

LEARN TO SKATE USA

Best Practices

Learn to Skate USA, powered by Toyota, is built on the premise of offering positive, rewarding and safe skating experiences to participants of all ages. How well this program is administered will not only affect every rink manager, figure skating club, hockey association, skating instructor and community but will also directly impact the millions of people who are interested in learning to skate.

The best practices of successful Learn to Skate USA programs are comprised of four key ingredients:

- Outstanding customer service – from registration to re-enrollment
- Tremendous staff – well trained and customer oriented
- Creative and consistent programming – adds excitement and clarity
- Rewards and recognition – where the key ingredient is fun!

More simply put, Learn to Skate USA offers the program as a tool, and it is up to the skating school staff to efficiently implement the use of this tool to cultivate a successful Learn to Skate USA program. Success is not measured by the amount of new customers that come into the rink but rather through the ability of the staff to keep skaters interested so that they return for subsequent lessons.

CUSTOMER SERVICE

When families walk into an ice rink for a skating lesson, it is imperative that they feel welcome. Great customer service begins when a patron is made to feel special and continues as they feel valued as an integral part of the business.

The key components of superior customer service relating directly to your group lesson program are the following:

- Reliable and punctual classes that always start and end on time
- Awareness of customer expectations and goals
- Exceeding customer expectations
- Teaching correct skating techniques
- Communication about upcoming events, changes in the schedule and promotions
- Listening to your customers and correcting misinformation or mistakes immediately
- Fair price for services with the inclusion of public skating practice passes and free rental skates as a benefit of enrollment

Some tips for better customer service in your Learn to Skate USA program:

ORGANIZATION

Keep class sizes to a recommended 10:1 ratio of skaters to instructor for all introductory levels and 7:1 for all preschool ages for added supervision and a 30-minute duration. If you need to have larger class sizes, then add a trained assistant for every two skaters above the recommended amount. Forty-five-minute classes are ideal for all levels above Basic 4 and specialty classes. Learn to Skate USA sessions can safely hold up to 80-120 people on the ice surface if space is managed correctly.

Allow five minutes in between lesson times for staff to pick up their class rink side and drop them off again. This helps with congestion while allowing safe transportation of the skaters to their class zones. Have all staff members (instructors, assistants or volunteers) wear some type of identifiable jacket so customers know immediately who is on staff and where to turn if questions should arise.

COMMUNICATION

Keeping participants updated is very difficult and is often an area where the greatest pitfalls tend to occur. This obstacle can be overcome through information being listed on brightly colored flyers, handouts and notices posted on bulletin boards, in lobby areas, on the website, at the skate rental counter, included in email blasts or sent out via text message. Staffing the registration/welcome table each week with a knowledgeable employee or volunteer to answer questions is also helpful in keeping the lines of communication clear.

Class registrations should be taken by phone, mail, internet, in person or on a walk-in basis. Waiting lists are not recommended, but if one must be used, be sure to prorate the registration fee if the skater begins class after the session has started. In addition to class registration fees, charging a yearly program registration fee will help pay for annual membership dues to organizations, provide a little extra income for use in advertising or can be used to cover overhead expenses. Your brochure should include all the information applicable for the entire year so participants may plan for each session and any special events such as competitions, exhibitions and ice shows.

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OFFER INCENTIVES/REWARDS TO THE SKATERS

Every registered member receives a record book to track his or her progress with stickers after skill mastery. Have instructors sign the skaters' books following completion of the level and post a success chart at the rink for everyone to observe the progress of the skaters in your program. Include a "Brag Board" for all the students who have passed either Basic 6 or Free Skate 6, or those that have advanced and graduated to your figure skating club, hockey program or speed skating club.

Distribute report cards both midway and at the end of each session with comments about their performance, things they did really well and tips for improvement. Give encouragement stickers to the skaters for good effort, good behavior and a job well done. Give out the badges when they pass a level free of charge to the skaters. This is a nominal cost to your program but is invaluable to the participants (plus free advertising around town).

STAFFING CONSIDERATIONS

A successful Learn to Skate USA program requires a great deal of planning and organization. Hiring a qualified skating director is vital to the success of the program, as it is his or her responsibility to implement, oversee and coordinate the execution of activities included within the program offerings. Great skating directors not only possess an extensive skating background and a through understanding of the program but are also capable of effectively designing, overseeing, promoting, marketing and overseeing all program operations.

The director must also have strong interpersonal, administrative, organizational and customer service skills. He or she should be held accountable for the overall success of the program while striving toward building/maintaining strong relationships with all "next step" programs.

