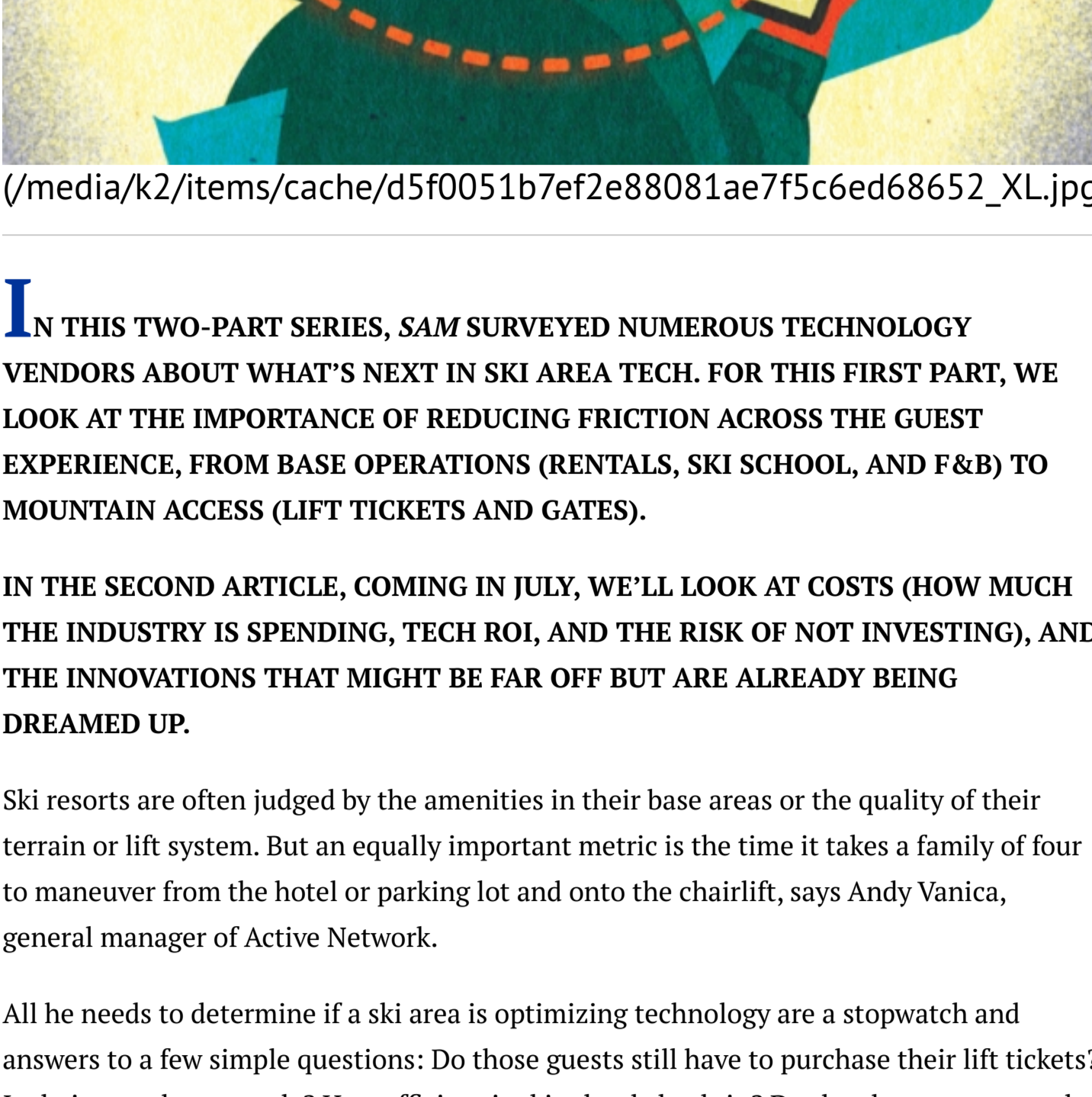


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## WHAT'S NEXT IN SKI AREA TECHNOLOGY?

