

Vail taps young Midwest market to fill its bigger resorts

By Andrea Petersen, Wall Street Journal

Vail Resorts has come up with a novel way to combat the leveling off of skiing's popularity: buying up little Midwestern hills.

The goal is to hook families on the sport at spots close to home and groom them for vacations at the company's pricier Western mountains like Canyons Resort in Utah and Breckenridge Ski Resort in Colorado. Vail Resorts has already bought resorts in Minnesota and Michigan and spent \$20 million to renovate and upgrade them.

It is a long-term strategy, says Rob Katz, Vail Resorts Inc.'s chief executive. "There are kids in those [Midwestern] markets whose parents may not ski – maybe they are 12. If we can make a connection with that kid, we have a great opportunity to keep him in our family as he gets older and begins making his own decisions about where he is going to travel," he says.

Skiing and snowboarding are looking to attract younger participants to replace aging baby boomers. The percentage of skiers and snowboarders ages 24 and younger fell to 22.8 percent in the 2012-13 ski season, down from 30.6 percent in 1997-98, according to a survey of visitors to 88 U.S. resorts by the National Ski Areas Association, a trade group. During the same stretch, the percentage of people ages 45 to 54 increased to 19.8 percent, up from 14 percent.

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