

# Successful rinks rely on 'secret shoppers'

By Kathy Bergstrom

**K**evin Baker owns Interskate 91 South in Wilbraham, Mass., but lives in Florida. He visits the rink monthly and relies on managers and staff the rest of the time. Every once in a while Baker would hear from customers about a cold pizza they got at his roller rink or another problem they had. He decided he needed something more.

Three years ago Baker started using a mystery shopping service. Once a month, a mystery shopper visits his rink and reports back on the experience. "I don't even know when they're coming," Baker said. "It kind of gives me a snapshot of what a typical day is at my facility."

A mystery shopper family skates at the rink, orders from the quick-service restaurant, plays laser tag and visits the play area if they have young children.

The shopper's report covers items like cleanliness, food quality and customer service. He pays \$125 per month for the service, which also covers the shopper's expenses. "It's money well spent," Baker said.

Rink operators say using a mystery shopping service is a cost effective way to evaluate their businesses from

a customer's point of view. They say it not only identifies weaknesses but also helps them recognize employees for good performance.

"I think for roller skating it can be a great service because there are a lot of independent operators out there," said Scot Carson, president and general manager of Amusement Advantage Inc., an Arvada, Colo.-based mystery shopping company. "It can be a very inexpensive way to give them eyes in the sky."

Amusement Advantage specializes in the amusement industry and has about 20 roller rink clients, including Interskate 91 South.

Mystery shopping is a valuable service for solo rink operators like Baker, but works just as well for larger operators like Columbus, Ohio-based United Skates of America. The company has 17 rinks across the country and has used mystery shopping services for many years, said Bruce Aster, vice president of operations. "Especially because we're such a large chain of skating rinks it helps us get outside evaluation with a fresh eye," he said.

The company has developed a survey with about 150 points to be measured. "It helps hold our people accountable. Sometimes when the cor-

porate office is coming, people don't behave necessarily the same way that they would" on a typical day, Aster said. "These are totally secret."

"It is a great resource for me as a multiple rink operator," said Charlie

Advantage about a year ago after hearing Baker's praises. Kirchner visits each of his rinks two to three times per week but said the mystery shopping input is invaluable.

When Amusement Advantage



Guests or secret shoppers? You never know at Interskate 91 South in Wilbraham, Mass.

Kirchner, who owns three New Jersey rinks. The rinks Kirchner owns are in suburban Philadelphia and include Deptford Skating and Fun Center in Deptford, International Sports Centre in Cherry Hill and International Sports Centre in Mount Laurel.

He started using Amusement

starts working with a rink, the company finds out what the owner wants to measure, whether it's customer service, loss prevention, up-selling or cleanliness.

"We try to put together an evaluation for them that's going to target the

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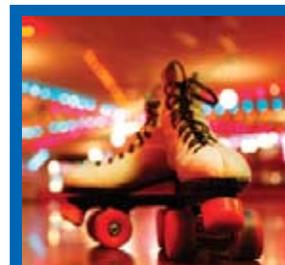


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