Tech vendors dish on how different innovations can help reduce friction and improve the guest experience.

Written by Eric Smith | 0 Comments comment



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**I**N THIS TWO-PART SERIES, SAM SURVEYED NUMEROUS TECHNOLOGY VENDORS ABOUT WHAT'S NEXT IN SKI AREA TECH. FOR THIS FIRST PART, WE LOOK AT THE IMPORTANCE OF REDUCING FRICTION ACROSS THE GUEST EXPERIENCE, FROM BASE OPERATIONS (RENTALS, SKI SCHOOL, AND F&B) TO MOUNTAIN ACCESS (LIFT TICKETS AND GATES).

**IN THE SECOND ARTICLE, COMING IN JULY, WE'LL LOOK AT COSTS (HOW MUCH THE INDUSTRY IS SPENDING, TECH ROI, AND THE RISK OF NOT INVESTING), AND THE INNOVATIONS THAT MIGHT BE FAR OFF BUT ARE ALREADY BEING DREAMED UP.**

Ski resorts are often judged by the amenities in their base areas or the quality of their terrain or lift system. But an equally important metric is the time it takes a family of four to maneuver from the hotel or parking lot and onto the chairlift, says Andy Vanica, general manager of Active Network.

All he needs to determine if a ski area is optimizing technology are a stopwatch and answers to a few simple questions: Do those guests still have to purchase their lift tickets? Is their rental gear ready? How efficient is their ski school check-in? Do they have to stop and ask anyone for instructions on where to go and what to do?

"If we look at a family skiing for the first time, we want to make it as easy as possible for them to pick up a pass, get rental equipment, get all their kids enrolled in ski school, make sure they've got money or lunch vouchers," says Vanica, whose company's enterprise system, RTP | ONE, offers resort management solutions.

"Even though I've been skiing my whole life, it's still a ton of work—and I know what I'm doing. Imagine someone who doesn't," he says.

### SKIING: IT'S COMPLICATED

While the sport's devotees have traditionally looked past these problems, there's concern across the industry that fewer people are willing to tolerate ski area friction. Consumers can spend their free time and discretionary income elsewhere—especially when "elsewhere" might be more affordable and easier to navigate.

"Ski trips are expensive, complicated, and stressful for a lot of people," says Rob Clark, CEO of Aspenware, a software company that's owned by Alterra Mountain Co. and Aspen Skiing Co., and which offers e-commerce, check-in, and point-of-sale (POS) solutions for resorts. "If you have a bad time on your ski trip, you're not going to want to go skiing next time. You're going to want to go to the beach, where you just need a towel and flip-flops. You don't need to be taught how to sit on the beach. You don't need to be taught how to ride a roller coaster. You just do it. There's a natural, inherent complexity to skiing."

Even with the growth and affordability of multi-mountain passes, and even with tech advances made during Covid, ski trips remain costly and complex. There's more resorts can and should do to keep pace, not only with resort and non-resort competitors but also with evolving customer expectations.

### REDUCING THE FRICTION

Vendors believe the model of crowded base areas, confusing reservation systems, and congested trails isn't sustainable, especially because younger, tech-savvy generations will eventually reject that status quo.

"Someday, wait in traffic for five hours to go ski, I'm not getting up with this anymore. I'm not going to wait in traffic for five hours to go ski and then be on the mountain with 25,000 other people," says Gregg Blanchard, vice president of marketing for Intopia, which provides reservation technology and services to ski resorts. "People keep doing it, and it blows my mind. Everything's good financially for the industry, but the experience sucks. There must be a breaking point."

Perhaps a better guest experience, one that's enabled and vastly improved by technology and data, could prevent that breaking point. The industry's technology vendors believe they can help, with solutions already on the market or coming soon.

