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Best of times, worst of times, for the ski industry

Last month a rich little lady from Texas with a short skirt and plenty of J.R. Ewing moxie blew into Kelowna on a Texan tailwind, caught a cab to Big White and instantly commanded the attention of the B.C. ski area's sales department.

by Lori Knowles

Working on tips from the almighty internet and a pal who liked to snow-board, within hours she'd pumped hundreds of thousands of George Washingtons into three... three!... new condos. One for her, she said, and two for the rest of her family.

It's the kind of big American spending Vail and Aspen... even Whistler and Blackcomb... have always been privy to, but it's relatively new for up-and-comers like Big White and it's catching on faster than fire in a stack of hay on a hot Texas day. "Out here," says Michael J. Ballingal, VP of Big White, "real estate is booming."

WESTERN CANADA "IN THE MONEY"

Indeed, real estate, lift ticket sales and skier visits have been on a steady upsurge in the Canadian west – the Canadian Ski Council reports a 20.7 per cent increase in skier/rider visits in B.C. and 22.8 per cent in Alberta in the last five ski seasons. Blankets of snow and a new-found cool factor have encouraged Eastern Canadians, Americans, British, Australians and Germans to come a-knocking and go a-skiing. It's a phenomenon that's spurred Big White and its Okanagan buddies – along with Fernie, Kimberley, Mt. Washington, Sunshine and Lake Louise – to add

lifts, expand terrain, and build out accommodation. And while ski area numbers in the rest of Canada have been flat or even in decline, Western Canada's success has kept the overall numbers stable. Says Jimmie Spencer, President and CEO of Canada West Ski Areas' Association (CWSAA): "We've shown a steady increase over the last 10 years."

BRITISH COLUMBIA

Thanks to little Texan ladies with lots of money, Big White, B.C. is one of the most optimistic. This giant of a mountain has come a long way from its bankruptcy days in the 1980s. Last spring, the Kelowna area announced it would pump \$35 million into a mega-expansion called Happy Valley, a new village cut into the mountain below Big White's existing development.

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Partnerships – new relationships for changing times

by Stephen Pearce

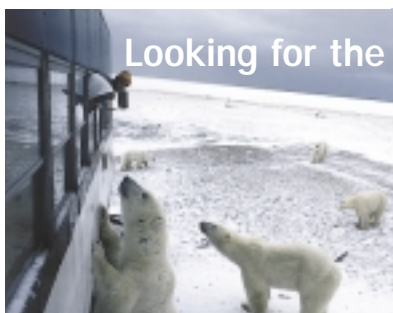
Destination marketing is inherently about building relationships on a number of levels. Stakeholders combine resources to identify prospects,

and collaborate to communicate, attract and host visitors. There is implicit recognition that tourism is about experiences, and that regions, provinces and even countries have

a vested interest in supporting marketing efforts that will yield results to all participants.

Explicitly defined partnerships are becoming an increasingly important means of leveraging scarce resources within an environment that is becoming increasingly competitive and a marketplace that is becoming increasingly fragmented.

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The aggressive plan – the largest in Big White history – includes an eight-passenger gondola, a 24,000-square-foot daylodge, accommodation, an adventure park and a trendy new golf academy. This fall the resort's partners added another \$10 million to the budget for Trapper's Crossing, 42 townhomes in the heart of the old village. And in upcoming years, Ballingal says new six-person, high-speed lifts, more terrain and even more accommodation are in the offing.

All this is made possible, Ballingal says, thanks to steady growth in skier and snowboarder numbers. In 1995/96 Big White entertained 435,000 skier/rider visits. In 1999/00 they'd increased that to 572,000 visits. And by the finish of the 2000/01 season the resort expects to top 600,000 – not bad for a ski hill operating in the red in the 1980s. Plus, says Ballingal, "we think we're just at the tip of the iceberg." By relying on word-of-mouth, smart marketing overseas and the building of strong customer loyalty, Ballingal predicts growth for Big White for a long time to come.



