

Skiers spending fewer days on the slopes

By Kathryn Reed

TRUCKEE – Money isn't keeping people off the ski slopes. It's that they have so many more options when it comes to how to spend their time.

That is something ski resort officials are trying to wrap their heads around.

Michael Reitzell, president of the California Ski Industry Association, said that while millennials are now the largest segment of skiers/snowboarders on the slopes, they are not participating as many days as baby boomers do. Baby boomers average 10 days a season on the mountain, while millennials are there half as many.

Nadia Guerriero, vice president and general manager of Northstar, talked about how people are looking for unique experiences. The runs themselves during a normal day are not always enough to keep people's attention anymore.

Daily Champagne, opportunities for first tracks, special groomed runs – these are some of the ways Northstar is trying to add to the experience.

Reitzell and Guerriero were joined by Dave Rathbun from Sugar Bowl-Royal Gorge, and Casey Blann with Squaw Valley-Alpine Meadows, as the guest speakers at the Truckee Chamber of Commerce breakfast on Nov. 14.

Reitzell threw out the following stats from 2016-17:

- 7 million skier visits in California/Nevada; (In 2015-16 there were 7.3 million and 4.4 million in 2015-16.)

- 42 percent of visits were from season passholders
- 6 unscheduled closed days, which was double from the prior season
- snowboarding is up from 34.2 percent to 34.7 percent
- nationally, there were 54.7 skier visits, up 3.7 percent from 2015-16.

People waiting to have children and having fewer of them are contributing factors to a decline in young people learning the sport.

Guerriero said one trend is “the shift toward time being more scarce than money.”

To combat that sentiment, she said Northstar is “encouraging guests to come midweek for an easy, stress free experience.” This way people will have more time to actually ski because it’s less crowded.

Rathbun said Sugar Bowl is doing what it can to make the experience at the resort off Interstate 80 more pleasant this season. Simply adding more snow removal equipment to plow the road and parking lot will go a long way. The 795 inches the resort received last winter at times made it near impossible for skiers to get to the resort, let alone park once they got there.

Sugar Bowl tends to rely on day skiers from the Sacramento area. They aren’t taking public transit even if it were available.

Making the start of their day stress free is one of the ways to improve guest services.

Squaw Valley also recognizes it has a traffic issue, in particular on Highway 89 and then the road leading to the resort. Blann said a pilot program will start this season

where a shuttle bus will have an exclusive lane. He said the resort is working with Placer County to improve the traffic quagmire.

Squaw also had a parking issue last season; to the point a snow melting mechanism was leased to get rid of the white stuff in the parking lot, and snow was also trucked out.

An issue that crosses generational lines is that people want to be connected on the slopes.

Sugar Bowl is working with Verizon to put in a transponder at one of the lodges. Reception at Alpine is near non-existent. They, too, are talking to Verizon. AT&T has talked about putting in a tower at Ward Peak. Northstar is in good shape, but is still looking to put in mono poles places.

Squaw and Northstar open Friday, with Sugar Bowl yet to set a date.