**The solutions** can include a la carte offerings or a full suite of technology-enabled improvements across the entire resort, says Mechele Larmore, SVP of sales and marketing for enterprise technology provider accesso.

"In the modern, 24/7 digital environment, the true opportunity lies in being able to hold a holistic view of that journey," Larmore says. "From initial online impressions and pre-trip communications to post-visit engagement, there are so many ways for operators to deepen the connection with their guests, if they have the tools and strategies to identify them."

Most tech vendors share a major belief: ski resorts must move everything toward self-service. Guests want to perform all aspects of a ski trip with as few steps and headaches as possible. Increasingly, that means using their smartphones to arrange and buy everything from reservations to rentals, ski school to dining, lift tickets to lift access.

"Once the consumer has the power through their mobile device to handle all self-service capabilities, that reduces the friction," says Casey Parliament, president and GM at enterprise software provider Intouch Elevate. "They can engage with the resort on their terms and through a mechanism that's comfortable and familiar to them. It also eases the operational burden for the resort. It's all about giving the power back to the consumer."

Still, cautions Erik Mogensen, managing director of Entabeni Systems, an under-the-radar enterprise solution provider primarily servicing small and mid-sized independent resorts, it's important for operators to "worry less about the next shiny thing" when it comes to adopting new tech.

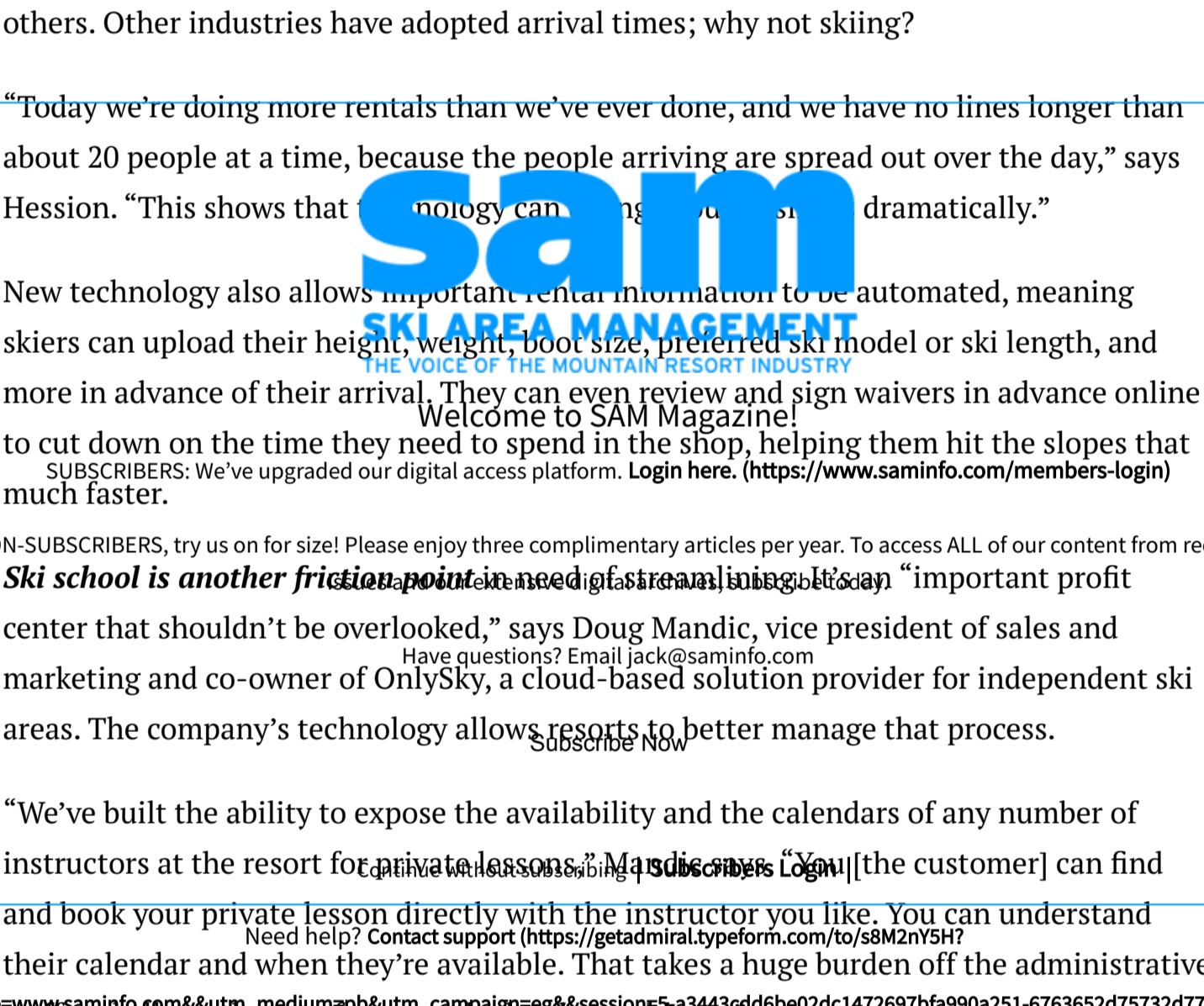
"The rate of change in technology is so high that staying focused on practical and purpose-built ski area solutions will help avoid dangerous pitfalls," he says.

