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# Marketing Thought Leaders
## A playbook for leading your company to future success

# EpicMix: Redefining the Customer Experience with Big Ideas

By Nancy Pekala

Vail Resorts has brought social to the ski slopes by creating a multi-channel strategy that redefines the customer experience.

Understanding that half the fun of sliding down a mountain is the bragging rights that come with it, Vail Resorts, which owns and operates six ski resorts in the western United States, set out to provide skiers with verifiable documentation of their achievements.

In 2010, the company launched two mobile applications and an optimized website (snow.com) in an effort to keep their guests engaged while visiting the resorts. The website is a must-see destination for Vail Resort guests and would-be visitors. It includes an active blog (Buzz), featured videos and photo galleries.



## EpicMix

The driver of the company's customer experience-focused strategy is EpicMix, a mobile



application that aims to make the entire ski experience social. Guests can access the digital app online or via a mobile app that can be downloaded for the iPhone, Android or other smartphone.

The app utilizes radio frequency scanners that are installed at all of the company's 89 ski lifts at its Vail, Beaver Creek, Breckenridge, Keystone and Heavenly Resorts. It automatically captures the activity of guests throughout each of the resorts. The radio frequency-enabled chips are embedded in season passes and lift tickets so that guests' life rides can be automatically

tracked including the total number of vertical feet skied and total days on the mountain. The EpicMix app is powered by Omniture and uses Adobe's online marketing suite.

Based on special achievements, skiers are awarded collectible virtual pins. With more than 400 graphic pins available, each with its own point value, there is a pin that fits almost every skier's ability. For example, the "conqueror" pin rewards those who ride very lift in one day while the

"Blues Traveler" pin is given to those skiers who get their picture taken on the top of Peak 7. Collecting the virtual pins can be a competitive sport in and of itself for resort guests. Riders with the most points are featured on a leaderboard, and the pins and metrics can be displayed as a checkered-collage image.

Additionally, the company commissions professional on-mountain photographers to scan skiers' RFID-enabled passes, take their photo and then upload it to the skier's EpicMix account. The photos run the gamut from action shots, portraits or snapshots. Thanks to the EpicMix mobile app, the photos can then be shared with guests' friends via social media.

With the tagline, "Capture, Connect, Share," the goal of the program is to allow guests to capture their time on the mountain and at the resorts and share it with their family and friends.

**The Results**

Vail Resorts reports overwhelming success for the EpicMix initiative. In its 2010/2011 launch season alone, more than 100,000 users participated in the program, a 15% adoption rate for all eligible guests. The first season also netted 40,000 mobile app users and more than 280,000 Facebook and Twitter posts, more than half of which included a photo. Using an estimate of 130 friends per user, the 35 million social impressions translated to over 55 billion vertical feet of skiing and snowboarding, according to the company.
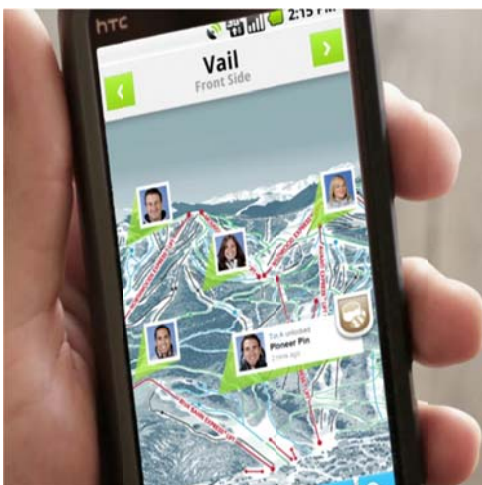
The mobile app also allows provides additional information for skiers including trail and grooming information, snow and weather reports, resort news and traffic updates.

Vail Resorts CEO Rob Katz suggests that the entire EpicMix initiative is about redefining the customer experience for their guests. 'This is more about recognition', Katz says. 'This isn't an advertising model for us. It's coming from our IT and mountain operations teams, like if we were opening a new lift or restaurant'. The cross-department collaboration ensures this isn't entirely a marketing effort, but rather an investment in the company's infrastructure."

What's been the impact of the initiative on the company's traditional marketing methods?  Katz explained simply, "We don't do as much traditional anything anymore."

Speaking at the recent Brand Innovators Chicago Summit, Clark Kokich, Worldwide President at Avenue A| Razorfish, suggested that Vail Resorts has done what many organizations today are attempting to do, which is redefine the definition of a "big idea." "You still need lots of little ideas but big ideas don't look like they did before," Kokich said.

He added, "Vail Resorts made the product better.  They invested in the digital experience in order to make the product better for their customers."

Kokich added, "Today, the Big Idea is about the Big Experience and the Big Product Idea." "This is just a lot more fun for marketers because it's about doing things that matter."

Nancy Pekala is the AMA's Senior Director of Online Content and Editor of *Marketing Thought Leaders*. Do you know any other brands that are redefining the customer experience?  Share your thoughts in the Marketing Strategy group of AMAConnect, the AMA's online community exclusively for marketers.  Follow us on Twitter @marketing_power.