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## How Do Private Clubs Attract – and Keep – Younger Members?

**AS MANY PRIVATE CLUBS SLOWLY REBUILD, THERE'S ALSO THE REALIZATION THAT THE OLD METHODS OF RECRUITING AND RETAINING PRIVATE CLUB MEMBERS HAVE GONE THE WAY OF THAT OLD SET OF PERSIMMON DRIVERS.**

So private clubs slowing are tweaking their business models, shaping and developing innovative ways to grow their membership.

How important is it to be attracting younger members? Well, consider this:

"Young families are the heartbeat of Woodfield Country Club, and our average age is 49," opines Eben Molloy, general manager of the club located in Boca Raton, FL. "We have always been a family friendly club, with more than 1,000 children living in our community. Continuing to attract that demographic is our priority.

"I wouldn't want to give a 'one size fits all' solution. However, younger members offer an opportunity for clubs to grow by becoming entwined in the members' family structure. When young families are immersed, they don't want to give up the club lifestyle. It becomes a part of who they are," Molloy explained.

"I think 'younger' is subjective, based on your market," explained Rachel Carter, Member Services Director, Monterey Peninsula Country Club, Pebble Beach, CA

"For example, at more established, high end clubs in second home markets, 'younger' might mean in ones' 50s and still working because the majority of the membership is retired. In other neighborhood clubs, 'younger' might mean young families in their late 20s and early 30s.

"It's important to continuously attract new members who are below your average age to build a strong roster into the future. If you attract only one age group, you are destined for a challenge down the road when they all reach an age where they might resign or downgrade their memberships. Plus, diversity is good for a community," Carter added.

"It's a consistent theme we hear around the country," suggested Frank Gore of Gore golf and chief analyst with

BoardRoom's Distinguished Clubs of the World program. "Many clubs are going to age out at about the same time and the needs for the next generation of members is significant in almost every market.

"Getting younger is a key part of the strategy most clubs must consider," Gore maintains.

"Even if you are a retirement club, younger members are critical for financial sustainability," espouses Rick Coyne, CEO of ClubMark and executive director of the Private Club Marketing Association (PCMA).

"Once a club is labeled 'senior citizen' that's what it becomes. However, attracting younger members requires commitment and a willingness to focus on relevant lifestyle offerings. Golf will always be important, but younger members want a more rounded and family inclusive environment and lifestyle experience."

No question, 'attracting new, young members' at the top of the list for many clubs. The Jonathan Club in Los Angeles has always had a vibrant junior program and it "continues to develop opportunities to invigorate and engage our younger members," stressed general manager Matt Allnatt.

"Our foundation starts with our summer youth program. At this time members' children – our 'legacies' – begin their memories at our club. These legacies are required to become junior members at age 25.

"In the last three years we have started preparing 'them' and parents by having events to help assist them with the process of becoming a member and introducing them to current junior members," he added.

"Since the economic downturn, Jonathan Club has been much more active in our recruitment since this segment on a percentage basis, suffered the most losses of all our categories. Through outreach and policy changes we have rebuilt this group to over 400 junior members," Allnatt enthused.

Down the road at the Beach Club of Santa Monica, general manager Gregg Patterson, raises a tone of caution:

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# WHAT THE YOUNGER GENERATION WANTS!

BY GREGG PATTERSON

The next generation wants what everyone wants, but they want those needs delivered differently than earlier generations. Wants don't change. But the way those wants get fed does.

The wants of the younger generation can be summed up in a number of questions they're asking themselves, consciously or unconsciously, every time they consider the club, use the club or remember the club.

Did they know ME as ME??? Did they remember my name, my face, my likes and dislikes, my passions, my last visit to the club? Did they 'customize' the experience to fit ME???

Did they know ME as a member of The Younger Generation? Were the goods, services, programs and facilities offered appropriate to someone of my age, my sex, my education, my income?

Did they equal my expectations? Did they equal or exceed the 'level of performance' I expected from the goods, services, programs and facilities offered?

Did they make my life easier? Did they make 'doing' the things I like doing easier to do?

Did they make my life better? Did they give me dignity, status and The Buzz? Did I feel better having visited? Did I miss the 'good opportunities' that visiting would provide?

Did they do what they do differently than I can get it someplace else? Did they provide 'memorable moments' and 'telling details' that distinguish them from the competition and from the other places I could have gone to experience the same thing?

Did they help me create new relationships? Did they expand my social network?