Down the road, Silver Star is mounting a major campaign to catch up – a \$150-million development budget that includes new on-hill condominiums for this year, several high-end subdivisions, a youth hostel, and a new Summit restaurant and bar, plus much, much more for upcoming seasons. Silver Star VP and General Manager Guy Paulsen pre-

dicts that by 2001 a new high speed lift will be strung up somewhere on this challenging mountain, and new terrain may be cut. As he says, Silver Star "needs to stay ahead of capacity problems."

NEW FLIGHTS WILL HELP

This Okanagan resort's big plans come in the midst of news Air Canada has added weekly direct flights from Toronto to Kelowna. Nearby areas are banking on an influx of skiers from Eastern Canada, the U.S. and overseas – skiers who have been there and done that at big areas like Banff and Whistler/Blackcomb and are looking for more of what Paulsen calls "boutique" skiing. Indeed, Silver Star's skier/rider visit numbers have already been encouraging, rising from 192,000 in 1997/98 to 292,000 in 2000. If all goes well, Paulsen predicts 325,000 by the end of next season. "The expansion plans have been on Silver Star's books for sometime," says Paulsen. "Now that we've seen growth, we've decided to blow the dust off them."

KICKING HORSE ON TRACK

Leaving others behind in the dust, however, may be Kicking Horse Mountain Resort, the province's much anticipated, brand-spanking-new ski area near Golden, B.C. that will rival Whistler/Blackcomb in sheer magnitude and vertical. Kicking Horse owners kicked off last spring with announcements they're reconstructing the former area of Whitetooth into a world-class mountain experience: 4,133 feet (1,260 metres) of vertical, the highest in the Rockies and second only to Whistler/Blackcomb. Kicking Horse is developing terrain renowned for years as primo heli-skiing territory. Opening officially December 8 will be the \$25-million Phase 1: an eight-person gondola, a chairlift, a timber and stone mountaintop restaurant and an 8,600-square-foot daylodge.

Watch for Phase 2 through 2001 and 2002 to include more terrain, more lifts and some on-mountain accommodation.

Ski times in B.C. are good, says Kicking Horse General Manager Johan Brandenburg, and that's a major reason investors pressed ahead with their aggressive development. But Brandenburg believes it would



be naïve to place all bets on a single race horse, no matter how well it's bred. "It would be difficult for a ski area to make it alone," he says. "That's why we're creating a four season resort. We're located near the Trans Canada Highway, and we have high expectations for summer tourism."

High expectations also abound in the rest of B.C. and in the Rockies of Alberta. Grouse Mountain in Vancouver is installing a new high-speed quad. Vancouver Island's Mt. Washington added a lift recently, improved its access road and increased its accommodation. The Resorts of the Canadian Rockies (RCR) is riding high with its developments at Fernie – new lifts and new base developments have shot this funky snow haven to the top the skier/rider charts and yearly visits have doubled to 305,000 in 2000 from 150,000 in the mid-1990s. And despite a dip in visitations at nearby Kimberley, RCR's western region Director of Marketing Scott Lazenby claims it's full speed ahead with more skier-friendly base village development.

ALBERTA

As for RCR's efforts in Alberta, Lazenby reports business was down slightly in 2000 at the company's flagship Lake Louise. Still, the Lake's \$4-million plans for a new high-speed quad, super pipe and extensive snowmaking upgrades should be in shape by opening day this November. Growth in the number of new Canadian skiers "has been flat for 15 years," says Lazenby, "but growth in the snowboard market has been high and we've had gains from other (Canadian and foreign) markets."

And there's the rub. Both Lazenby and Big White's Michael J. Ballingal remind us that increases in skier visits in B.C. and Alberta have not been thanks to new interest in skiing by the Canadian public. In fact, the Print Measurement Bureau's 2000 report lists a 4 per cent decline in the number of Canadian skiers over its 1999 report. Both Ballingal and Lazenby claim instead it's a reflection of the Canadian industry learning to boost its appeal in foreign markets, including the US, the U.K., Australia

and Europe. By beefing up their areas and their marketing campaigns, they've managed to steal skiers from the rich resorts and give to the poor.