### STREAMLINING BASE OPERATIONS

Base operations are ripe for innovation, and ski technology vendors have solutions to match.

**Let's start with rentals.** The current system for renting gear is cumbersome. Typically, a resort opens the shop doors in the morning and awaits the guests who either reserved equipment to pick up that day or decided to show up with no reservation and no clue what they need. This creates a logjam.

Instead, a ski area should offer arrival window times, says Joe Hession, CEO and co-founder of SNOW Partners, which includes training and process optimization firm SNOW Operating, as well as Mountain Creek Resort and the indoor Big SNOW American Dream facility, both in New Jersey.



**New technology**, such as SNOW Partners' SnowCloud resort management platform, can create rental arrival windows, relieving congestion at peak times and maximizing the number of people who come through the shop. Hession says Mountain Creek, for example, offers a certain number of rental slots in 15-minute windows. Guests pick a time that works for them, meaning the shop isn't overrun at certain parts of the day and dead at others. Other industries have adopted arrival times; why not skiing?

"Today we're doing more rentals than we've ever done, and we have no lines longer than about 20 people at a time, because the people arriving are spread out over the day," says Hession. "This shows that technology can be used dramatically."

New technology also allows important rental information to be automated, meaning skiers can upload their height, weight, foot size, waxed ski model or ski length, and more in advance of their arrival. They can even review and sign waivers in advance online to cut down on the time they need to spend in the shop, helping them hit the slopes that much faster.

