

Why pool and spa professionals aren't enthusiastic about swimming (but should be)

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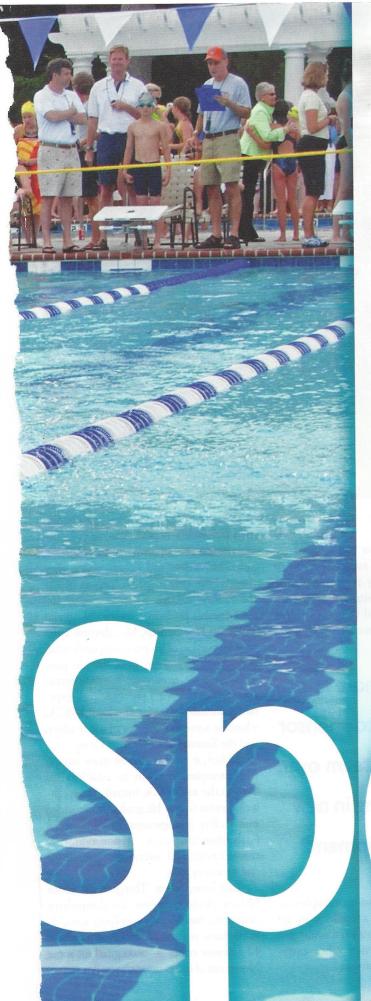
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By Dan Schechner "Every Child A Swimmer."

THEFT

That's the mantra of the International Swimming Hall of Fame in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., and the credo that Bill Kent enthusiastically adopted when he joined its board of directors in 1990.

However, shortly after his tenure began Kent started to notice that his colleagues exhibited a striking lack of support for swimming.

This troubling trend is a "blind spot," he says, that has continued to the present day.

"The industry is fairly disaffected when it comes to use of the pool and the world of aquatics," explains Kent, CEO of Fort Lauderdale-based Team Horner and past president of the National Spa and Pool Institute (now APSP).

"If you want to create goodwill for the pool industry...become involved in your local swim clubs, develop connections with swim schools or fund scholarships," he adds. "I still believe it's a good strategy, it's just not being broadly engaged."



Insiders say that when it comes to promoting the activity most logically associated with their product, the industry falls unquestionably short. A few theories could explain why.

The most frequent explanation is that many pool and spa professionals are highly focused on their individual businesses. Rather than acting as an ambassador for the sport of swimming, most spend the bulk of their energy trying to increase profitability, comply with the latest regulations and improve marketing efforts.

"People are focusing on market share, not on how they can create value and market that," says Thomas Lachocki, CEO of the National Swimming Pool Foundation in Colorado Springs, Colo.

"They aren't really talking about how to grow the industry in this way," he adds. "But this idea of getting people in the water is the most important thing our industry should be looking toward. It's a very wise investment, people just aren't thinking about it."

Another roadblock could lie in the fact that most pool industry professionals don't have backgrounds in aquatics, and may not hold a passion for swimming. Still others assert that the actual product — a pool — isn't as closely linked to swimming as some might assume. They say that rather than focus on the sport, industry professionals are better served emphasizing the beauty, luxury and curb appeal that pools bring to a backyard environment.

Is a retailer more apt to spend \$500 to sponsor a local swim team over, say, investing in new office equipment?

There's also the question of simple economics. For example, is a retailer more apt to spend \$500 to sponsor a local swim team over, say, investing in new office equipment or management software?

Despite these and other misgivings, industry leaders nonetheless trumpet the importance of supporting swim programs, individual teams and events which they contend can help boost business as well as the industry at-large.

Charles Baldwin, owner of Swim Things in Blue Springs, Mo., devotes a significant portion of his pool company's retail division to swimwear, from fashion suits to competitive team gear. It makes sense, considering Baldwin's previous work experience included stints at the local YMCA, where he served as director of water safety, and the Kansas City, Mo., Red Cross.

In fact, it was his interest in swimming that prompted Baldwin to establish his firm, in the mid-1970s, initially as an outlet for swim teams. He gradually expanded into facility management for commercial pools, then into service, renovation, new construction, and eventually equipment and accessory sales.