NEW DEVELOPMENT VIEWED AS CRITICAL

Meanwhile, back at Alberta's Sunshine Village, \$5-million infusion this season into two new lifts will ease commuter traffic between old and new sections of the mountain. With a surge in overall visits from 530,000 in 1998/99 to 590,000 in 1999/00, John Ross, Director of Marketing, says Sunshine is also hoping for Federal Government approval of a new access lift to ease the load on Sunshine's gondola. "As it is," says Ross, "if that gondola goes down we're pooched." Still, the Alberta resort is predicting nothing but good times in its immediate future due to its proximity to Calgary and the phenomenal growth of the city.

Overall, skier and rider visits in the entire province of Alberta have risen a whopping 22.8 per cent in the past five years.

ONTARIO AND QUÉBEC

Fast forward to Québec and Ontario, where the stats aren't quite as encouraging. Skier/rider visits in Ontario sank 3 per cent in 2000 from the previous season, and were down 2 per cent in Québec – drops that were in response to warm temperatures and poor snow conditions. Still, the shakers in the business refuse to be dismayed. "We were only down 3 per cent," says Ontario Snow Resorts Association Executive Director Margot Minardi. "That's not bad considering the season we had last year."

Minardi reports a record seven new lifts will be installed at Ontario ski areas by the start of this season, and it's still all systems go for Intrawest's multi-expansion of Ontario's Blue Mountain. And despite Mother Nature's penchant for ultra-warm spells and melting snow in Ontario, Rich says Blue Mountain will neutralize further decline in business by creating a resort that's not just based on skiing.

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The classic national park ski experience

Jasper National Park is Canada's largest Rocky Mountain National Park and one of North America's largest natural areas and wildlife sanctuaries spanning over 10,000 square kilometres. Designated a World Heritage Site in 1984 by UNESCO, Jasper offers four season fun in a pristine Rocky Mountain environment. Shimmering glaciers, abundant wildlife, crystal clear lakes, thundering waterfalls, deep limestone canyons and evergreen forests surrounded by towering peaks are all a part of the Jasper experience.

Nestled in the midst of Jasper National Park's vast unspoiled grandeur lies the picturesque town of Jasper where many first-class facilities await the visitor. One unique aspect of Jasper National Park is its only ski area, Ski Marmot Basin. Just 20 minutes from the town of Jasper, Marmot Basin is home to some of the best skiing and snowboarding in Canada. With almost 1500 acres of terrain, 3000 vertical feet, wide open runs, world-class facilities and on-mountain services; Marmot Basin attracts skiers from Canada and around the world.

NEVER FAR REMOVED FROM NATURE

Marmot Basin's unique terrain provides skiers and snowboarders with the opportunity to experience many of the ecosystems found throughout the park. From the high alpine bowls and chutes, skiers and snowboarders pass through trees and sub-alpine terrain all within the ski area's leasehold. Visitors truly have an opportunity to experience several aspects of the national park, even without leaving the ski area. Visits to Marmot Basin from the US, Europe and Australia are growing annually and many are third and fourth time visitors.

Marmot Basin has been steadily improving its facilities over the past few years. One aspect of the business that is currently being improved is its commitment to customer service. The ski area has committed to improve its customer service further this season by implementing Alberta's Service Best hospitality program, in



which all staff will be put through the training course in an effort to educate each individual on how to exceed customer expectations.

TRAINING OF STAFF KEY TO SUCCESS

President and CEO Dave Gibson says, "Customer service has always been a top priority at Marmot Basin. We've always boasted about the friendliness of our staff, and we plan to prove to our guests that service at our ski area will not only improve, but we hope to set service standards within the ski and snowboard industry." In its commitment towards the highest level of customer service, focus will also be placed on pre-season

hiring, training all supervisors and managers, and implementing customer service standards into all job descriptions around the resort.

THE NATIONAL PARK EXPERIENCE

Marmot Basin is also focusing on heritage tourism in an effort to provide visitors with a complete 'national park' experience. Marmot Basin provides information on the Park's heritage to its entire staff, and encourages all its employees to share their knowledge

with guests to the area. Many visitors to the park wish to learn all they can about the destination to which they travel, and Marmot Basin recognizes the importance of educating all visitors on the special and unique aspects of Jasper National Park.