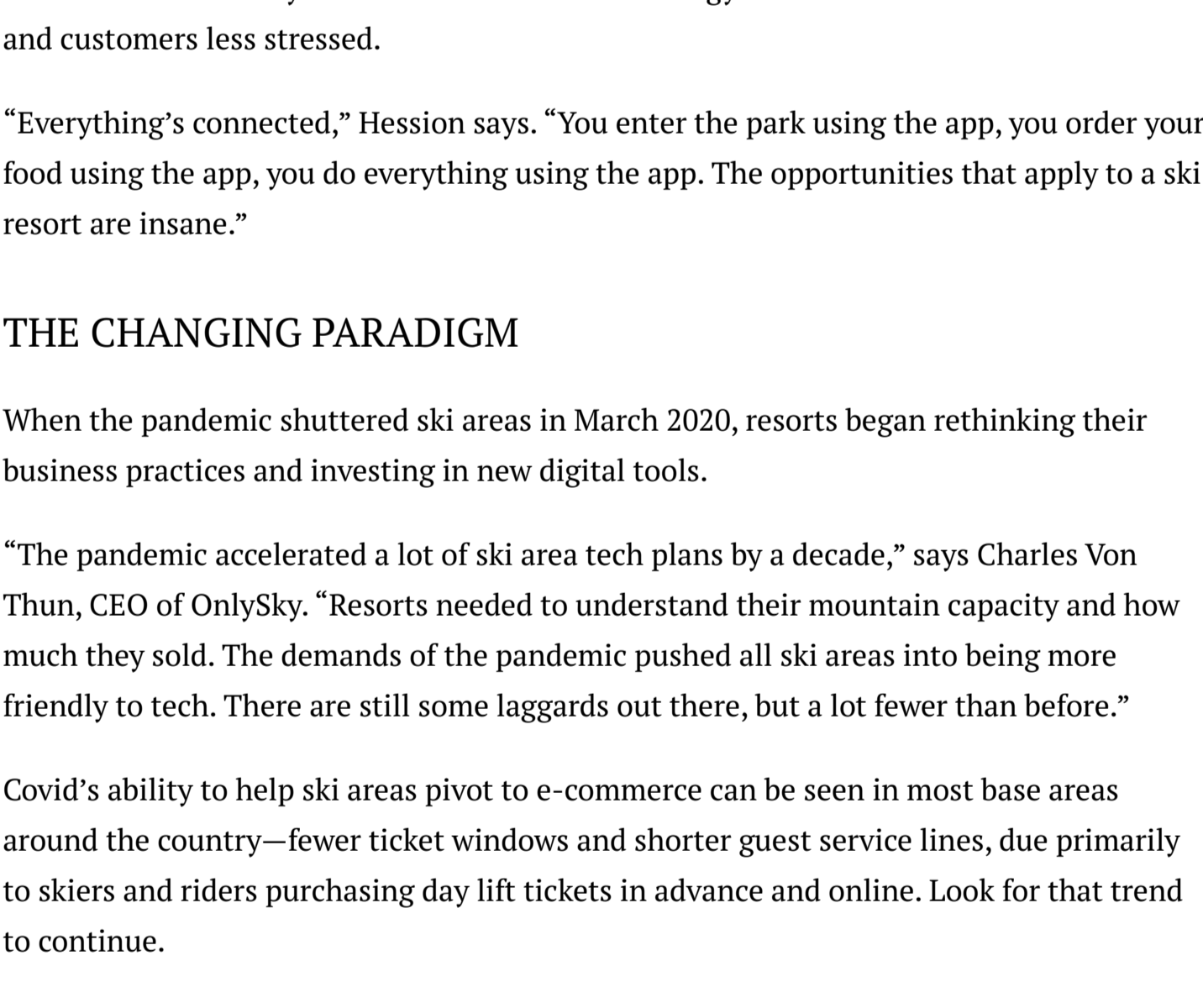
**Ski school is another friction point** in need of streamlining, says Sam "important profit center that shouldn't be overlooked," says Doug Mandic, vice president of sales and marketing and co-owner of OnlySKI, a cloud-based solution provider for independent ski areas. The company's technology allows resorts to better manage that process.

"We've built the ability to expose the availability and the calendars of any number of instructors at the resort for private lessons. As a skier, you [the customer] can find and book your private lesson directly with the instructor you like. You can understand their calendar and when they're available. That takes a huge burden off the administrative side."

Ultimately, suggests Steve Salim, CEO of Summit Ski Management Solution, "ski and ride schools are about to revolutionize the way that ski resorts manage their resource alignment—technology streamlines this process, ensuring that not only is an instructor available to teach a lesson, but it's the right instructor to deliver a memorable guest experience that keeps them coming back."

**Food and beverage** is another base area operation that technology has the capacity to transform. Hession can't help but sigh when he visits a ski resort's sparkling-new, multimillion-dollar food court and sees the layout and functionality remain stale.

Instead, he argues, ski areas looking to elevate their food and beverage operation should look to sports facilities or, not surprisingly, Disney—where technology enables all kinds of cool F&B possibilities.



