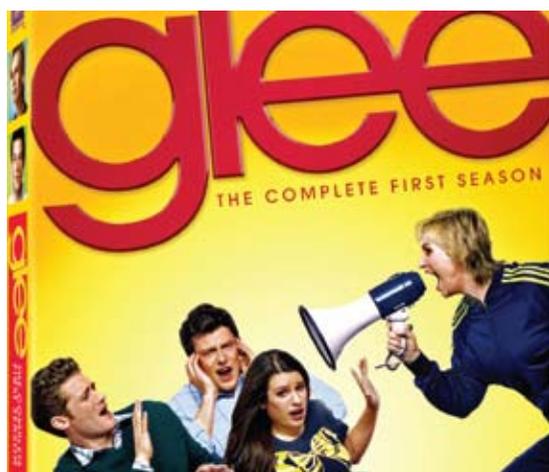


ney Princess dolls from Mattel enjoyed a 7 percent rise in sales last year, and Disney looks to have another winner on its hands with its latest doll line, Monster High dolls, also licensed to toy giant Mattel. Further, Mattel is seeing first-rate demand for its licensed Toy Story 3 dolls, as well as both its Thomas and Friends line and its World Wrestling Entertainment collection. (American Girl dolls are a bit pricey for rink usage, although sales of this line did see a 2 percent rise for 2010, defying the economic picture.) Overall, these select dolls and their licensing should enhance rink profitability and popularity throughout 2011.

**‘Glee’**

It’s becoming tougher than ever for new TV series to stand out from the clut-



ter of literally hundreds of cable channels, the norm these days. Despite that obstacle, the new Glee series on the Fox network has worked its way out of the pack and has risen to rarified star-cult status. Demographics show that Glee is especially popular with girls ages 8 to 10,

**Secret shopper** (cont'd from page 23)

area they’re most interested in,” Carson said. The reports provide a broad spectrum of the entire operation but focus on the owner’s specific goals.

Secret shoppers receive detailed instructions for what to evaluate when they visit the facility and submit their results through the company’s Web site. Cost ranges from \$50 to \$100 per shop plus reimbursement for the entertainment. Most rinks choose to be evaluated once a month.

Amusement Advantage hires most of its shoppers through its Web site. The company is a member of the Mystery Shopping Providers Association, which certifies mystery shoppers.

Carson said association membership is one factor rink operators should consider when choosing a mystery shopping service. They also should look at the company’s experience working with similar facilities, length of time in business and whether it had a good source of shoppers in the area, he said.

It’s also important to remember

and after that, just about all pre-teens and young teens are Glee fans. No doubt you can put licensed Glee merchandise to work for you, and those school and weekend sessions look ideal for Glee exposure, as with drawings and giveaways. Perhaps you can tweak your birthday packages with Glee merchandise, as well.

**Taylor Swift mania**

Taylor Swift has rocketed to country-pop music superstardom since her debut in 2006 and several subsequent Grammy awards, and that’s great news for you, too. After all, this singer-songwriter has issued several top-selling recordings — Speak Now is her third and latest album — and her attractive looks and demeanor have been genuine plusses, too. This holds for rural and suburban audiences alike, most notably. Get some of her CDs for any sessions having a strong teen component (many school sessions, of course) and work your announcements for Taylor Swift drawings. In a large number of communities, from Florida to California and from Texas to Minnesota, a promotion of a Taylor Swift Session should do wonders for you. She should be a sure draw for school sessions, of course, as well as family skates and open weekends. See what kind of dollar-friendly “music” Taylor Swift can generate for you this winter.

**Beverage news**

•Coca-Cola has stepped up with

that most mystery shoppers do the work to provide cheap entertainment for their families and not to make a lot of money, Carson explained. While they do provide detailed reports, it’s not like having a private investigator doing a detailed audit.

Carson recommended that rink operators keep the big picture in mind as they read the reports. “One report in isolation may not be the best tool to make radical changes. You want to look at trends over time,” he said.

It’s also important to use the reports as a positive tool with employees, rink operators agreed. Operators said they recognize and reward employees identified in the reports for providing exemplary service.

