



## Case Study: The Snow Centre

With the stated intent to be Britain's premier indoor snowsports destination, and providing "the perfect slope, the perfect snow, the perfect location", The Snow Centre opened its doors to the public in May 2009. Situated on the site of the old Hemel dry ski slope, this superior modern facility delivers an Alpine experience in Hertfordshire. Within easy reach of the capital, it offers the very best in training, recreational snowsports and family fun.

The numbers attached to the venue are impressive: 2,500 tonnes of real snow spread over 8000 square metres of slopes; a 160m main slope and Britain's largest indoor lesson slope of 100m; plans for around 250,000 visitors per year. The capital investment attached to the business is impressive too: £23m .

### Business issues

"That means that we have some big numbers coming back in terms of capital repayment," says The Snow Centre's Commercial and Operations Director David Surrey . "Large climate controlled leisure facilities like The Snow Centre require a lot of energy to maintain the environment, so we also have some significant operational expenses."

It is an economic reality that every business today needs to drive costs down and maximise the opportunities for revenue; however, this is seldom truer than in the leisure industry. "Recessions are especially tough for the leisure industry. People tighten their belts so we're competing for a smaller pot of disposable income from fewer people," says David Surrey.

"One of the things about operating a facility like this is that there are a number of factors that determine operational efficiency. Some carry the potential to erode profitability and impact milestones in the progress of the business - like loan repayment schedules."

### Driving costs down

"One critical factor originates in the processes of managing customers through the touch points with the operation here. For instance we have to sell tickets, take bookings for sundries like skis and boots, issue the tickets and control access to the facility," says David Surrey. "Depending on customer needs, we have to assign instructors of the appropriate standard and make sure they're on slope at the right time with the right visitors. And that's before a ski touches the snow."

"This sounds pretty straightforward, but across 180 instructors and an average of 5000-plus visitors per week the process flows that make the operation run smoothly can add up to a lot of staff hours. We need to make sure the processes behind our operation don't undermine our profitability," David Surrey says.

### Driving revenue up

For leisure facilities like The Snow Centre it's a fact: Every minute that the facility is not running at full capacity is revenue missed. Indeed, below a certain utilisation level, it will be costing rather than generating money, so a central focus across the business is maximising utilisation and optimising customer throughput.

Chief Executive Ann Horner explains "As the teams set to work on the business plan we recognised that we needed an efficient technology platform that could enable us to run our business in the most efficient way. The key to maximising revenue was good forward...

...visibility- the ability to assess our resource utilisation and see where there is surplus capacity. We then needed to be able to market this un used capacity to appropriate customer segments in a way that is low cost, timely and efficient.”

## The Solution

“This is a fairly unique business, and we couldn’t buy what we wanted straight off the shelf. So we began to search for a technology partner that could build what we needed,” says Ann Horner.

Ann Horner continues: “Having identified the relationship between efficiently managing customers through the business, capacity planning and the need to market unused capacity effectively, we knew what to look for in a partner; it needed to specialise in CRM data-base driven systems that close the loop and bring day to day visitor operations together with marketing.”

“We were introduced to Green 4 Solutions by a mutual acquaintance and, as the dialogue between us developed, it became clear that their skills and industry specific expertise in providing CRM solutions could deliver a customised system built for our business. Their development platform enables us to mitigate or eliminate many of the risks that bespoke systems development traditionally carries,” says Horner.

The Green 4 Leisure solution operates end to end, accommodating the spectrum of functions required to smoothly and efficiently operate the facility. The solution is built on the Microsoft Dynamics CRM platform. Green 4 have extended the core Microsoft product to include marketing tools.

This integrates elements such as online booking functionality, email communications and esurveys, along with data profiling, segmentation and, most importantly, rules based communication automation. Together these automate booking acknowledgements and post visit follow up.

To the benefit of customers and the business, not only does Green 4 Leisure simplify the process of booking onto an event, it means that the booking is recorded directly in CRM and becomes part of the marketing process to trigger informational communications and post event surveys.

The system accommodates customer bookings through the call centre or through online self-service. This allows ski, boot and accessory reservations to be made, and matches ski instructors to the level of tuition reserved. The system provides instructors with diary schedules and core administration staff with up to date capacity planning information.

Building out further in to the area of day to day operations, access control is linked to the system. Kiosks issue pre-booked tickets to visitors and turnstiles control entry to the facility. “This process automation of ticketing and access frees up our staff and speeds up visitor flow,” David Surrey says.

On the other side of the Green 4 Leisure solution sits the enterprise marketing element. “The integration between day to day operations and marketing operations lets us see where our spare capacity lies and we can promote this to appropriate customer segments through well planned and controlled e-marketing activity. For instance we know that if we have unfilled level 3&4 tuition slots we can market them to customers that have previously completed level 1&2 courses,” says David Surrey.

One benefit of Green 4 Leisure that makes the system particularly user friendly is the ability to provide customised user interfaces on screen. This allows user information to be presented in a way that matches the needs of users. For example, operational staff can see planning for slopes and instructors at a glance, presented through a familiar Microsoft Outlook style calendar. User

## **Results and Future Development**

### **Hitting the big numbers...**

The Snow Centre closed out the first year of operations with attendance of around 300,000 - up 50,000 on target. This is a good indicator of the effectiveness of the team's marketing efforts and the Green 4 system behind it. Another noteworthy statistic is that at any one time a duty team of just two people is co-ordinating the schedules of 180 instructors with an average of 5000-plus visitors a week.

"With the solution Green 4 developed and maintain for us we've got efficiency interwoven into the business. In addressing the need to create this level of efficiency, they have also given us the capability to maximise revenue and hit our big numbers," says David Surrey.

### **Risk reduction**

In terms of the risk associated with developing bespoke CRM centric business systems, Ann Horner is candid. "I think it's a fair representation to say that IT Directors are not entirely comfortable with the concept of commissioning custom software systems. I think the experience of some is that you spend a lot of time, effort and money but you do not get what you need."

It is claimed that developing custom solutions using the Dynamics CRM platform cuts development time in half, and the experience of The Snow Centre fits in with this assertion. From first consultation with Green 4 to project implementation, the initial system was delivered in 16 weeks.

As the business develops the powerful trend spotting capability, that stems from the reporting tools available in the Microsoft Dynamics CRM database, is certain to reveal greater insight into visitor behaviour.

"This may lead us to re-think some aspects of the system. This is another risk factor because system-wide changes are something that traditional approaches to custom software development may not easily permit. In the hands of Green 4, Microsoft Dynamics CRM can readily accommodate changes that are needed that may have not have been originally considered," says Horner.

### **Customer experience**

The reality of maximising profitability in business can make it seem that customer considerations are secondary; however, in the case of The Snow Centre that would be completely wrong.

"First and foremost The Snow Centre is all about delivering a great Alpine customer experience. I think customers recognise when they get value for money. Thanks to the total integration we have achieved with the Green 4 Leisure system, our customers get the most out of their leisure time by enjoying efficient hitch free visits," says David Surrey.

"I mean who wants to waste time queuing or waiting for the right boots when you have paid for time on the slopes?"

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