

The Senior Member Dilemma

{Most clubs have a variety of market segments, each with their own unique expectations regarding their club, and future enhancement of the facilities. This article will focus on dealing with the special characteristics of those members 70 years of age and older.}

You may have heard this male phrase ‘Women – You can’t live with them and you can’t live without them.’ I am sure women can say the same thing about men. When it comes to senior members, other groups within the average private club today may cut the saying short to just “can’t live with them.” As management you may be sympathetic to this point of view.

This article will deal with senior members and their impact on change management. Before we progress further we must make a qualification. There are clubs where the membership is exclusively senior. Even in these clubs, all members may not agree on each issue. However, the purpose of this article is to examine those clubs with diversified memberships and consider how to manage the interaction of senior needs to those of the other market segments ages 35 to 65. The discussion will revolve around the concept of change, which can often come with a requirement for capital investment in facilities or services

CHARACTERISTICS OF SENIORS

It is well established that the needs and expectations of older members can vary greatly from those who are considered middle aged. Physiological patterns that are characteristic of seniors may include:

- Resistance to change
- A financially conservative nature
- Greater orientation to short term issues
- A need for more extensive communication from the leadership

These patterns effect clubs in a variety of ways. There may be lower incremental sales within the senior class. Seniors are less likely to spend heavily in the golf shop or be willing to pay for higher ticket items in the dining rooms. They can be more health conscience, therefore eat less, while at the same time they look for value in menu pricing and portion size. They like tradition and are less experimental.

Seniors know that their life span, and present resources, are limited. They are concerned that their resources will last, that there is enough to take care of themselves, a surviving spouse or their children and grandchildren.

Obviously there are individual exceptions to this definition of senior members. There are many great, visionary club leaders who are well into their 70's. However, it is generally accepted that these characteristics are common place within a majority of those over 70.

These are certainly different characteristics that would normally be found in younger or middle aged members. Both of these groups are more risk tolerant. Younger members are more willing to spend money on luxury items and mortgage the future. They believe they will be around for a long time and are attuned to long-term problem solving to their personal benefit. Seniors have a concern for anything that will disrupt their normal enjoyment of the club or add to their present financial burden. These differences can cause division among groups when it comes to change.

SENIOR DISCOUNTING

Another divisive issue between groups may come from discounting. Private clubs have historically divide members by age for the purpose of offering incentives or financial discounts. Since seniors more likely have been members of the club for a longer period of time, they most likely have risen within the social and power structures of the club. As club leaders they have recognized the potential fixed income nature inherent to senior status. The argument has also prevailed that long-term members have supported the club for sometime, and therefore, deserve a discount in their waning years. Therefore, many clubs offer senior members, those individuals who have reached the age of 65-70 years, reduced fee structures.

There are obvious exceptions to this rule, where the club is very high end and only the very affluent belong or where the average age of the membership approaches the late 60's. In these cases offering discounts to seniors would be discounting everyone to no reliable end.

Normally it is not the senior dues discount or the difference in belief systems that becomes an issue with rest of the membership. Generally they understand these differences and the traditions that have been developed over many years. In fact younger members look forward to taking advantage of senior opportunities that may be available in their own golden years.

THE REAL PROBLEM

. The real problem comes when discounted memberships include an equal vote on financial and capital replacement issues surrounding the club. A major capital project requiring member investment can be dicey when seniors are included in the voting block. Many a senior constituency has undercut normal club progress with a negative vote for the status quo.

This is where managers need to take a departure from the concern over negative forces seniors bring to the table, and focus on generating understanding of all points of view. Progressive clubs are change orientated. They believe that, by being proactive in initiating change, the future of the club will flourish. A club can veer off on the wrong path with overly aggressive plans. This is where outreaching to the senior membership class can pay dividends.

Since change requires risk, it is naturally suspect within the senior membership group. The resistance to change, combined with a conservative financial nature can have a tempering effect on the club leadership, helping to generate a balance in the planning process.

Some clubs do not allow seniors to vote. Voting or not, these clubs should still be concerned about membership retention. They do not want a mass exodus of older members due to, what they perceive as, a foolish and expensive program. The fact is that the more across the board support a project has the more potential for success. The effort necessary to generate senior member acceptance of a project can generate benefits across all member lines.

Normally, the more something is scrutinized, the greater the potential for a quality final product

THE KEY IS COMMUNICATION

The answer to generating acceptance is communication in a variety of forms. Four major communication efforts that will enhance success are:

1. Outreaching to assess needs
2. Communication through inclusion
3. Positive repetition
4. Peer marketing

The goal is to generate a positive response to change within the senior group. The club must prove that a change is needed and provide cost/value alternatives that are acceptable to senior members. Let's examine how the communication systems above can be of benefit.

1. Outreaching to assess needs.

A club must show how change will benefit the senior. The “what’s in it for them. scenario” must be cultivated. Identify concerns via survey and through focus group input. Opinions must be aired and weight given to senior needs as they relate to the future.

2. Communication through inclusion.

Be sure that seniors are represented in decision-making arena. Insure that the senior point of view is a part of the decision making process. Select visionary, respected individuals to participate. Publicize senior participation to eliminate the perception of a closed forum.

3. Positive repetition.

On going communication between the leadership and the membership is important. This is never more so than with seniors. This group has more time on their hands to talk with each other. If they have not been given the facts, or know the real story, rumors can invade to discussion and undermine progress.

Keep all factions up-to-date on the issues. This is not to say that you need to release every detail or communicate brainstorming concepts before there is clear consensus. Be clear, concise and timely with reports. When the truth is not available they will make up their own version of reality.

4. Peer marketing.

Seniors have had many years to form relationships built on trust. They can be more amenable to other points of view if those views come from one of their own. Organize a select group of visionary seniors to promote change within the rank and file. There can be strength in numbers. An organized marketing effort of senior on senior can have the greatest impact.

SOLVING THE DILEMMA

In most cases behavior is effected by emotion. Financial security, and the unknowns associated with change, are emotional issues. The purpose of these four communication tools is to diffuse emotions. Once the issues are on a logical plain, the easier it will be to prove how change will provide the elements necessary for long term success.

The strength of the senior impact can be felt in their regular use of the club. Human activity brings warmth to bricks and mortar. It can also be felt in the ability to temper change. In many cases adopting program aspects that alleviate senior concerns may actually strengthen the overall program.

Management needs to be proactive in regarding senior groups. Help lead volunteer leaders through potential minefields by using a sound logical approach to communication. Be concerned with efforts to bypass this constituency because they are perceived to be out of touch. Who knows? When it comes to seniors, the truth may be, “you can’t live without them.”

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