

2014-15 NSAA National Demographic Study Results

Data Indicates Potential for Growth in New Visitation

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You probably know a lot about your customers, but there are likely some things you wish you knew with a bit more precision. How many customers are visiting your ski area for the first time? What do they think about the grooming or the food and beverage? Would they recommend your ski area to their friends? Are you attracting a higher household-income customer than other ski areas in your region?

Keeping track of these and other issues is the purview of the *NSAA National Demographic Study*, the industry's benchmark report on participants in downhill snowsports. The report tracks and documents customer demographics, "skiographics," and trip characteristics of skiers and snowboarders. The value of this information is incredible—and the envy of many other industries, including golf, cycling,

hiking, and other outdoor activities.

The national and regional benchmarks in the report show how the customer base of the sport is evolving and, importantly, allow resort managers to compare their own results to those standards. These comparisons reveal areas of differentiation in the customer mix at your resort.

The 2014-15 report presents results from surveys of more than 135,000 skiers and snowboarders from 89 different ski areas in the United States. This past season was the 19th consecutive year of the study; this longevity permits the identification of trends over time. The changes in the customer base of skiers and riders tends to be gradual, which means that these data need to be monitored closely to keep track of such measured developments.

The 2014-15 Skier/Snowboarder Profile

Perhaps the most notable theme to emerge this past season was a continued, modest shift to a slightly less experienced and avid visitor profile, indicative of, among other things, new participants in the sport and a greater level of competition from other activities. This trend has both potential opportunities and challenges for snowsports operators. Here are some of the indicators that point to this trend:

- A slight decrease in visitor ability levels
- A long-term decrease in average days of participation per season
- A slight decrease in visitors' years of skiing/snowboarding experience
- An increase in first-time visitation to the resort where interviewed
- A plateau in season pass usage
- A stabilizing of the visitor aging trend

Other notable trends in the results include:

- Proportionate increases in participation by families, females, and alpine skiers (offset by proportionate declines in singles, males, and snowboarders)
- An increasingly affluent visitor profile
- Continued strong growth in helmet usage
- An increasing share of overnight visitors using rental accommodations (i.e., fewer using second homes or staying with local friends/family)
- A slight growth in the share of visitors renting equipment
- A continued upward trend in visitor satisfaction with various aspects of the skiing/snowboarding experience, a likely reflection of infrastructure and service improvements at resorts

More specific patterns observed in the results this season include the following:

Stabilization of the age profile

The visitor age profile appears to have roughly stabilized over the past three seasons, at least temporarily halting a long-standing aging trend. Specifically, the average age has hovered around 38.5 over the past three seasons, and the median age has been 38 to 39. This suggests that the industry as a whole is attracting younger participants to replace older participants who are dropping out of the sport (detailed immediately below).

Generational change: steady decline in Boomers; the rise of the post-Millennials

Over the past 10 seasons, the share of snowsports visits attributable to Baby Boomers (aged 51 to 69 in 2015) has dropped by about a third, declining from 31.1 percent in 2005-06 to 21.5 percent in 2014-15. There have also been ongoing declines in the share of visits attributable to the Silent Generation and older generations (aged 70 and older, 2.5 percent of visitors in 2014-15).

Conversely, the share of visitors attributable to Generation X (aged 35 to 50 in 2015) has trended up from 29.6 percent of visitors in 2005-06 to 32.8 percent in 2014-15, while the share of visitors who are Millennials (aged 18 to 34 in 2015) has exhibited some modest fluctuations while trending relatively flat over the past 10 years. The strongest growth in recent seasons is attributable to the post-Millennials (aged 17 and under in 2015), who are increasingly entering the stage as the newest generation to adopt snowsports. ▶

Marital/family status: growth in families; decline in singles

The proportion of visitors living in households with children at home has trended up strongly over the past decade (rising from 31 to 40 percent of participants). Conversely, the proportion of singles has trended down. The growth in family participation is an important opportunity for the industry for many reasons, including 1) the opportunity to introduce more children to snowsports, which is critical to the long-term health of the industry, and 2) the immediate economic benefits associated with family visitors, including families' comparatively high per-capita daily spending, lesson participation, and rental usage.

Party composition: growth in skiing with spouse and relatives; decline in skiing with friends

The proportion of visitors coming with their spouse/significant other and/or other family members has been trending up in recent seasons, consistent with the growth in visitors who are families with children, couples without kids, and empty nesters.

By contrast, the proportion of respondents visiting with friends had been trending down for several years, consistent with the decreases in the proportion of singles, young adults, and children. Visitation with a group/club/organization has also been trending down slightly for the past several seasons, while the proportion visiting alone has held relatively steady.

Increased share of female participation

The past few seasons have exhibited steady growth in the proportion of participation among females, who ticked up to a new high of 42.6 percent this past season, up slightly from the historical range of 38.9 to 41.8 percent in the previous nine seasons. The uptick in females may in part be related to the increase in family participants noted above, as a relatively high proportion of family participants are female (48 percent in 2014-15).

