

Make a Friend Before You Need A Friend

By Ted Robinson

THE ADAGE “MAKE A FRIEND BEFORE YOU NEED A FRIEND” IS SO VERY APPROPRIATE IN YOUR MEMBERSHIP MARKETING LIFE.

As we’ve discussed previously, knowing who you are and where you fit in your market, using technology for prospecting, and approaching your prospects are important steps in membership marketing. Now we focus on concept of “Make a Friend Before You Need a Friend.”

One common thread has appeared in all of PCA’s member research (surveys, focus groups) over the last six years, in clubs of all economic strata – with initiation costs ranging from zero to \$250,000. That need is for a sense of community – belonging, as exemplified in the sitcom “Cheers.” They know my name, they know what I drink!”

Remember back to your first day in high school - the fear and apprehension as you entered – not knowing where your locker was located – and suspecting everyone was looking at you funny? We must assure that each and every new member never has to feel that way in their new club.

The obvious *why* is threefold – 1) An *included member* is loyal member and stays a member longer (reduced attrition) 2) an *included member* uses the club regularly (increased revenues), and 3) an *included member* wants to enjoy the club with their friends – and is prone to provide referrals. So how do we encourage that?

The first step is “new member entry” – assuring a smooth transition from prospective member to accepted member who is now part of your club’s culture. Certainly your new member orientation is a key component of the “new member entry” but it is just one of many steps to successfully integrate new members.

Every stakeholder must be involved to make this process (not an event) successful. You, the membership director, are also the conductor of the new member entry orchestra consisting of the senior staff (department heads and especially the general manager), junior staff, board and especially the president, committees and the membership committee chair and all other members.

Seven of 10 members who resign in the first year cite their *lack of personal connection* to the club as a reason. Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs rates the social need for belonging as the most important human need after air, food, water and safety. Here is a suggested sequence and a few hints for success:

Gain as much information about the new member as you can during the prospecting/sale period. Share this information with the staff and all stakeholders.

Make the first event for the new member the new member orientation – require attendance and issue their membership number, membership card, locker selection, website log-in. Introduce them to the general manager, department heads, board and/or committee members and the other new members.

Share the passport program whereby the new member’s passport is stamped when they first visit each club venue and is rewarded upon collection all stamps. According to a study by Global Golf Advisors: “Retention rates exceed 80 percent for new members who are welcomed into the club, introduced to a wide and diverse number of existing members and coached on how to best enjoy the club.”

Heidi Voss of Bauer Voss Consulting suggests three objectives for the orientation:

1. Make the new members feel welcome and get them entrenched in the club quickly (new friends, new things) so they never want to leave the club.
2. Teach them how to use the club.
3. Introduce the responsibility of a new member to provide referrals.

Introduce them to their mentor/big brother or sister – who could be the new member’s sponsor – or another member with similar interests (golf, tennis, kids the same age, same neighborhood, etc.). Meet the new member and any of their family members the first time they use the club.

Very soon after the first visit – follow up with the mentor – and call the member or family member who was in the club. Within 30 days, follow up with the member – be certain they are attending social events – and meeting new members.

Now we get to the real purpose – how to generate member referrals. Remember the original premise – you now have a friend, in fact multiple friends and they want to help you.

Get them together with other new members for what Anita Welch of Club Impressions calls an Ambassador Workshop– a lunch or cocktail event where the general manager briefs the new members on current club issues

and events. Then you go around the table and ask for names of prospective members.

It is so much easier to do this with a group of “friends.” And you have a great probability of having sponsors identified on the spot. Perhaps the headline should have been: “Taking advantage of the most motivated membership sales force in your club – your newest member”.

Gather as much information as you can during the sales process. Get everyone involved in the new members – and then ask for a referral. **BR**

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3) Wellness and fitness – The time for wellness and fitness at private clubs is now. The appointment of a wellness and fitness director is akin to a similar evolution of the membership directors’ position over the past 20 years. Clubs are defining this new role as a way to bring all the department heads together with a common wellness strategy. Clubs are seeing the importance of bringing in third party service providers such as massage therapists, nutritionists, physical therapists and chiropractors, as a convenience to their members, but it adds significantly to the member experience. These services also offer incremental value to the club without additional dues if the member uses their insurance. With an overall wellness strategy for your club, your staff and members will reap the rewards of an overall healthier club.

2) Member experience – The expectation of a total member experience is an emerging trend that will continue to grow in 2013. Clubs must not only provide for members’ business and social requirements, but also for wellness and lifestyle needs. So how do you define the member experience? By product, facility, governance or service quality... or is it the intangible? The member experience is different for every member, but to create a great member experience a strong emphasis must be placed on the club’s culture, history, traditions, image, and governance. The member experience is that special feeling members sense when they come “home” to their club; an experience based on personalized service and a feeling of pride because of intangibles that can’t get anywhere else.

1) Education – One of the biggest trends of 2013 is club governance and board of directors’ education. Get your board on board. Raise and discuss governance issues with your president, board and committee members. Define your club’s short-term and long-term strategic plan and goals. It’s important for both the general manager and the board to participate in education and professional development programs geared to moving the club forward. BoardRoom Institute is the resource of choice for your board’s educational requirements, just as the CMAA, with its many educational components is the choice for your general manager. **BR**

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