Did they make me part of a special community? Did they show me the virtues of 'tribe' and 'the club tribe' and did that tribe give me The Warm Embrace, initiate me into the fold and make me 'one' with the tribal experience?

The younger generation was born 'entitled.' They've been told since birth that they're 'special' and that their 'specialness' is innate, not earned, a 'right' to which they're entitled regardless of performance.

Status is assumed, and respect for that status is demanded. If the younger generation could have it their way, they'd like everything delivered INSTANTLY, PERFECTLY and delivered FREE.

The younger generation wants less complexity, because they're doing so much all the time they've got little time for focusing on any one thing they do. A few clicks on the United app and the tickets ordered, the trip's booked.

The younger generation wants what they want, 'customized.' Starbucks can do it, why not your dining room?

The younger generation wants the club to 'read their mind.' Amazon has the algorithm to do so. Why not the club?

The younger generation wants instant communications, everywhere, about everything, coming to them, with no effort. FaceBook and Twitter deliver it, continuously, without being asked. Why can't the club?

The younger generation wants the stuff they want when they want it - Netflix delivers flicks 24/7 and they expect to play three holes of golf on 14,15 and 16 mid-mornings on Saturdays.

The younger generation sees women as equals and prime decision makers in the partnership they may or may not call 'marriage.' More women are graduating from college than men, entering the professions in greater numbers than men and earning more money than men, and they expect the club to give them equal dignity, status, deference and recognition as the men.

The younger generation sees children as 'partners' in the decision making process, more inclined to focus on the kids and do what the kids want than earlier generations, and they expect the club to create an experience that's not only 'kid friendly' but 'Kid Inspirational.'

Bottom line for the younger generation, if the kids aren't buzzed by the club and crying to visit, chances are the parents won't be interested either.

The younger generation has a low threshold of boredom and wants more 'buzz per minute' from their entertainment. They want color and action and stimulation continuously at the movies and they expect the club to do likewise.

The younger generation is less concerned with 'the stuff' than they are with 'the experience.' They get more joy from the trip they took than the car they drive and expect the round of golf to be more filling than the clubs they used.

The younger generation wants to escape from adulthood, from the over-programmed journey from youth through college and into the market place, so they get married later, get careers later, clinging to the memories of fraternity experiences from days long past and they expect the club to provide opportunities to 'retreat to their youth', to release their 'animal spirits' and to enjoy moments forbidden in their corporate lives.

The younger generation wants what everyone's always wanted, but they want their wants satisfied differently. And that's the challenge! **BR**

"It's important to create a club that's attractive to members of ALL ages. We need to be 'all things to all people.' Keeping the peace between warring 'tribes' will always be a challenge – the younger generation and the older generation see the world through different eyes!" Patterson intoned.

"Younger members are part of the 'demographic mix' needed to keep a club's membership full-up. However, every market segment at the club is 'key to making the club a success, all important, none inconsequential. Although clubs need to be a magnet attraction for the younger generation, the other segments can't be neglected. The future will come, but when the future comes, a healthy club will still have a broad based demographic mix," Patterson reminded.

"Of course younger members are important for the future of clubs but we must be careful not to emphasize this segment," Allnatt added. "In many cases they (younger members) do pay reduced dues and their spending patterns, normally because of their economic situation, are not as great as our 'regular' members.

Still for younger members, especially potential members with families, a club's amenities are key.

"First, this is not a new condition, but rather a cyclical one," inject Bob Bodman, principal with Club Resources, a membership marketing consulting firm.

"For example, one club that we consulted with about 10 years ago had originally been formed as a family club in 1953. By the 1990s the membership had aged to a point where members felt they no longer needed the pool or the tennis courts, so they filled in the pool, converted it to a practice green and paved over the tennis courts for extra parking.

"Today, 60 years later, that same club is searching for ways to attract the younger membership market again. That's not to say that the young family market has returned in the same way as it was in 1953, but there are similarities, to be sure," Bodman suggested.

"Moms still like to relax by the pool, reading or talking to other moms, while their kids spend the day jumping in and playing Marco Polo. Kids still line up at the snack bar for ice cream and still spend their summer days trying to beat their brother in tennis. Some things don't change."

But many things do change for young families with and without children.

"One of the biggest changes, aside from moms on iPads instead of reading books by the pool, is the new families' core values. This is the driving force, and one of the newer, more powerful core values of the new, young family profile is 'pragmatism.'

"Making a decision to join a private club, much like all of the major buying decisions in their lives, requires passing a key test: 'Does this purchase make sense and does it make me look

smart for choosing it. Does this decision make my life easier, simpler, and more effective? Will it solve some of my current life's problems or just add costs?'" Bodman explained.