There are three main areas of responsibility that exist for skating directors:

1. Administrative duties
2. Membership
3. Public relations

TRAINING YOUR STAFF

It is crucial that every staff member consider themselves part of the team working cohesively toward the retention of skaters and continued success of the program. Staff members are the ultimate keys for success (or failure) of a program, as they are the ones on the front line directly communicating with the customer base on a consistent basis. A well-trained staff member will know the rink policies, has a "safety first" mentality, possesses the technical knowledge of skills, is organized, dependable, punctual and professional in appearance, and puts forth extra effort to promote the program.

In hiring qualified staff, seek out those individuals with a strong skating background, prior work history and excellent customer service skills. At this level of skating, you can hire for attitude and train the employee on the teaching/testing standards you desire. Consistently evaluating the staff's performance by examining their re-enrollment records and participant drop-off totals, and by listening to what your customers say about them are all terrific measures of competency. Be proactive in discussing the positive and negative feedback you receive with the staff member directly and be sure to keep a written record of this discussion in his or her personnel file for future reference.

Learn to Skate USA offers instructional manuals, skating director resources, lesson planning booklets, instructor certification course, an App Series, skill cards and a "Learn to Teach" written test to assist with the training of new instructors. The ideal instructional staff is set up as a tiered structure with a pay scale based on experience and credentials consisting of senior staff, junior staff, assistants and volunteers. Make sure you also set up an incentive program with specific criteria for upward movement and reward instructors with high retention rates.



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CREATIVE AND CONSISTENT PROGRAMMING

Learn to Skate USA consists of 13 different badge curriculums to use throughout the year to enhance or vary your offerings.

These are divided into fundamental and specialty curriculums depending on the age, interest and ability.

Fundamental curriculums

- Core classes to offer at consistent and convenient times
- Snowplow Sam 1-4 (pre-school aged)
- Basic 1-6
- Hockey 1-4, plus Power Skating
- Adult 1-6
- Special Olympics and adaptive skating

Specialty curriculums

- Use to enhance and retain skaters in group lessons
- Pre-Freeskate - Free Skate 1-6
- Synchronized team 1-4
- Ice dance 1-6
- Pairs 1-6
- Artistry in Motion 1-4
- Speed skating 1-6
- Theatre on Ice 1-4

It is also encouraged to expand programming to include Parent and Tot classes (Tall & Small), Kindergarten, home school, adult coffee clubs and connect with local school districts for field trips to the rink or PE skating classes to help fill slow ice slots during the day.

Developing packaged Bridge programs, off-ice conditioning, special focus (Axel class), parent meetings and special events will help retain higher-level skaters. Add a "Learn to Compete" class before your Learn to Skate USA competition so that new skaters can prepare in a group environment while reducing costs to families.

Higher-level skaters inspire lower-level skaters; thus, exposing newer skaters to their more advanced peers can increase their desire to dream and continue skating. Try a buddy program or mentoring program, and invite higher-level skaters to perform an exhibition or skate their practice sessions right before or after group lessons so that newer skaters have the chance to watch them. Camaraderie and friendships go a long way toward the children's enjoyment and continuance of skating.

SKATER RETENTION

It has been proven that it costs far less to retain a current skater than to recruit a new one. Learn to Skate USA programs should aim for at the minimum of a 60 percent retention rate (six out of 10 current skaters sign up for the next set of lessons), with an 80 percent retention rate being considered excellent. Monitoring your retention rates from session to session will provide useful insight as to why skaters may decide to stop skating. Often the reasons children may decide to stop skating include the challenge of a particular level, having to work with certain instructors, lack of enjoyment or simply a loss of motivation to continue. Offer "booster" lessons on public skating to assist skaters with a difficult skill, as those extra five minutes of personal attention may make all the difference in that person's success and continued skating.

Your current customer base is one of your best resources for increasing enrollment and retention. Try offering referral packages, family discounts or repeat-enrollment discounts to encourage loyalty and progression. Offering family discounts of \$5 off the second family member, \$10 off the third family member, second class half-off pricing or reenrollment discounts for multiple sessions are other good ways to keep your current customer base strong.

Giving your customers a simple evaluation survey at the conclusion of each session and following up on their responses not only makes them aware that you have read their surveys but also that you appreciate their time spent in giving feedback. Program evaluations should include questions such as "Would you (the parent) recommend this program to peers? Why or why not?" Knowing how your program is perceived helps boost your retention and gives you the ability to correct or modify any issues. Directly contacting parents of skaters who did not re-enroll to ask what contributed to their decision will benefit the program as well.

Bottom line: Learn to Skate USA is a business that provides a service. How you treat your customers is vital toward your eventual success and can be easily achieved when one strives to deliver services in the most efficient and fun manner possible.

