

# 8 Marketing and Membership

## Introduction

**S**tudents will often hear that membership is the lifeblood of clubs. This simply means that without members, clubs would cease to exist. This is true for both not-for-profit and for-profit clubs. The focus of this chapter is on membership, that is, who are the members and why do they join; and marketing, that is club activities directed at retaining existing members and recruiting prospective members. The reason that we are combining a discussion of marketing with one of membership, is because it is hard to separate the two functions in clubs. When we use the word ‘marketing’, we are referring to marketing to members, either current or prospective. At one time, marketing was not within managers’ lexicon. However, as we have alluded to several times, clubs must be much more outwardly focused now than they were a generation ago. We will talk more about marketing, but let’s first examine why members join clubs.

## Why members join clubs

**M**embership in clubs offers many advantages, albeit at a cost. The reasons that are generally given for joining a club include: ‘to golf’, ‘to network’, ‘to get ahead in business’, ‘because my father was a member’. Other reasons that people join clubs, which they might not readily admit, would include prestige, status, peer pressure, conformity, or to reward themselves.

Jim Butler, CCM, CEO of ClubBenchmarking, has delved deeply into this area while looking at the relationships among motivations for joining, member satisfaction, and member loyalty. In his research (<https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/etd/15886>), he begins by looking at members’ motivations for joining a club (and remaining as members or leaving). Dr. Butler examines member motivations for joining from a couple of perspectives. First, he suggests that there are both external and internal drivers that motivate people to join clubs. Examples of external drivers include facilities, the environments (including weather), the club culture, and other characteristics of the club (including reputation).

In addition to these external factors, members also have internal reasons for joining including the ability to relax, socialize, receive high levels of personal service and to enjoy certain health benefits.

Using slightly different terminology, Dr. Butler suggests that there are usually a combination of ‘push’ and ‘pull’ reasons prompting a member to join a club. Push factors (member driven) are those factors which meet members’ needs and can include some of those listed above: socializing, business, health, athletic activities, etc. Pull factors (club driven) are tangible aspects/features of the club and can include: facilities, weather, reputation and events offered. In one case study, Jim found that the landscaping (and related factors) was actually the main thing that newer members liked about the club and which prompted them to join. This came as a surprise to some of the longer-tenured members.

Finally, Dr. Butler points out that motivators can be different for different demographics groups – men, women, baby boomers, Generation X, etc. Society is often guilty of making generalizations about entire cohorts when, in fact, sub groups within cohorts may exist. One example of this is discussed in an article exploring ‘younger’ and ‘older’ members. In her research, Knutson (2001) found significant differences in the behaviours of club members between 50 and 64 and those 65 and older.

The reason that these factors are so important is that managers can use this information to better understand what attracts members to their club, current member needs in determining which services to offer, and how and to whom to market them. Ideally, the ability to capitalize on this information will increase member satisfaction, loyalty, and retention.

## The membership process

**A**fter a prospective member become sufficiently motivated to apply, two things must happen for them to become a club member – the process is similar in most clubs.

In for-profit clubs, membership applications are made directly to the appointed staff person, who may be the general manager, membership director, or in one club we know of, the director of golf. Regardless of whom the point of contact is, interviews are conducted, the candidate’s background is vetted and then the decision is made by a staff member or the owner.

In not-for-profit clubs, it is quite different. In more exclusive clubs, direct applications/letters of interest are discouraged or simply not accepted. Instead,

prospective members must be referred, that is nominated, by a current member who serves as a sponsor. From there, the process goes through a series of steps. Some clubs require an additional sponsor while others require multiple sponsors. Then, a complete application is filed including personal references. The entire packet then goes to a membership committee, which vets the candidate by calling references, checking the candidate's background (including a credit check) and considers the general eligibility of the candidate. During this process, the candidate will be interviewed. Also, some clubs will 'post' the fact that a certain candidate is under consideration and invite the general membership to comment on their eligibility. If enough members (or even one in some cases) object to the candidacy, the application will not move forward.

Remember, too, from Chapter 3 that a candidate must first meet the basic threshold for admission. For instance, a candidate will need a university degree for admission to a university club, be of a certain age, work in the appropriate profession, etc. Finally, one membership criteria that most clubs have is that members must be of 'good character' however the club chooses to define it.

After the vetting stage is over, the membership committee moves the packet forward (or not) with a recommendation to either a secondary committee or, in most cases, it goes directly to the board of directors which votes on the candidacy. Admittance is accompanied by a letter of approval to the candidate, an information packet and an invoice for the initiation fee, first month's dues, and whatever other up-front fees are applicable.

Sometimes it is not as straightforward as this. For clubs with waiting lists, gaining admittance will only put the candidate at the bottom of the list, which can represent an additional wait of up to five years or more. Other clubs may have a policy where the candidate is first admitted as a social member (with limited privileges) for a year or more before they are again considered for full admission.

Finally, there is another staff member within the organization who sometimes plays a greater or lesser role in the process but is becoming increasingly important in clubs – that is the position of membership director (sometimes called the marketing and membership director). They may have as central a role as actively recruiting members, to one of just processing the paperwork and orienting new members – it varies from club to club. More will be said about the role of this position later in the chapter.