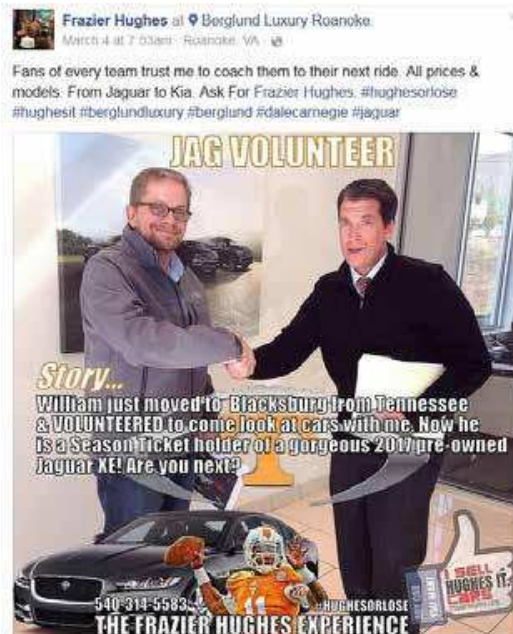
"When you're talking to groups or schools, they always want your cheapest



Billy Thompson of Kate's in Gastonia, N.C., "upsells" online and in the rink.

rate," said Thompson. "So you tell them, we do have a \$6 rate, but all the other schools do the \$6.50 rate because it includes B and C as well as A. So you're really better off with the \$6.50 rate. But it's your decision. And usually (once they understand what they get for that extra 50 cents), they'll say, 'oh, okay, let's do the \$6.50. And they're going to be happy with all the extra stuff.'"

Thompson also pointed out that customers upsell themselves when they buy online. The Kate's web site pages for booking parties or buying skates are set up to make sure no one misses any options. "You can't go to the next page until you look at all the stuff you're not getting, so you realize what you're giving up," he said. "So people don't pass up extra glow sticks or better wheels because they never realized they were available. They have to consciously decide against them



before completing their purchase."

As Hughes puts it, you are not working with your customer, you are working for your customer. It's your job to provide information and guidance that will make your customer a more savvy consumer. Upselling is good for increasing sales, but customers are well served by it, too.