One example: visitors can not only schedule meals via Disney's resort app, but their smartphones can signal the kitchen to begin preparing their food when they're exiting a certain ride or nearing the restaurant. The app knows what they preordered that morning and knows where they are at all times. This technology makes restaurants more efficient and customers less stressed.

"Everything's connected," Hession says. "You enter the park using the app, you order your food using the app, you do everything using the app. The opportunities that apply to a ski resort are insane."

### THE CHANGING PARADIGM

When the pandemic shuttered ski areas in March 2020, resorts began rethinking their business practices and investing in new digital tools.

"The pandemic accelerated a lot of ski area tech plans by a decade," says Charles Von Thun, CEO of OnlySky. "Resorts needed to understand their mountain capacity and how much they sold. The demands of the pandemic pushed all ski areas into being more friendly to tech. There are still some laggards out there, but a lot fewer than before."

Covid's ability to help ski areas pivot to e-commerce can be seen in most base areas around the country—fewer ticket windows and shorter guest service lines, due primarily to skiers and riders purchasing day lift tickets in advance and online. Look for that trend to continue.

"Many resorts began closing their ticket windows, permanently," says Aspenware's Clark. "They instead gave customers the ability to buy everything online and then turned that now-unused space into a retail shop or restaurant. The only reason someone might need to stop in now is if they need help with something they can't do online."

Ski areas of all sizes, and in all geographies, have been making progress. They've upgraded e-commerce, moved toward mobile, improved POS systems, added RFID capabilities, and consolidated legacy systems, to name a few.

### SPEEDING THE PROCESS

One of the most recent, and certainly highest profile, examples of ski tech acceleration came in early March, when Vail Resorts announced it would launch mobile pass and mobile lift ticket technology for guests this fall.

**On the snow faster.** That solution addresses a ski area's fundamental purpose—getting people on the snow faster. And for most resorts, that process is flawed, says Intopia's Blanchard, who sees technology as the means to alleviate sprawling lift lines and on-hill traffic. As he explains, if a resort can handle 10,000 people on the mountain at any given time but 15,000 show up in the first two hours of the day, it creates a spike in demand, overloading a ski area's capacity. An improved backend system that controls access can ease bottlenecks.

What would be better is using a reservation system that will spread out arrivals and usage in a way that aligns with your capacity, Blanchard says. "That will give skiers the confidence that if they buy a ticket, they don't have to head to the area four hours early or worry about getting turned away. It's technology that allows you access to the resort in a way that guarantees everyone will have a spot to ski instead of this guessing game. The current way is unsustainable."

### MAKING MAGIC FOR GUESTS

If the current way is indeed unsustainable, resorts risk losing business because they're going to drive visitors away. Hit the stopwatch button on that family of four that Active Network's Vanica is timing with his stopwatch as they move from the parking lot to the chairlift. But this time, the resort's next-gen tech is powering their journey.





That family now has a mobile parking pass and prepaid lift tickets. Their rental gear is ready and waiting when they arrive at the shop with a QR code. Their skis are waxed and waiting on a rack close to the chairlift. They emailed their kids' ski school waivers the night before, so check-in is a breeze. Their RFID gate access is seamless. And before they know it, they're on the lift. A perfectly timed meal awaits them on their lunch break. At day's end, their après drinks are sure to taste a lot better, and they're already planning a return trip.

**Supporting the experience.** The technology was not their experience. It simply enabled them to begin enjoying their reason for being there—quality time on the slopes with each other—that much faster, with much less friction.

As Vanica notes, there's a reward for skiers and snowboarders who labor through the timeless complexities of skiing. Longtime enthusiasts know this, which is why they return, again and again. By adopting the latest ski area tech across their operation, ski resorts can focus on what they do best and keep those guests coming back.

"The minute you sit on the chair, everything melts away and you're in a different world," Vanica says. "That's the magic of the ski resort."

