

Does Your Club Need a Brand New Approach?

By Larry Gulko

Ralph Waldo Emerson truly understood brand marketing when he said, “Do not go where the path may lead; go instead where there is no path, and leave a trail.”

Companies known for establishing signature brands have done just that—created new categories and dominated markets with best-selling products. Think FedEx and overnight delivery...Swatch and fashion watches...Callaway and oversized drivers. These companies have shown that once a product and brand are inseparably planted in the minds of customers, it becomes something much more valuable, and bigger, than any advertising budget you might have. Like MasterCard states...it's priceless.

Going Beyond Bland

Discussions of brand marketing might seem out of place in *Club & Resort Business*, where management attention is often focused on delivering familiar comforts. But there's a huge difference between a club with a bland offer, and a club with a distinctive brand.

As in every other business, creating a “winning brand” at a club or resort involves more than just developing a logo, tagline, brochure, or website. Rather, it's about creating and delivering a unique and emotional experience—a brand essence—that your customers (members and guests) come to recognize, receive, expect and respect, every time they use your product.

To adopt the proper branding mindset in this industry, you must first recognize what it is you're selling. It's not 18 holes, pro shop products, 19th-hole dining, or golf lessons. It's something much more grand—be it entertainment, family programs, social activities, top-level competition, or simply the opportunity to escape the urban landscape and commune with nature.

Finding the Sweet Spots

But pretty much every other club offers these things, too. To establish your club as a leading brand, you have to go further, make your club compelling, and give people a reason to make it their destination. Again, this is a mindset that doesn't require a hefty budget—just the ability to conceive and deliver premium values and phenomenal experiences. Want some examples?

• During the summer months, Willowbend Country Club on Cape Cod (Mashpee, Mass.) offers a variety of programs focused on young adults and children. One of the club's most pop-

ular events allows children to fish in the ponds—at most other clubs, the only things being fished for are lost golf balls.

• A yacht club on Long Island (Montauk, N.Y.) provides not only docks (which are as common to yacht club offers as checking accounts are to banks), but also a concierge service that generates customer loyalty—and repeat visits and purchases.

• Then there's a Boston club that identified a profile of its average member (age 45, with two children). This led it to differentiate itself by creating a formal summer children's program that has received wide acclaim, with over 400 kids enrolled. Imagine the revenues from not only the monthly camp fees, but also pro shop sales, as all those kids are outfitted with the proper gear. Talk about a huge win-win.

These clubs, and many others, have successfully established distinctive brands because they understand that customer intimacy isn't the aspiration, it's the foundation. They've made the effort to get timely, top-of-mind information about customers' “sweet spots”—their needs, attitudes, perceptions, expectations and personal values. They've discovered what will not only encourage customers to buy in, but just as importantly, what factors—emotional, financial, and psychological—will keep them away. Armed with this knowledge, they've established an emotional connection with members that drives them to consistently exceed expectations.

In the club world, the sum of customer experiences creates the brand. What are you doing to establish a point of difference between your club and others down the street? How are you increasing the loyalty and lifetime value of each customer? Are you delivering on your promises, keeping integrity in your message, and continually demonstrating that customers can depend on your club for a unique experience?

Remember: It's one thing to get new members, but quite another to keep them spending, participating, raving about your club, and spreading the word about what it represents. That's the difference between being a flash in the pan, and succeeding as a lasting brand.



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