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RINKSIDER

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2012-2013 Annual Buying Guide.....p. 24

Keeping up with social media.....p. 9

Once rink operators have established a Web site to reach customers, the next step usually involves social media. In the past couple of years Facebook and Twitter have become standard fare for marketing-savvy rink owners and operators. Now take a look at the newest trend: Pinterest.

'Goin' fer da gold'...p.12

In Tennessee, skaters at a small town rink took the Summer Olympics down a notch with redneck-styled games, medals and food. This fun idea is one that other operators may want to copy!

New rink opens in Ga.....p. 17

A three-generation roller skating family has opened a new rink in Georgia that will include some rather new and unique offerings. Toddler Time parties, 3D laser tag and party room and adult snack fare such as bruschetta and beer are just some of the big draws.

Patience and flexibility help rink-school partnerships make the grade

By *Connie Evener*

When rinks team up with schools, the results are frequently win-win situations. For rinks, it's a great way to attract new customers. For schools, skating fundraisers are a way to bring in extra cash. And for many stu-

dents, school-sponsored events provide an introduction to the wonderful world of roller skating.

Two Oklahoma operators who have worked with their local schools agreed to talk with The Rinksideer about their experiences. Here's what Veronica Hunt of Skatetown in Enid and Janet Hardridge of

Southwestern Skate Center in Oklahoma City had to say:

"A lot of schools tell me they just do it for the community aspect and that the money is a bonus," said Veronica Hunt, who with her husband, Harry, and daughter, Amber, owns Skatetown Enid. Many schools, she says, want to create a sense of community and are struggling for parental participation in PTAs, so she markets the fundraisers as an opportunity for parents to get to know each other, as well as their children's teachers, outside the school setting.

Schools are bombarded by businesses offering 10 percent for fundraisers, so the Hunts upped the ante to between 25 and 40 percent of the proceeds, based on attendance. After eight years, the program is going strong. As a matter of fact, the Hunts are considering several ways to expand it.

Up until now, school fundraiser night was Thursday, but so many local schools want to participate that the Hunts will probably add Tuesdays this year. When they bought the rink ten years ago, schools



During a local elementary school fundraiser at Skatetown Enid, Okla., the kids in the classroom with the highest attendance got to duct tape their teacher to the wall.

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Operators and suppliers share their pro shop 'bests'

By *Catherine Bennett*

When customers enter their favorite family recreation center they may be likely to walk past the pro shop without interest, but with the right tactics some rink owners have found effective ways to increase the traffic of people taking interest in skating products.

Multiple factors contribute to a pro shop's appeal to customers, including the display, promotions, online services and a knowledgeable staff, but perhaps the most important part of maintaining a successful pro shop is keeping the displays and products within the pro shop fresh.

Dan Warner, owner and operator of Aurora Skate Center in Aurora, Ill., said he makes sure to re-do his pro shop's display design every few months

to keep customers interested in browsing his selection.

"If they have seen it before, they

will stop looking," Warner said.

Products in the pro shop should be

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Aurora Skate Center's pro shop area is organized, clean and well-stocked.

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School partnerships (cont'd from page 1)

were reluctant to participate. "Most of the schools wouldn't work with us at all, but now after doing this for eight years, almost every elementary school in town is on board. Most of them do a fundraiser every month," said Hunt, noting that they also do fundraisers with churches and civic organizations.

"We haven't done a lot with middle and high schools, but to build

so making life a little easier for teachers is a special priority. "We do passes at Christmas and spring breaks. Christmas was a tough time for Harry because the kids would bring presents and he couldn't afford to give them all something in return. So our Christmas passes say 'Merry Christmas from your teacher,'" said Hunt. "I know a lot of rinks do that, but they may not explain why. We send a letter along with the passes explaining why we do it. We think it makes a difference when the teachers feel you're trying to ease their burden. They start to feel a kinship with you because you care."

In the Oklahoma City area, roughly 100 miles south of Enid, co-owner/manager Janet Hardridge is struggling with declining school participation at Southwestern Skate Center in Oklahoma City, and its sister rink, Skate Moore, in nearby Moore. "The Healthy Lifestyle Skating Program is a really good way to get kids into the rink, to get them to know there's a healthy alternative to lying on the couch," said Hardridge. "Our main goal was to give back to the community, but it was also an inexpensive way to get people in, people who became regular customers and had birthday parties."

From 2005, when they started their Healthy Lifestyle Skating Program, until 2009/2010, participation grew steadily. But in 2010/2011, attendance began to drop. "This past year (2011/2012) has been the worst we've had. Attendance is lower and the response is not as good. It's like they've lost interest," said Hardridge. "It was very, very good for the first six



A Gross Out Party at Skatetown Enid, Okla., included a snack of "eyeballs" made of mushrooms and black olives.

years, but the last two years have been real tough."

The drop doesn't apply just to the Healthy Lifestyle Skating Program, said Hardridge. It's across the board. Demographics in the area around Southwestern Skate and Skate Moore have changed over the last decade. "When we first started up, most of the parents were our customers. Now they've married and had kids, but a lot of them have moved out of the neighborhood," she said. The minorities who now live in the area don't have the same associations with roller skating. "They didn't grow up at the local rink, skating every weekend."

The economy is another factor. "When you've got customers paying with nickels, dimes and pennies, you know they're struggling," said Hardridge. And skate sales, which were very strong four or five years ago, have plummeted. "We're not

selling nearly as many skates, and when we do we're selling lower end skates. If they're \$100, they buy. But if they're more than that, they don't even want to look at them."

Oklahoma City has received a lot of attention for revamping its downtown, but the downtown now pulls business from outlying areas. "Now we've got NBA Basketball, the Oklahoma City Thunders. They made it to the Western Conference finals this year, and everybody was going to the games, going downtown, and that took a lot of our customers," said Hardridge.

Everyone at Southwestern Skate and Skate Moore is working hard with every factor they have control over. "We've kept the rink upgraded. We have brand new skates. We've kept our concession and Stuff Shop up. We've got the latest music, the latest videos and we've put in more projectors," said Hardridge. "We're trying new things, trying to come up with ways to regenerate," she said. In July, when The Rinksider interviewed her, Hardridge was planning a Friday the Thirteenth Late Skate, complete with a haunted house set up in an underground passageway beneath the building.

The Hunts have taken a hit or two as well. Their Summer Fun Camp, a three-way partnership with a local bowling alley and a water park was a huge success. But after a tragic drowning at the water park last summer, participation this year dropped by more than half. To take up the slack, the Hunts agreed to work with a roller derby team. Veronica, at first reluctant, is now the team's most vocal cheerleader. "They totally changed my mind," she said. "They are the nicest people."

Although Skatetown Enid and Southwestern Skate are different in many ways, they do have much in common: their management uses a mixture of patience and flexibility, whether they're working with schools, or coping with events and conditions beyond their control.

“...after doing this for eight years, almost every elementary school in town is on board. Most of them do a fundraiser every month.”

our Friday nights - especially during football season when football Fridays kill us - we're thinking we may do fundraisers for the schools that don't have a football game going that Friday," she said.

Harry Hunt is a former teacher,



Skatetown Enid, Okla. Owner Harry Hunt tries one on for size and gets a big smile from his tiny customer.