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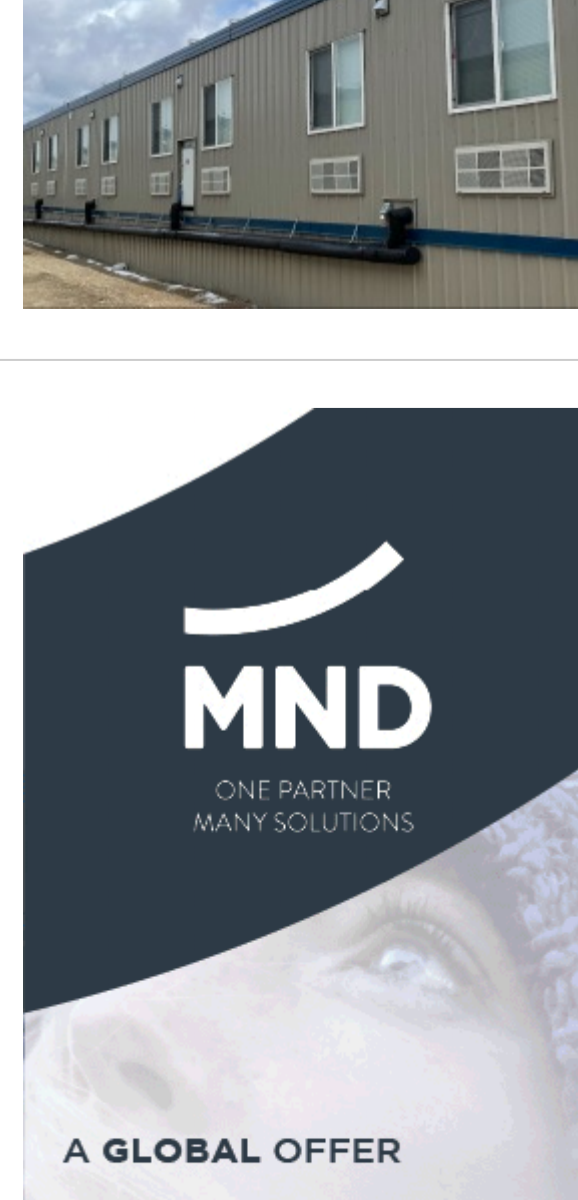
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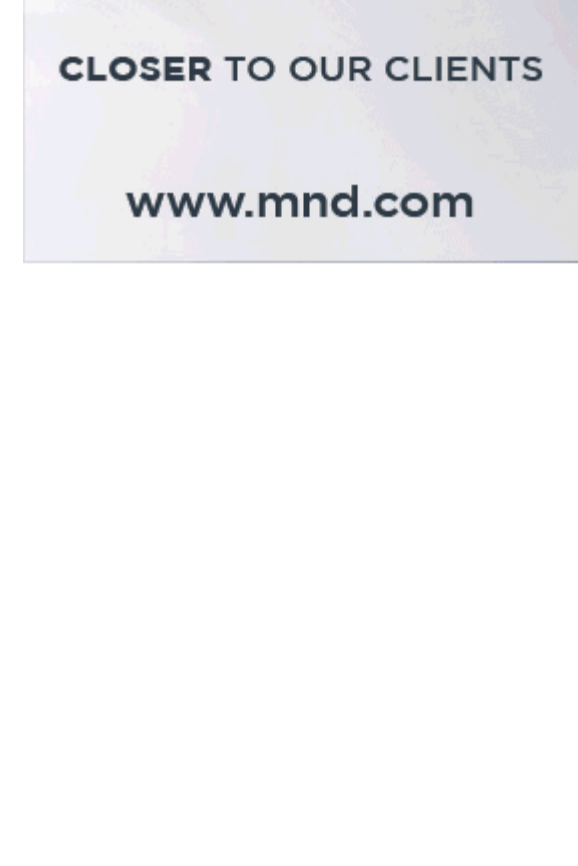
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