

Plan now to make next summer your most profitable one ever

By *Connie Evener*

Summertime and the livin' is easy, or so the old song goes. But if you manage a roller rink, summertime is anything but easy. Larry Sanford, and his wife, Judy, have managed skating rinks for more than 40 years and currently own Crystal Palace Rancho in Las Vegas. Traditionally, he said, "There's a contingent of rinks in the country that just close in the summer." But in today's economic climate, a growing number of operators are meeting the challenge of keeping their rinks profitable through the summer. The four rinks we contacted cited day care, summer camps and field trips as part of the solution, but every facility had its own unique approach.

At Crystal Palace Rancho, the desert heat drives in plenty of daytime skaters, including lots of day care groups. That's the upside. The downside is that "you work twice as many hours, so you have twice the payroll, and your air conditioning bill triples," said Sanford.

So Sanford works hard – and smart

"If we don't stay on top of advertising, social media and making sure kids have fun when they're here, they're going to go somewhere else."

– to get more skaters into the building when business typically quiets down and the air conditioners are still chugging away. For the last 15 years he's offered a summer punch card good for just those Wednesday evenings and Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday afternoons. The \$18 for 6 punches isn't a major revenue enhancer. What makes the difference is that most kids are handed a \$20 bill for the day, which they spend on their skate rental (which is extra), at the snack bar and on video games. "The punch cards work for us," Sanford said. "They put people in the building, and you know the old saying, 'A crowd draws a crowd.'"

The Skate Zone in Lafayette, La.,



A young girl learns to skate at the Star City Skate Center of Roanoke, Va.

owned by Frank and Debbie Torries, also sees an increase in daytime skaters during the hot, humid Louisiana summer. The population of Lafayette itself (now around 130,000), plus the surrounding parish, is growing fast because of the nearby oil fields. Competition for recreational dollars is at an all-time high.

"I bet there are 20 fun jumps and they're getting ready to open a Sky Zone (trampoline facility). (The Lafayette area has) two bowling centers, three movie theaters, a dress-up company, a place that has clay modeling parties, a rock climbing place and an ice rink - and every one of them does birthday parties," said Torries. "If we don't stay on top of advertising, social media and making sure kids have fun when they're here, they're going to go somewhere else."

To keep his share of the birthday party pie, Torries offers a 20 percent weekday afternoon discount during his slowest months, April and May, August and September. And he's working now to expand his private parties, especially corporate parties, meetings and conferences.

Torries has tried to do a summer camp several times in the past. The first obstacle was lack of a bus to transport kids to and from the rink. The second obstacle was the introduction of a city parks and recreation program with subsidized fees so low that Skate Zone couldn't begin to compete. But Skate Zone now hosts field trips for that city program, as well as for a number of local day cares and summer camps sponsored by YMCA, Boys and Girls Clubs and local churches. "Our summers stay pretty full because all these groups bus the kids in and bring them

skating," said Torres.

"I start calling them in April, and of course, a lot of them call us. The downside is the scheduling, which is sometimes a nightmare," he said. Unfortunately no group wants to keep the same schedule from one year to the next and the city recreation staff doesn't open its doors or do any scheduling until June. Torries appreciates their business, but the kids in the city program tend to be more boisterous and less well-behaved, so he schedules them for times when the other groups aren't in the rink because "The last thing I want to do is make my day cares mad," he said.

For several years Veronica and Harry Hunt's Skatetown Enid collaborated with a nearby bowling alley and a waterpark for their Summer Fun Camp, which proved very successful. But after a drowning at the water park, sign-ups dropped. Then, just when the stigma had faded and they thought it might be time to bring back the Summer Fun Camp, there was a murder at the bowling alley. Having two incidents like that in Enid, Okla., is like lightning striking in the same place twice, so the Summer Fun Camp won't return. "That's something you need to be concerned about when you collaborate with others," Veronica Hunt noted. "If something happens, it could affect you, too."

Hunt believes the recent slide in their day care numbers could be due to a growing number of government subsidized programs that parents choose because the out-of-pocket cost is so much lower. Last fall Hunt was already chewing over ideas for the summer of 2015. "All the schools are doing summer schools now, so we're going to look into how to connect with the summer school programs and see if we can get

them to come here," she said.

Hunt also passed on an idea given to her by Brian Whitson of Skate World in Branson, Mo., where summer camps abound. Whitson lets all the summer camps know that Skate World is the perfect option when their outdoor activities get rained out. "He makes sure to accommodate them because they bring in such large numbers," said Hunt, who also suggests that her local summer camps and day cares add Skatetown Enid as the "in case of rain alternative" on their field trip permission forms.

As Sanford said, a crowd draws a crowd, but there's an advantage to joining a crowd, too. Mason Drew, event coordinator at Star City Skate in Roanoke, Va., keeps a sharp eye on the area's many kid oriented events like Kite Fest and the Touch a Truck Program (where kids are invited to get up close and personal with fire trucks, ambulances and police cars). "We go out to all different kinds of festivals and hand out free skate passes," said Drew, noting that Star City Skate's speed team frequently signs up for parades, where they also hand out free passes.

Star City Skate is under the same ownership as Honeytree Early Learning Centers, which has a dozen facilities in the Roanoke area, and that's a nice advantage for the rink. All summer long, said Drew, Star City Skate hosts Honeytree groups throughout the week. The groups arrive early and stay four to five hours, dividing their time between Honeytree initiated activities and skating or using the play area. "We have four or five other day care groups that also come here on a regular basis," said Drew. "Our summertime goes very well - and in the wintertime, it just gets better."