

Skaters at Broken Arrow, Okla. rink text music requests, win prizes

By Suzy Weinland

Well, in this age of technology, where even college kids on a date can be seen texting each other over dinner, being able to speak the language of your customer can make all the difference in the success of your rink.

At Broken Arrow Roller Sports in the suburb of Broken Arrow, Oklahoma, just outside of Tulsa, owner and operator Darrin Johnson has jumped on board the technology train. The rink is open 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. daily, and during his sessions on Wednesday, June 3, skaters began texting the deejay with their song requests.

"I watch kids (texting) while they are skating. All Friday night they text each other because it's easier than talking, when the music is loud," explained Johnson of his decision to promote to them via text messaging.

"The incentive is that randomly I'll choose phone numbers to give away free passes, and once a month a free pair of skates," he said. "I have a caveat that in order to qualify they have to permit me to return text messages – that way I can send them information on all-night skates and other specials that are coming up."

Johnson uses the text messages to find out whether or not his DJs are playing the music his customers want to hear; to see if there are any songs missing from his repertoire, he said. "The first time we tried it I got 15 song requests. A couple of songs I don't have, so I know I need to go get them."

When it comes time to throw out a free pass or two, Johnson sends out a text message stating, "Congratulations! You've won a free pass. Bring your phone up to the office and show us this message."

"Of course, I know what phone number it came from, so I know whether it's been forwarded or passed around 'cause I only give out one or two passes a session. Plus I put a little code at the end – like the date in reverse," said Johnson.

His daughter convinced him to set up a separate line for rink texting. "I have a separate line through AT&T, and for \$9.99 (a month) we get unlimited text messaging," said Johnson. "Then, I capture those numbers and I can use either that phone to send them return messages, or I can use the program called constantcontact.com." This is a web-based text generator. For a set price per month the user can store phone numbers and e-mail addresses and produce mass mailings.

"I can still have my own personal line in my pocket and hand (the rink)

games. We usually have one TV tuned to Spongebob," shared Johnson. "I watch

redemption game areas.

Johnson has owned the rink for 2 1/2 years. He had a tough go at the start. The former owner was charged as a pedophile, so Johnson had to do his due diligence to get things back on track. "I realized that with some good marketing I could make it bounce back. We had lost some of our Friday night crowd and all of our PTA/School parties." Johnson definitely made good, receiving the City of Broken Arrow's PTA Partner of the Year Award for 2008.

The rink primarily caters to daycare groups, according to Johnson. On this Wednesday when he began the texting, he hosted around 150 kids from daycares around Tulsa. "The songs today were very Hip-Hop oriented because the majority of the children were from the northern side of Tulsa. Tomorrow and the next day, when we're having all the south Broken Arrow kids, it will be more Rock oriented."

And the best thing is it will stir up free, word-of-mouth advertising. "They'll go and tell their friends 'it's so cool, we get to text message our request.'"



A DJ at Broken Arrow Roller Sports, Broken Arrow, Okla., checks a music request sent via text message.

phone with the text messaging line to my head DJ or manager."

Johnson also uses text messaging to communicate with his local PTAs to remind them of upcoming parties. "Nobody wants to use the phone anymore," he chuckled.

Aside from texting, but in order to keep current with today's technology, Johnson uses MySpace and Facebook. He admits, however, that he mostly uses Facebook to keep in touch with former skating buddies at other rinks and that it was difficult to get skaters to sign up on his MySpace site to receive info about upcoming events and promotions at the rink.

"(With texting) they want to do a request – it's killing them to do a request! And it's cool 'cause now I can separate the music requests by session," suggested Johnson. "I'll know if on Saturday afternoons the requests are more '80s and '90s-oriented from the parents, or if Friday nights are the more Hip-Hop/Top 40 stuff. So I'll be able to differentiate what songs I should be playing when."

Last year Johnson said his rink skated 66,000 (paid admissions) from a total population of 100,000 from Broken Arrow and an additional pull of 600,000 from Tulsa and surrounding areas. This doesn't include the parents – who don't pay – who may join their kids on the floor. For the parents who prefer to watch or get some work done, he offers them free WiFi and coffee. He also has four televisions playing at any given time.

"Dads will come in and watch the

some of these parents and grandparents reach into their wallet and hand the child money without even taking their eyes off the TV or computer." So, the free admission pays off at the snack bar and

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