

FINDING OUT ABOUT YOUR MEMBERS

It is simple and cost effective to conduct your own market research almost without your members realising it. A member survey once a year should be at the top of your agenda in getting to know your customer base. It's relatively easy to administer as you have a captive market and should be able to communicate with them on a regular basis.

The key to any survey is to understand what it is you are trying to find out. It may be about a specific area where you are having problems such as the catering or encouraging use of the bar, it may be a general survey about their membership, a new member survey after 3 months or perhaps an exit survey.

Surveys only work if they are conducted regularly and the members receive feedback - on both the results and the next steps i.e. what you plan to do. You may also want to consider incentivising your surveys which always improves response rates.

As well as a more formal survey, there should be plenty of opportunity to talk to members and get a general idea of how they regard the club. Your staff and committee members can be very useful here as they will be regularly playing with or talking to the membership. Beware of people feeding back what they want you to hear. This is often not deliberate but if it is a subject they themselves feel strongly about they may not really be an independent observer.

Once you have gathered and analysed the information you have about your members then you can begin sorting them into distinct groups. These may be governed by factors such as age, frequency of visits, time they play, use of the bar or restaurant but however you choose to categorise them you will have a clear profile of your key customer segments.

Profiling your members and visitors in this way means that you will now be able to talk to them much more effectively.

Communicating with members more effectively

Once you know who it is you are talking to and what they like or dislike about your golf club then you will be able to communicate and market to them more easily. This is particularly useful when marketing to visitors and potential members but is also important for communicating with your existing members.

These days there are many more ways of communicating directly with members than relying on word of mouth and the club notice board. Direct mail can be cost effective as the message is well targeted, while email communication has proved a boon to golf clubs looking to communicate quickly and easily.

Emails are highly targeted, cheap to send out and also mean you can respond quickly and effectively to your current needs, such as promoting an upcoming social function.

However, you decide to communicate with your members you need to be consistent about it. So many golf clubs launch a monthly newsletter, for example and after a few issues when there is nothing to say (!), the whole idea tails away. The same applies to the club news section on the website which is fervently updated for the first few weeks and then again, the novelty wears off and it falls down the 'to do' list.

Intermittent communication is almost as bad as not communicating at all as it makes it doubly difficult to pick up where you left off after a spell of silence.

The secret to making a successful communication programme work is to make someone take responsibility for it. In most private member clubs this will be the Secretary or a member of the Marketing Committee.

A simple communication plan such as weekly update of the website, a monthly newsletter and email, a regular 'what's coming' poster on the notice board.....the ideas are numerous but the key is to commit to them and make sure they happen.

Define your member groups

Once you have found out more about your members, stored the information legally and in an easy to use database programme, and committed to a regular communication campaign, it is important to make sure that the messages you are communicating are right for each member group.

There are the obvious ones - women, juniors and seniors- but remember the information you have acquired through your membership survey will mean there are now members who haven't visited for six months; members who used to use the restaurant and bar but don't any longer; members who may have brought a society along for the past few year but no longer...the list is endless. It doesn't need to be complicated but by dividing (segmenting) your 1000 members into manageable groups with a common theme, it's amazing what can be achieved with relevant, targeted information, offers and promotions.

Reviewing your membership

You will by now have built up an excellent picture of your members and how they are using their membership. This is an excellent starting point for input into your marketing plan.

However, once having analysed your membership you need to keep doing so on a regular basis. A snapshot every six months would be the minimum especially as the nature of the game makes it a very cyclical business, with the results in the height of summer very different to those in January.

Things change much faster than they ever used to and you need to be aware of external influences as well as internal ones. For example, the completion of a new housing estate a few miles down could explain an influx of members during the past few months - and could point to a source of more.

Regular reviews will also allow you to see the changing demographics of your membership. The average age of a golf club membership has been increasing steadily in recent years, mirroring general population demographics. This has had economic consequences for many clubs who have seen their senior membership (often paying reduced fees) grow out of proportion with their club membership. A regular review and the statistics to back it up would have meant many golf clubs addressing this issue long before it became a problem. For example, exit surveys may help you to spot a worrying trend which you can act upon.