And making the decision is often dependent upon the amenities a private club can offer younger members and their families.

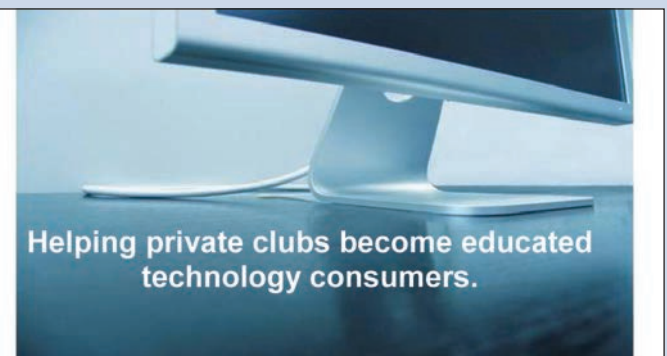
"Amenities such as fitness and spa services are important, but programming is of major importance as well," Coyne injected.

"Many Internet and news sources point to the fact that females are making 75 percent of all buying decisions and 85 percent of discretionary buying decisions. The significance is obvious. Golf may be *his* passion, but if *she's* not seeing what's important to her, and/or her kids, they will be shopping for a club that does.

"In nearly all of our recent club surveys, social activities and dining are the most important reasons for joining and the most important reasons for staying. This is especially true for the younger members. They are looking for the full lifestyle experience. Children's amenities at the pool, multiple casual dining venues, i.e. sports bars, are immensely popular and well used at clubs that have made the transition.

"Recently we've talked about the club as a 360 degree environment. Traditionally, the majority of a club's band width of time, energy and programming, has been absorbed by

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golf. Attracting younger members means that the band width must change in proportion to relevancy of activities the younger family wants and needs. In male-dominated board rooms, this is one of the most difficult hurdles for a club to cross," Coyne suggested.

At the Jonathan Club, Allnatt says his "younger members are working for: Excellent athletic facilities, networking opportunities, getting involved in the club committee system; events that encourage interaction with other juniors not, only of our club but other clubs, and parties that are relevant to their age bracket – beer tastings, beer pong tournaments, downtown scavenger hunts, and March Madness events."

And, 'connectedness' is a 'must.' For younger members being connected is part of their lifestyles and while some clubs are making changes more rapidly, others are still lamenting the cell phone as a fact of life, let alone more advanced technologies in sacrosanct clubhouses. The Union Club of Cleveland (*our cover story*) is an excellent example of how some of today's private clubs are addressing technology and change and members' needs.

"Communication technology and the need to always 'be available', wellness and limited leisure time are the new realities," Coyne suggested.

"This reflects on policies that must be in tune. There is a significant difference in needs and preference between the young and old that changes with every generation. The expectation of the old is that you conform to their standards. Unfortunately, not too many young families want to step out of the time machine and back into the 60s or 70s. The realities of today require that change is inevitable. The longer it takes the club to realize this, the harder the road to recovery."

As technology changes so do members' needs.

"The younger adult members need more technology, but a club needs rules related to social media," advised Frank Gore. "Strong WiFi, and comfortable places to use cell phones and tablets are necessary. They need a place to print off documents, boarding passes and Google maps, and all club communications need to be easy to read on mobile devices.

"Young members want to communicate via texting and blogs, electronic newsletters readable in flip-form not PDF, and robust colorful email blasts promoting events," Gore added.

"Clubs can satisfy many of these needs with enhanced levels of family programming, such as lessons and clinics, field trips, movie nights, pool parties, camp outs, etc. and also by providing new family-type facilities, like a movie theater, indoor game room, after school activity center, practice soccer/volleyball fields, arts and crafts rooms, etc.," Bodman added. "And clubs can get good ideas from current members through focus groups, task groups and surveys."

Joining a private club can be a costly proposition, so how much 'financial latitude' do clubs give younger members? Perhaps Patterson says it best:

"The younger generation earns more than ever before, but the dollars are being stretched to buy more things than ever before. Private school for the kids. Three clubs not one. More stuff. More opportunities to spend.

"They've got the money, but are over-spending what they've got. Clubs have to acknowledge these fiscal constraints...what I call the 'more but less' collision.

"Make the club a magnet attraction and 'hook 'em, then make the transition as financially easy as possible... 'ages and stages' with the early stage lower admissions and lower dues with progressive increases in each until full membership pricing is achieved.