At Interskate 91 South, employees are rewarded with \$25 if they are identified as the “employee of the day” in the secret shopper report. On the flip side, employees who get negative reports are pulled aside privately.

One of the rink’s reports identi-

its beverage-fitness theme, joining the national fitness chain RetroFitness to make Coca-Cola beverages No. 1 in the world of fitness. You, too, can play the fitness angle, so talk to your beverage and fountain supplier for related promotional ideas and materials. Among the company brands touted by Coca-Cola are Vitaminwater, Vitaminwater Zero, Dasani, PowerAde, PowerAde Zero, Coca-Cola, Coke Zero and Diet Coke, in addition to any of their energy drinks in your market; for example, Coca-Cola has introduced Vitaminwater stur-D, which contains vitamin D in a blue agave-, passionfruit- and citrus-flavored blend, and it should roll out in January.

•The Dr Pepper Snapple Group reports sales of their numerous carbonated and non-carbonated varieties rising 3 percent. This bodes very well, given the dog-eat-dog competition in the beverage industry. You ought to get a sales boost after talking with your Dr Pepper-Snapple wholesaler and devising some in-rink promotions.

•The Coca-Cola Company is going global with a mammoth new advertising campaign this winter, and the featured music is by the Grammy-winning band Train. Coke should be glad to help your rink with promotional materials, incentives and discounts, so look into this A-S-A-P.

•McDonald’s is going with an expanded cold-drink menu, after success in 2010 with its new ice frappes. The proof: Sales rose a store-average 4 percent after the introduction of the frappes, and that has everyone talking. Next up for McDonald’s: smoothies and premium beverages, to broaden the company’s appeal beyond its traditional base. This expansive, something-for-everyone approach to beverage sales should improve profit margins. To these ends, McDonald’s plans a major marketing campaign for frappes and smoothies, and that commitment should spur your own customers to look for new beverage sensations in 2011 when they come

fied an employee who went out of her way to make sure a family had a good time, helping the children on the skate floor and carrying their food to their table. “Those are the heroes we don’t know about, and we never would have known about it had it not come up in this report,” Baker said.

Employees at Kirchner’s three rinks receive \$10 gift cards if they’re identified as providing good service in the reports.

Employees who receive a negative report receive a warning and are taken off the schedule if they receive a second negative report. “We’re in a competitive market for fun and exercise and birthday parties,” Kirchner said. “We’re not letting that happen.”

Employees at United Skates of America are told when they’re hired that the company uses a mystery shopping service, and employees shouldn’t be put off by it, Aster said. Most customer service oriented businesses use secret shoppers, he said. “You’ve got to be able to see things from a customer’s

**SUPPLIER CORNER**

**Luigino’s Mini Challenge Adjustable still a favorite**

Luigino’s ‘Mini Challenge’ Adjustable is a runaway favorite of parents AND kids alike! First introduced in sizes 12-2 one year ago, we now offer the Mini Challenge Adjustable in sizes 2-5 to meet customer demand. This nylon composite shoe is unique in many ways. Parents do not run the risk of their child outgrowing the skate shortly after purchase. Another notable feature is the resale value. Rinks or parents can pass the skate on to multiple skaters with varying foot sizes and are not tied into one option. Dealers love this skate for its comfort and ankle support, plus they can stock just two items and fit multiple sizes (12jr - 5).



through your doors. After all, McDonald’s ads have impact that knows few bounds, and that should translate into better beverage income for your rink.

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point of view without the employees knowing that they’re being observed.”

Baker said his employees don’t have a problem with the secret shopping concept and even try to figure out who it is. “They think it’s kind of fun, and they make a game out of it,” he said.

Operators said the problems revealed at the rinks have included potholes in the parking lot, food quality issues, the wrong music being played or employees giving items to customers who don’t have enough redemption tickets. At Interskate 91 South, the rink implemented a policy requiring all birthday party inquiries to be answered by managers to ensure callers receive the correct information.

Kirchner said he’s implemented a strict requirement that employees wear nametags as a result of the service, and it’s one of the items checked in the reports. “There is no question in my mind that it is a very good barometer for me,” Kirchner said. “It absolutely helps me with running my business.”