Jasper and Marmot Basin have managed to balance an unspoiled and natural 'national park' experience with a world-class ski and snowboard experience for its visitors. By growing in small steps, the ski area hopes to continue to offer its guests the best skiing and snowboarding experience of their lives, while still remaining a protected winter paradise.

Rob Ellen
sales@skimarmot.com

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The key, reiterates the President of the Canadian Ski Council, Colin Chedore, is for "resorts to offer visitors other amenities."

QUÉBEC FACES SKIER DECLINE

Perhaps hardest hit in participation has been Québec, the province that's suffered a 9 per cent decrease in skier/rider visits over the past five years. "There was a decline from 1990 to 1997 because of demographics," says Claude Péloquin, head of the Québec Ski Areas' Association. "We have the same number of skiers but they're skiing less during the season."

It's a stat that's encouraged RCR, owners of Mont-Sainte-Anne and Stoneham, to exploit outside markets for new visitors. "The U.S. market," says Guy Desrosiers, head of RCR's eastern development, "has big potential." What's more, Desrosiers says RCR is confident its proposed new villages for Sainte-Anne and Stoneham will attract new business. Plus, he says, recent information on Canadian demographics points to a rise in the number of teens taking to the slopes – an increase Desrosiers expects will be as big as the Baby Boomer phenomenon of the last generation. Supporting that is PMB 2000 reports of a 21 per cent increase in snowboarders over 1999.

And while Claude Péloquin says there's not much new planned for other Québec resorts this season, he reminds us Intrawest continues to infuse cash into Tremblant, and Charlevoix's Le Massif has massive plans to qualify as a ski race training centre with a new lift, new terrain and a new daylodge.

CANADA CAN NOW COMPETE IN ANY MARKET

Indeed, it is the best of times and the worst of times for Canadian skiing. There's much ballyhoo in B.C., a lot going on in Alberta. And despite roller coaster ups and downs, Ontario and Québec are pushing ahead. Says Jimmie Spencer, head of the CWSAA and Chair of the Canadian Ski Council: "Canada is able to compete now with anyone, and we're very optimistic about the future."

Lori Knowles
is a freelance writer
specializing in skiing
and the ski industry

Newfoundland? Skiing? But of course!

Newfoundland may not be the destination the average skier thinks of when planning a winter vacation, but it very possibly should be. With over 1600 feet vertical lift and 16 feet of snow per winter, Marble Mountain near Cornerbrook is right in there when it comes to competitive destinations.

Marble boasts the only detachable quad lift in Atlantic Canada, and over 150 acres of ski-able terrain. Back in the early 1990s, the provincial government invested heavily into developing what had for 30-some years been a local (Newfoundland) treasure, largely developed and operated by volunteers and clubs. Now,

new lifts, modern grooming equipment, and a 54,000 square-foot lodge with a 1000-seat capacity entertainment area have brought the mountain services into the same league as many of the giants in Canada.

Marc Sexton, Manager of Marblewood Village Resort near the base of the mountain, told *Communique* that "there are almost 1200 pillows" (over 500 rooms) within four miles of the ski hill. The City of Cornerbrook, the adjacent major community, has at least a dozen accommodation facilities including brand hotels like Holiday Inn and Best Western. The Marblewood Village Resort itself has 56 beds, housed in deluxe suites.

Air travel access is through the Deer Lake airport, served by scheduled service from Halifax (the main gateway). However, Canada 3000 and Royal have been putting large-aircraft charter services into Deer Lake as well, with direct flights out of Toronto costing as little as \$400.

Sexton, and other accommodation and tourism service providers in the area, have been concentrating scant marketing dollars within the Atlantic Canada region. While there was a major marketing push into developing markets (Boston, Toronto) back in the mid-nineties, a couple of bad seasons caused a re-thinking of priorities "for the moment".

The area markets itself as Newfoundland's best kept secret; it could well be that it is one of Canada's!

www.marblemountain.com