



Making Them Want You

Within two years, Ferncroft Country Club in Middleton, Mass., revved up its rolls of committed members from zero to close to 500. This past December, Penobscot Valley Country Club in Orono, Maine reached out to former members, and has already reactivated somewhere between 30% and 40% of them. Between August and January, Ballantyne Country Club in Charlotte, N.C., received more than 100 requests for membership and wedding information. And with an attrition rate of under five percent, Eagle Oaks Golf & Country Club, in Farmingdale, N.J., obviously knows how to keep its members happy.

While every situation is unique and no one-size-fits-all strategy exists to guarantee recruitment and retention success, all of these properties have demonstrated one common truism about club membership and marketing: Even in the toughest markets, effectively targeted messages will hit the mark and deliver real returns.

Even in the toughest markets, effectively targeted membership messages can deliver real returns.

By Marilyn Odesser-Torpey, Contributing Editor

Striking It Rich

With no committed members, Ferncroft CC had nowhere to go but up—or out—when it was purchased by Charlottesville, Va.-based Affinity Golf Management in 2006. But within two years, membership at the private Boston-area club has soared to just under 500, two-thirds of which are golf memberships.

Prior to the purchase (the first actual acquisition for Affinity, which works with private clubs in 22 states), Ferncroft had seen a constantly declining number of annual members. So even the Affinity team was stunned by the sudden surge in applications that followed its initial membership proposal presentation.

“Originally, our goal was to attract 50 founding members in four to six weeks,”

SUMMING IT UP

- Precisely targeted, one-on-one marketing to past members and the surrounding residential and business communities can help communicate that a property has been restored and revitalized.
- Emphasize particular facilities and amenities, to target prospects such as families or empty nesters.
- Updated and modernized Web sites can attract new members as well as event business.

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— DAMON DeVITO



After acquiring Ferncroft CC, Affinity Golf's Damon DeVito uncovered strong levels of pent-up demand.

explains Affinity's co-founder and Managing Director, Damon DeVito. “Instead, we had 50 within three days, and received a total of 118 applications within six days.”

What was the key to uncapping this hidden vein of pent-up demand? DeVito cites a strategy of precisely targeted, one-on-one marketing to past members, and also to the surrounding residential and business communities, that stressed a message of restoration and revitalization.

While it was clear that the club needed to become more of a full-service, family-friendly facility, the Affinity team conducted extensive small-group interviews with annual and former members, to determine how to best invest a \$2 million improvement budget.

“If we expected to get away from annual membership, we had to show we were willing to commit to [prospective members at the new levels], just as we expected them to commit to us,” DeVito says. “We auditioned our plan for them and, based on what they told us, made revisions that would be most meaningful to them.”

To further demonstrate that they meant business, the Affinity team brought their contractors and employees, with whom past members were familiar, to the meetings. When they were ready to expand their membership recruitment efforts, Affinity worked with the sales and general managers for the condominium and townhouse developments that surround the club, to host a series of cocktail party-format open houses for residents and realtors.

“By meeting with them instead of simply distributing printed information and price sheets, the residents felt the club was offering something special,” DeVito says. “For the realtors, that exclusivity provided a major amenity that could

Worth Waiting For

THE ULTIMATE GOAL of any club Membership Director is to have a healthy waiting list. Founded in 1989, Eagle Oaks Golf & Country Club in Farmingdale, N. J. has not yet had to start a list—but thanks to a new tiered membership program and the buzz from an impressive new clubhouse, it will probably hit that milestone very soon, according to Membership Director John Beurskens.

The new membership structure was designed to be flexible enough to meet members' individual and changing needs, Beurskens says. Golf memberships, for example, now range from Charter (with full golf privileges) to Associate (positioned as a “springboard to Charter” or “ideal second club membership”) and Social categories that have more limited golf privileges.

“Younger members with children at home may initially feel they would not be able to fit in golf more than twice a month, so they opt for social membership,” Beurskens explains. “But they soon find they want to come more often. So our tiered system lets them upgrade to Associate or Charter membership—or, if a category is filled, get preferential wait list positioning.”

With golf membership already at around 90%, Eagle Oaks has expanded its facilities and amenities to offer more appeal to the sometime-, or even non-golfers, as well. One increasingly popular option is the exclusive Farmingdale Dining Club, for members who prefer full-course dinners to courses of the golfing variety. The new, 60,000-sq. ft. clubhouse, completed last April, has

upped the “wow” factor of Eagle Oaks as a dining and entertaining venue, Beurskens says. Family and corporate Dining Club memberships include invitations to special events and partial clubhouse access.