Steady racial/ethnic mix

Minorities are still significantly underrepresented in skiing/snowboarding (13 percent of visits this season) relative to their share of the US population (37.9 percent, per 2014 Census estimates). The overall racial/ethnic mix of ski area visitors has remained largely stable over time, at 86 to 89 percent non-Hispanic white and 11 to 14 percent minority. Encouragingly, minority participation in snowsports is strongest in the 10 to 35 age cohort, which suggests opportunities for longer-term growth if existing minority participants can be retained while new minority participants are attracted to snowsports.

Growing household income

Household income has been trending up over the past eight seasons, with increases in visitors earning \$100,000 or more (rising from 45 percent in 2006-07 to 58 percent in 2014-15), and decreases in visitors earning less than \$50,000 (dropping from 30 percent to 18 percent over the same period). Snowsports participants continue to skew significantly more affluent than the general US population (with 58 percent of skiers making \$100,000 or more, compared to 23 percent of all US households).

Growth in alpine skiers; decline in snowboarders

Since 2008-09, the proportion of visitors on alpine equipment has climbed by 9.2 percentage points (to 73.1 percent in 2014-15), while snowboarding participation has declined by 6.2 percentage points (to 23.6 percent), and telemark/other equipment usage has slipped 3 percentage points (to 3.3 percent). Snowboarding still continues to have a high percentage of first-year participants relative to skiing, which speaks to its relative attractiveness to younger participants and its significance as a gateway to snowsports for many newcomers, as well as its potential for future growth.

Slight decrease in ability level

The visitor ability profile appears to have passed through an inflection point, whereby the share of visitors who are of advanced/expert ability has peaked and begun to decline slightly, and intermediate participation has bottomed out and begun climbing. Meanwhile, first-timers and beginners have fluctuated in the 12.4 to 13.6 percent range over the past decade with no clear trend (12.6 percent in 2014-15).

The recent shifts in the ability profile may be related to the slowing of the visitor aging trend, a plateau in the use of season passes, a stabilization of years of participation in snowsports, and a slight decrease in days of snowsports participation per person.

Long-term decreases in days of snowsports participation

On an overall national basis, the average number of total days that respondents anticipated they would alpine ski/snowboard has trended down over the past several seasons, dipping to 17 days this season from a recent high of 19.7 days in 2006-07. The decrease in average days skied is attributable to a reduced share of visitors participating 20 or more days; conversely, there have been increases over the same period in visitors participating only one to three days and four to nine days. ▶

Increases in first-time winter visitors to “this resort”

The proportion of first-time visitors (in the past five seasons) has risen gradually from 21 percent in 2005-06 to 27 percent today, while the proportion of repeat visitors has thus correspondingly declined from 79 percent to 73 percent. While caution should be used against over-interpreting these results, the trend may potentially indicate a broadening of the visitor profile, at least at the individual resort level.

Steady levels of previous summer visitation to resort

This season, 31 percent of respondents said they had visited “this ski area” in the previous five summers, within the historic range (26 to 33 percent). Results have fluctuated over time with an overall flat trend.

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The overall long-term trend to a more avid, committed participant base may have at least temporarily peaked or plateaued.

Strong growth in helmet usage

Helmet usage continued its growth trajectory this season, reaching 78 percent adoption, up from 73 percent last season and 38 percent in 2005-06. Adoption increased in all age groups. Helmet usage is highest among children (especially children aged 9 and under and 10 to 14) and adults aged 65 or older, and lowest among young adults aged 18 to 24 and 25 to 34.

Steady season pass usage

Results from both the *NSAA Demographic Study* and *Kottke End of Season Report* show that season pass usage has roughly plateaued over the past four to five years, suggesting that the long-term shift to pass usage is stabilizing—a pattern that will bear watching in the future. Perhaps relatedly, ability levels have also plateaued and anticipated days of participation have declined, suggesting that the overall long-term trend to a more avid, committed participant base may have at least temporarily peaked or plateaued; these customers are less likely to purchase a season pass because of their lower number of days on the slopes.

Uptick in equipment rentals

Equipment rental usage has ticked up over the past four seasons, rising from 26.8 percent in 2010-11 to 29.1 percent in 2014-15. Rental usage has been on a strong upward trend in the Midwest, and has also trended up slightly in the Northeast and Pacific Northwest while also reaching a new high this season in the Rocky Mountains. Resorts in the Southeast and Midwest have the highest incidence of renting (37 percent each), followed by the Rockies (32 percent), Pacific Southwest (28 percent), Northeast (21 percent), and Pacific Northwest (17 percent).

Improving visitor satisfaction ratings and steady net promoter score

Average satisfaction ratings have generally improved over the past several seasons, with the greatest improvement noted for variety/number of trails, overall rental experience, and overall food and beverage. A variety of other items have shown improvement too, including overall employee service, overall lesson experience, friendliness of lift operators, and quality of grooming. The ratings trends suggest that resorts have been making meaningful improvements to the quality of the visitor experience. Relatedly, resort net promoter scores have also trended up over the past decade, hovering in the 70 to 71 percent range over the past three seasons, up from 58 percent in 2005-06.

Data Highlights by Region

The following tables provide a detailed breakdown of skier and snowboarder demographic trends by NSAA region. Order the complete *2014/15 NSAA National Demographic Study* online at nsaa.org. ▶