"As long as it fits into their monthly budget for discretionary dollars, and as long as the value equation (value = experience-cost) is high (that is, the experience received is far higher than the price paid), a 'laddered' approach to finances makes sense," Patterson outlined.

"Forty is the new 30," GM Allnatt suggests. "Our younger members are juggling harder to establish a financial founda-

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tion. At Jonathan Club we have a very aggressive program for our juniors to be able to ‘mortgage’ the cost of joining. We also offer financial incentive to ‘legacy’ juniors, and juniors also receive a discount in their due.

“For non-junior oriented club events we also offer incentives for them to attend to help them orient to the club and encourage the “cross-generational” focus of our club. The major difference between our younger and older members are their financial capabilities,” Allnatt added. “We have found that new younger members are proud of belonging to the club...they value the institution and its rules.

“One interesting note...we actually find that our ‘midlife crisis’ members are the most vocal about the club’s dress codes etc.,” Allnatt injected.

“I think financial latitude is important,” commented Carter. “Young families are strained for time and usually for cash flow as well. Clubs have to make sure they align the cost of being a member with the value the family will receive. If their time is limited, they may only be at the club a couple times a month, in which case, the cost has to justify that usage.

“At Monterey Peninsula Country Club, we created a Junior Associate category of membership in the winter of 2011 and offered a tiered program for paying for the initiation fee, and also tiered the dues based on age (which we equated to potential use patterns).

“The program has been extremely successful for us and well received by the existing members. In only 18 months, we have 18 new members in the category. So yes, I do think financial latitude is important for younger members,” Carter added.

Rick Coyne suggests that “offering vesting or time payments on initiation fees as well as a tiered dues structure simply makes demographic sense in order to attract young members early and allow them to grow into the full membership.

“Many clubs have disdain for social or sports memberships, but looking at the lifetime membership value of these categories allows a different perspective. The dues income, the potential for upgrade, the potential for referrals, and the ancillary spending become substantial opportunities if the club is paying attention.

“The key is having a strategy that drives interest in referrals and upgrades. Getting the pro staff engaged in fun, socially driven golf learning and/or improvement programs at very low to no cost is a necessary part of the commitment,” Coyne maintains.

And how do clubs help ‘acculturate’ and then retain younger members for the long run?

“Engage, engage, engage,” stressed Allnatt. “Have mentors involved in the junior programs. Allow juniors, by giving incentives, to attend some of the club’s more traditional

events and make sure that they are given the opportunity to meet and greet senior members. Make sure that your junior committee liaisons interact with all committees and have a newsletter/blog that can be used to update juniors on the club’s happenings.”

Coyne says clubs must “understand how important it is to get ‘her’ engaged so ‘he’ can play golf. Recognize and commit the entire staff to drive programming around the issue of time, family and lifestyle experience. Remember the family with children under age 11 will have different needs than those with kids 11 to 17.

“Smaller, more focused events and activities will acclimate them quicker. Top contender clubs have recognized that acculturating new members of every age is crucial to new referrals as new members may be five times more likely to refer a new member if they are having fun. Build a communications strategy for new members for at least the first 120 days of membership,” Coyne added.

“Woodfield’s younger generation is typically the first to latch onto new trends,” outlined GM Eben Molloy.

“From technology to food to fashion, they are at the forefront. Healthy food choices for both adults and children are a staple on our menus, and we offer a variety of customized wellness programs to support fitness trends. Fortunately, all of our members have embraced these changes.

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"We are not trying to make young members fit into an outdated club structure. Our club culture complements younger members' lifestyle. Children are truly welcome here.

"Members can wear shorts at lunch and jeans are allowed most of the time - even the fashionably ripped designer jeans! We have WiFi throughout the club and simply ask members to put their cell phones on the silent mode.

"As a mandatory membership community, we do not have the same attrition challenges as other clubs. A dissatisfied member actually has to move out of the community in order to leave the club. However, we always strive for membership satisfaction and track our success rate annually with member surveys so that we know where we need to improve," he stressed.

"Younger members want to be with and learn from the older and more experienced community leaders who are club members," explained Frank Gore.

"Mentoring programs can be very powerful. Key contacts and building relationships with the community's affluent tenured members are great reasons for younger people to want to become members.

"But *relevancy* is key. The club must be relevant to the new affluent consumer. The faster and less formal service

food and beverage product and technology upgrades are all part of the member experience that must be relevant.

