

The Business We're Really In

“With all thy getting, get thee understanding.....”

By

**Gregg Patterson, General Manager
The Beach Club**

What Are We Really Selling?

Clubs are in the business of selling community. Prospective members talk about buying “stuff”---a clubhouse, dining room or golf course---but what they really want to buy is community. The rest are just details, “stuff” used as an excuse to experience community. Huh???

This truth was dramatized to me recently when a family of five, already a member of an area club similar in “stuff” to our own, decided to join our club---a two year process---and to release their other membership once accepted. During my new member orientation (which included mother, father and three young children and is required before activating a club membership) I asked them why they joined our club given their long relationship with our rival. Easy decision they said---the member community and the special member / staff relationship at our club provided the “warm embrace” that they were seeking for their growing family. Our “stuff” was good, as was their other club’s, *but our community was better*. They were buying community.

Why Do People Buy?

The fundamental building blocks of the club community are the need to belong to a group with a commonality of interest and a basic alignment of core values amongst the participants. People naturally want to be with others who share an interest in the same activities---be it golf or books. They seek out a tribe that supports their values.

We in the club business tend to focus on externalities, the tangible “stuff” of buildings, menus, driveways and irrigation systems. But all of this “stuff” is there to facilitate relationships---on the golf course, in the clubhouse, over dinner. These relationships satisfy the psychic needs of people everywhere, the need for tribe, the need for team, the need for community. Those relationships are the ultimate magnet for new members, the ultimate cement for member loyalty.

People may join clubs initially for “stuff” but they stay because of people reasons, that is, they genuinely enjoy the company of their fellow members, they like the way they think

on critical issues and they enjoy the service community that's been assembled. Bricks and mortar attract but do not sustain. In the final analysis, the sense of community wins.

What is Community?

Communities are groups of people connected by common needs, purposes, identity, values and information in a series of interlocking relationships. Clubs are special because they're filled with people who have chosen to join a unique community.

Within a club, there are always multiple "sub-communities" within the membership (tennis players versus bridge players, dining room staff versus golf course staff). But they are all linked to the larger community---physically, experientially, emotionally---and have a vested self-interest in the success of the larger club community.

What Do You Need to Do to Create Community?

- Admit the right personalities and you'll create community. This isn't about being elitist, it's about creating a membership that shares common values and interests so that they create an environment that "brings them back for more," week after week and year after year.
- Create shared experiences and stories. You need universal events where all members come together for a special celebration---perhaps a Fourth of July fireworks extravaganza or a grand lighting of the Christmas tree. And each of the smaller tribes within the larger community need the same type of experience on a more intimate level---the men's locker room for golfers and the club's tennis championship for the tennis players.

Shared stories highlight the special relationships between people and "things" within a community, distinguishing that community from others that exist in "the other world." Shared stories detailing a mythical past, a proud history or an interesting present bind communities together. Members repeat stories that dramatize certain themes---a come from behind victory in golf; a candidate rejected; building the new clubhouse without an assessment; the manager as wedding officiant. Each story tells the listener about the unique culture and, through anecdote, highlights "the good" and "the bad."

- Build familiarity between people. People love to watch people. Great communities provide frequent opportunities for people watching. Members like to see other members, to have their paths cross (in a common foyer or hallway, for instance) to observe others while seated (windows in a dining room that provide a view of members walking by). Seeing people and speaking to people with frequency creates

familiarity. There must be no strangers within the club. Familiarity is critical to community.

- Acknowledge and embrace the family. Clubs should promote family celebrations, be they weddings or holiday dinners. Most golf clubs will hold clinics for children during the summer months. Since “family trumps everything,” I think it imperative that the family experience be made a more integral part of the club experience, thereby broadening the appeal, increasing utilization and deepening the emotional attachment of members to the club community.

Clubs bring members and friends together in moments of personal celebration or tragedy---birth, graduation, marriage and death. Community is there to comfort and embrace. Clubs “sell” those moments and dramatize their value to members and staff alike.

- Encourage public and open discussion of critical club issues. Newsletters should be filled with substantive issues, controversies should be aired each month, conversation between varied member groups should be encouraged, issues should be openly debated. Some would suggest that such “controversy” diminishes community when evidence suggests that it actually builds community through the review of common issues, unique to that community. Hiding information or avoiding dialogue creates suspicions and distrust---the very things which destroy community. Welding produces heat and so too do controversies but the end result are a far stronger product and a far more resilient community.
- Use club leaders to amplify community. Clubs need great board members who speak to community when they adopt policies and programs. Clubs need great managers who build staff community by selecting the right people and nurturing their inclusion.
- Don’t forget the staff community. Clubs have lower staff turnover than in any other part of the hospitality business. It’s not because of the money---good waiters can do far better in a cash tip environment. Ask them why they stay and you’ll be pleased to know that they stay because of the people they work with and the people they serve---the same sense of community that members enjoy. General managers know this and do what they can to create the right type of relationships among the employee team and between the employee team and the membership. The staff are a critical extension of the manager in every part of the club every day of the week.

Get Thee Community

Club leaders and club managers need to see what we’re selling a little differently. We may think we’re selling food and beverage, but what we’re really selling is the social encounter realized through the culinary experience. We may think we’re answering phones and providing information at the front desk, but what we’re really doing is

extending the warm communal embrace to all who call or visit. We may be explaining rules and regulations to member children when we hold our ten-year-old orientation, but what we're really doing is socializing the next generation of club members. Once we understand the business we're really in---creating communities---club managers will change the programs we provide, the emphasis we give to various events, the strategic directions we adopt and the selection criteria we use for the people we hire---as managers and as board members---to "sell" the real club experience. Community attracts and community "sells." Members join and stay. Staff join and stay. Guests see it when they visit.

Get thee community. It sells.