Last year, Swim Things built about 50 new pools. However, his competitive swimming business — supplying suits, Tshirts, hats, sweatshirts and bags for about 40 different teams — accounted for some 20 percent of the company's retail revenue.

"It's the one area we can count on for year-round sales," Baldwin says. "During winter, when a lot of pool stores are closed ... we have a steady stream of customers for swimwear, whether it's for indoor swim teams or people traveling to warmer climates for vacation."

Beyond carrying swim apparel and accessories, Baldwin operates a successful fundraising program though the company's Website, where teams or groups can earn 5 percent back on all members' purchases of Swim Things products.

In addition, Baldwin regularly advertises in the "heat sheets" that are distributed at local swim meets; and during at least one big meet per year, he sets up a makeshift retail booth: "Families are there all day," he says. "It helps introduce the company to people who don't already know about us."

For those looking to get involved, potential avenues also include sponsoring learn-to-swim programs such as the New York-based Strategies for Overcoming Aquatic Phobias (SOAP) Program and the Miracle Swimming Institute in Sarasota, Fla. Other options include donating to local Boys and Girls Clubs that offer



Education never stops: Learn-to-swim programs help individuals of all ages overcome their fear of water while promoting the benefits of pool-related activities in both one-on-one and group settings.

lessons to underprivileged children.

A few years ago, the Swimming Pool Education and Safety Foundation was established as a nonprofit affiliate to the Florida Swimming Pool Association. The foundation's goal is to provide swim instruction and pool-safety education to families throughout the state. And much of its support

comes through local chapters of FSPA.

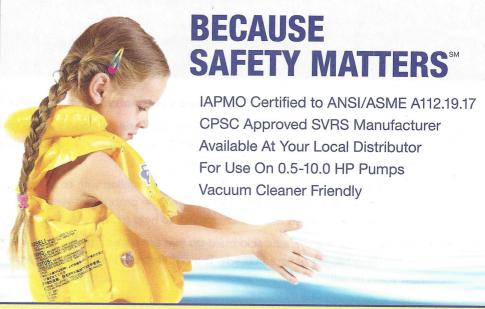
"We do it because it's the right thing to do and it's good for the kids," says FSPA Executive Director Wendy Parker Barsell. "Besides, anytime there's news of a drowning, people get concerned about their kids. The more kids we can teach to swim, the better it is for our industry."

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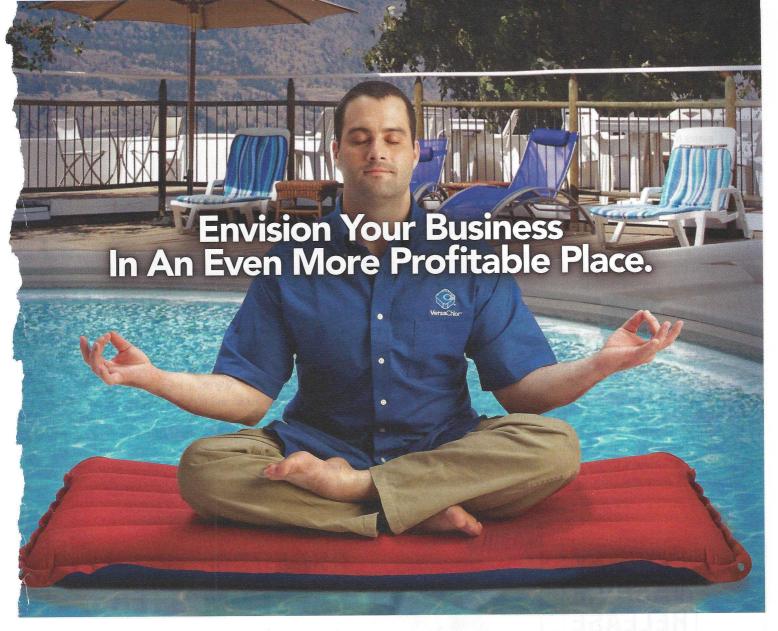




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