"Young people need private clubs and they like to be part of private clubs. Facebook is the world's largest club, for example. The concept of the *third place* that has made Starbucks so successful needs to be understood. The first place is our home; the second place is our work. For decades the third place was a private club. Private clubs can be the third place again if they are relevant."

## PUBLISHER'S FINAL THOUGHTS

Many private clubs have marketed to and enlisted younger members but clubs often don't have a usage or retention program aimed at these members. So, it's realistic to see why many of these younger members quit their club over time.

Finances also can be an issue. I've heard many times that these younger members quit because of the cost of being a member. Yes, many have been shell shocked after they receive their first invoices. Food and beverage, dues, cart fees, tournaments and guest fees all add up. Younger members leaving because they can't afford it is one thing, but in many cases they quit because they don't see the value for what they are spending.

So for members, the value must be there, especially with a club's intangibles. Let's start with the basics before we dealing with usage and retention.

To attract qualified members and keep them, your club must start with the board's involvement. Use your board members' influence to attract new members. Include the board members' names on the club's letterhead, and collateral material presented to prospective members.

The club needs an orientation program with well documented usage and retention plans, and it must be a program that includes all department heads, as well as general manager and board of governors.

Use your membership committee for club tours, for introductions to other members; connect them with other potential golfers.

Initiate a quarterly new member orientation, and I recommend a progressive dinner that focuses on new members with similar interests at the same table with one board member and a manager.

Each family member using the club should meet with the club's general manager because a private meeting creates an opportunity for both the GM and family to learn more about the club's operation and culture. And it's very important their children be included throughout the whole orientation process.

Use your club's marketing tools to introduce new members. Feature members in the newsletter, with family photos and information that includes occupations, hobbies, notable accomplishments and favorite club activities.

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The networking process becomes vitally important so coordinated events like after hours business sessions featuring guest speakers are also a great way to introduce your new members to other clubs members.

All new golf members should be identified by special colored bag tags so that when other members notice the colored bag tag they can introduce themselves and welcome the new members to the club.

I'd also recommend colored napkins at the dinner tables for all new members...another small detail that becomes so important as your members become accustomed to one another.

Each manager – the chef, the general manager, the clubhouse manager, the club's golf course superintendent and head golf professional – should meet with each new member, because much of this is the start to establishing member pride and preserving the club traditions and culture.

I also recommend a focus group with all new members every 90 days. This can start with new members having lunch with the GM and board president. This focus group allows new members to clarify and better understand the club's bylaws, regulations and culture, and allows the club to understand what makes new members unhappy and of course, what keeps them happy.

Younger members when they join a club are looking for easy access to tee times, a quick round of golf, competition, safety for their family, golf learning programs for their children and spouse, and they desire a great practice facility (with lights at night, if possible).

Young members want activities for their entire family, including fitness facilities, karate and Zumba programs, a yearlong junior golf program, and a play zone for their younger kids, and great family activities such as bocce or croquet.

Clubs must consider more liberal attitudes and policies regarding technology and personal social media use. Younger members today want and need access to their SmartPhones and iPads. They work and live in a 'connected' world, and just because they're members of a private club doesn't mean that changes.

Using various social media and the technology today is how younger members live and work. Private clubs must understand this need and make it possible if they want to attract and keep younger members, and certainly some clubs are moving quicker than others in this vital area.

Clubs should also consider more liberal and less costly guest policies...for example, include range balls at no additional charge and allow younger members to play without caddies.

Most younger members work so time for many, remains an issue. Have tee times set aside for single players to tee off shortly after sunrise. I'd recommend them playing as twosomes or threesomes. This alone is a big plus for your younger members.

Wellness and fitness is big with younger members. A wellness and fitness facility and program for all members is a plus, and a 'light' menu at your food venues with fresh vegetables from your own garden creates an additional attraction.

Most younger members aren't attracted to regular dining. They are motivated by organized events. Many clubs for example, have a family New Year's Eve event until 9 p.m., followed by an adult-only event. And of course, day care is available for all these events.

Reciprocity certainly interests younger members. Today's golfers want to play different courses. This is an issue many of clubs must face, but unfortunately, so far I haven't seen a reciprocity program that I like, or one that deals with the concerns private clubs have.

At the end of the day, it may be well and good to have strong, viable membership recruiting programs, but these will all be for naught if your club doesn't work equally hard at instilling a strong, viable retention program, because this is what keeps member long term.

At least that's the way I see it! **BR**

John G. Fornaro, publisher

*If you have comments on this article or suggestions for other topics, please contact John Fornaro at (949) 376-8889 or via email: johnf@apcd.com*



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