“Winter sports under a summer sun”: the marketing of Sun Valley ski resort in the 1930s

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Abstract

Purpose
The purpose of this paper is to describe the growth of the early ski market and the marketing strategies that the Union Pacific Railroad took in promoting Sun Valley ski resort, one of the most popular early destination ski resorts in the USA.

Design/methodology/approach
The paper uses primary and secondary source material, including ski periodicals, national magazines and the manuscript collection of W. Averell Harriman, the Chairman of the Union Pacific Railroad during the creation of Sun Valley.

Findings
This paper finds that Sun Valley pioneered the western ski vacation by conducting careful market research into not only the snow and weather conditions of western mountains, but also into the habits and economic potential of skiers and winter tourists.

Originality/value
Scholarly work on skiing has primarily looked at the sport from the social and cultural perspective of skiers. Work on entrepreneurial objectives of ski resort designers has largely focused on the period after the Second World War. This is among the first works to analyze entrepreneurial activities and marketing strategies in the ski industry before the Second World War. As a result, the paper challenges the idea that big business only began to shape the ski industry during the Cold War. Instead, this paper shows that large corporations like the Union Pacific Railroad were influential in growing the ski market by building resorts that illustrated the importance of market segmentation to the success of ski areas. In this way, the paper challenges the popular idea that Sun Valley was merely a media sensation and shows that it was a carefully designed business that exhibited a nuanced approach to changes in the ski market.

Keywords
Tourism, Skiing, Advertising, Market research, United States of America, Railroads, Marketing history, Sports
Sun Valley, Idaho—where the first destination ski resort in North America was established in 1936—may have its roots in winter. Founded in 1936, the Sun Valley Lodge stood as the centerpiece of the resort and it's a must-visit to appreciate the storied history of this mountain town. Black-and-white photographs of generations of celebrities and winter-sport athletes—Ernest Hemingway, the Kennedys, Marilyn Monroe, Clark Gable, Errol Flynn, Warren Miller, Picabo Street, Arnold Schwarzenegger—adorn every wall of the 108-room accommodation, which recently underwent a full face-lift, including the introduction of a 20,000-square-foot day spa. Moreover; Sun Valley was the first purpose-built ski resort in the United States, hand-picked by Union Pacific Railroad scion William Averell Harriman in the 1930s and publicized by numerous members of the then glitterati such as Ernest Hemingway, Clark Gable and Gary Cooper. When Sun Valley opened in 1936 it sported the world's first chairlift and a showcase "Parkitecture" lodge that still acts as its premier resort. Sun Valley has kept its swanky Hollywood clientele and extended its facilities to include the legendary Bald Mountain, yet it remains a refined and pretty place. Highly rated nat Sun Valley was an anomaly in 1936 and still is 80 years later, retaining a distinctive character that sets it apart from just about every other major ski resort in the country. It has been fervently family owned by decades by the Holding family of Sinclair Oil fame, who also have the Snowbasin ski resort in Utah, Salt Lake City's premier hotel, the Grand America, and were instrumental in organizing the Utah Winter Olympic Games. But Sun Valley was always their baby, and over the years, numerous improvements were undertaken, but always with a close eye on keeping the underlying character unchan