

Don't Shoot the Messenger:

Member Complaints Provide Opportunities to Improve Your Service

By DAVID SCHREIBER

Cold food, slow waiters, the length of the rough on the golf course... members are never at a loss for opinions about virtually every aspect of the club. While handling complaints may not be the best part of your day, consider this - it may be the very best opportunity you have for improving overall member satisfaction, the most critical component of successful club operations.

Viewed in that light, the member who bothers to bring a problem -- real or imagined -- to your attention is worth their weight in gold. Their complaint means they are willing to give the club a chance to respond. Complainers are also willing to take their time to tell you how you can be better.

The reality is that when it comes to member satisfaction, silence is not always golden. Just because your members aren't talking to you about what's bothering them doesn't mean that they're 100-percent satisfied. In fact, it may mean that they have given up on seeing the situation improve, or

that they don't feel valued enough to think it will make a difference if they complain.

In that situation, soliciting and reacting effectively to member complaints is the most effective weapon you have in boosting loyalty and usage and slowing attrition.

The member whose problem is taken care of in a timely, courteous, and thorough fashion often becomes the club's best ambassador.

We live in a service-centered economy where supply has exceeded demand in almost every market, including private clubs. Consumers with lots of choices ultimately rely on essential differences in areas such as service when selecting one business (or club) over another.

In an ideal situation, every employee of the club should be prepared to handle every member interaction -- whether it is a request or a complaint. I am not suggesting that every employee be empowered to make any decision, but they

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Member Complaints-

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should always have immediate access to someone who can.

When complaints are dealt with in a way that shows the member that they are valued, their loyalty to the club is enhanced. Likewise, a complaint that points out less-than-excellent service serves as a perfect opportunity to increase the level of member service your club delivers. That process begins by developing a problem solving strategy.

Claim It. Most members who complain just want to be heard. When you receive a member complaint, you own it. That means you don't pass the buck. Listen to what the member is saying, write it down, and repeat it back to them. This will establish confidence in the member's mind. If you have to get back to the member, establish a mutually agreed-upon time.

Reality Check. Solve the problem and understand that, in reality, not all problems are solvable to the member's satisfaction. If the problem cannot be solved, explain to them why. Don't give excuses, give reasons.

The easiest way to solve the problem is to first ask the member what you can do to make them happy. The majority of time they will ask for less than what you were willing to give them.

How and Why. Employees at all levels must, in a structured environment, explore why the problem occurred in the first place. Ask, "What caused this to happen"? This should be done with every problem, every day.

Strategize. Develop a plan to keep the problem from happening again. If this is not done, you can be certain that the same problem will continue to occur. When this is the case, employee morale will deteriorate -- a situation that leads to an increase in member complaints and future member defections, and a decline in member usage of the club. Ultimately, the negative effects will take their toll on the bottom line.

Complaint handling is vital to the success of every organization, and while it is a critical component, it should be viewed only one part of a broader service strategy. If you focus solely on complaint handling, you may win a few of the battles, but still lose the war.

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