

New Membership Marketing Series: "Going Tactical!" - Introduction

By Bob Bodman

I grew up in Southwestern Connecticut and began my club career shagging balls on the driving range, caddying and later bussing tables for a private country club. I cut my teeth, however, in the dining room of a city club on top of a high rise office building as a Wine Steward and Maitre'D. Later still, I managed several private city and country clubs.

In all, my early club management career knew only of the traditionalist culture of private clubs. Such traditionalist culture involved waiting lists to join, admissions committees, nominating processes and the gauntlet that new member candidates needed to walk through, regardless of their wealth, notoriety or social status. On the floor, everything operated in an unspoken manner, as the traditions and standards were never tested or changed, but simply passed on -- "*This seat belongs to Mr. Warner at lunch on Wednesdays and Fridays,*" etc... You didn't break rank, move the furniture or fiddle with the menu (except to change the "soup of the day.") You even had to think twice about dusting the old framed portraits in the hallway.

This article series, however, is not about the importance of maintaining tradition or developing a long-term membership growth plan. Having written numerous articles on the necessity and importance of Strategic Membership Marketing and Long Range Planning, I still maintain that the best approach to membership growth and the health and perpetuation of a club's culture lies in its strategic planning. Clubs intuitively know it is imperative to plan strategically. The reality is: "We need to sell memberships now." This article is about "Going Tactical!"

I am still a little apprehensive to delve into the topic of this article, not for lack of resolve or passion for the subject, but rather that much of the club industry is still rooted "back there," and is still resistant to certain membership marketing realities. One reality is that the primary purpose of private clubs, indeed the reasons for their existence, has been irrevocably altered. People joining clubs today are simply joining for different reasons than they did 20 years ago. Another reality is that many newer private clubs were developed as an amenity to commercial and residential real estate developments, which has created a less-than-traditional culture. Other significant changes in technology, economics, psychology and sociology have pulled at the "traditional" fabric of private clubs. In this regard, private clubs have been evolving and adapting all along, but one area has been slow to change -- membership sales.

Below is our Top Ten List of Membership Tactics that can be deployed in a short term. In subsequent articles I will be expounding on these in much more detail.

1. Campaign Management - Pre-planned series of targeted marketing campaigns with target deadlines.
2. Membership Sales by Contract - Off-site, commission-only, represented membership sales in lieu of or in support of an on-staff Membership Director.

3. Pricing Structure - Substantial review and revised Initiation Fee/Privileges pricing structure.
4. Integrate Members into the Referral Process - Programming to greater involvement of the members in referral and sponsorship.
5. Customize Membership Types - Developing new and substantially revised, forward-looking categories of membership.
6. Modernize the Bylaws - Review and changes to the Bylaws to allow for new membership offerings, pricing, terms, etc.
7. Club Communications Director - The role and importance of this new position-type in membership marketing and in current member usage and appreciation of the club.
8. Community Alliances - Opening up new channels of marketing by aligning with key organizations that fit the club's targeted categories and objectives.
9. Almost-Member Programming - Programming activities and events that involve (target) the people on prospect list to not only demonstrate the club's features, but will "put the prospect into the picture."
10. Benefits are Better than Features - Developing and focusing marketing communications and contact discussions on the "benefits" of being a member, versus emphasizing the club's awesome features.

To learn more about any of the above tactics, as well as Strategic Membership Marketing, Contact Bob Bodman, President of Club Resources 800-267-6758 or by email: Bob@ClubResources.com