In addition to local residents, the tiered Golf and Dining Club options have allowed Eagle Oaks to take full advantage of its location near the New Jersey seashore. A couple of years ago, the club conducted a successful direct mail campaign that marketed Eagle Oaks as a “second club” for out-of-towners who own summer vacation homes in the area.

In a different approach, Penobscot Valley Country Club in Orono, Maine, recently pared down its membership categories as it made the transition from private to semi-private. Instead of the 10 or 11 classifications it previously offered, the club now has only two (Golf and Social), says Director of Golf Jeffrey Bickford.

“Most of the categories, such as pool or tennis memberships, required a tremendous amount of accounting to track,” Bickford explains. “We feel there is enough leeway to meet a wide range of needs by offering Individual, Couple, Junior, Family and Student subcategories under the Golf and Social headings.”



John Beurskens, Membership Director, Eagle Oaks G&CC



“By posting our calendar online and using e-blasts and other electronic bulletins, we have been able to communicate more frequently with our members.”

— MAUREEN KINDRED, MEMBERSHIP DIRECTOR, BALLANTYNE COUNTRY CLUB

help them sell their properties.”

Affinity also invited influential and respected members of the business community for cocktails and conversation, to discuss the life-enriching benefits of club activity for employees and how corporate membership could be an attractive “worker perk.”

And, while Affinity usually does not use advertising as a recruitment tool, the team felt that the message of new ownership and new life for Ferncroft warranted a direct-mail campaign. The mailed piece, sent to a rented list of prospects, stressed just the facts, instead of a “come and get it” offer. Response was strong and immediate, exceeding a 1.8% response overall and paying for itself within the first week.

Spreading the New Word

Harris Golf, owners of five clubs in Maine, used a similar direct-mail approach to get former members back on board when the company took Penobscot Valley Country Club from private to semi-private.

“With our new status, reduced rates and elimination of food and beverage assessments, we felt that the package we were offering would demonstrate how dynamic and user-friendly the club had become,” says Penobscot Valley’s Director of Golf, Jeffrey Bickford.

And at Ballantyne CC, a regular direct-mail program to new homeowners within a five-mile radius has paid off during that club’s transition from a developer- to member-owned facility. Instead of using a single promotional piece for all mailing recipients, Ballantyne emphasizes particular facilities and amenities to target specific demographic segments such as empty-nesters or families (the club has a separate Family Activities Center with a full-time Activities Director, swimming pools, movie theater, teen room and kids’ corner).

Response has been particularly strong since the club’s new Web site went live in August, says Ballantyne’s Membership Director, Maureen Kindred. In addition to providing information to prospective members, the site has attracted attention among local brides- and grooms-to-be. It has also become a key tool for communicating to current members, successfully encouraging more utilization of the club’s facility and amenities.

“By posting our calendar online and using e-blasts and other electronic bulletins, we’ve been able to communicate more frequently with members and keep them completely up to date on what’s happening at the club,” Kindred says. “At the same time, we’ve been able to eliminate the need for a bi-monthly or monthly newsletter.”

Kindred gets input for the site from weekly staff meetings. Monthly calendar meetings with department heads ensure that events are posted in a timely manner.

The interactive site also allows members to sign up for events and tee times online. However, getting members used to logging in has called for a bit of ingenuity.

About 60 members responded to an invitation to attend a “launch party” to preview and learn to utilize the site. Kindred followed up with instruction letters to help other first-time site visitors, and reminder flyers were included with member statements for several months. Quarterly drawings for prizes, such as two tickets to the club’s New Year’s Eve party, also provide incentive to provide correct and current e-mail addresses.

The web site has also yielded an unexpected bonus in the form of numerous employment inquiries, Kindred points out—several of which have resulted in hirings.

Finding the Right Focus

Always looking for new ways to engage members, Eagle Oaks Country Club conducted targeted focus groups to get some female feedback about its programs and amenities. As a result of this input, the club launched a program of women’s fitness classes, and the results so far “are fantastic,” according to Membership Director John Beurskens.

“By asking our members what they want, we get a better perspective on not only how the club now fits into their lives, but how it can be made to fit in even better,” he explains. “Some things, like the women’s fitness classes, are so easy to implement, yet they give so much back in terms of member satisfaction and retention.”

Beurskens also uses the club’s Web site to post brief member questionnaires that solicit member reactions to new events. “These are a quick and easy way for members to express what they like and what they want,” he says.

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