

Case Study:

Volunteer Sport Club: Insights for Building Member Engagement.

By Peter Barraket

As I write this (December the 5th), it is International Volunteer Day and for the past two years I have been lucky enough to be a driving member of a long-standing and successful amateur sports club in Western Sydney. A not-for-profit club, our sports club was established first and foremost as a racing club and is operated by volunteers. Like many volunteer operations, the same small number of volunteers in this club (some for decades), have done the lions-share of work to provide opportunities for sporting participation in the local area. Their passion, determination and competitive spirit have been the heartbeat of the club. Sadly, with declining racing participation and membership numbers and an emerging need to offer more social engagement options, it was time for some new thinking.

In this context, I have been thinking about what makes for high engagement in the often thankless-world of volunteer, member-based organisations. For our sports club, we recognised that the club Executive Committee had to engage with members more broadly and deeply. As a result, we commissioned an inaugural Member Feedback Survey to understand what was driving the decline in participation and to inform decision-making - rather than act on assumptions alone, as is so easy to do when bodies like this are time-poor and not being paid to delve any deeper into member behaviour. This was a critical turning point to help rebuild the member experience.

Tip: Encourage new thinking and challenge the status quo; engage with members directly and often.

What follows are some insights and lessons learned that came out of our Member Feedback Survey with the hope that other similar member-based organisations can benefit from how our club has begun to turn things around.

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Case Study:

The top three reasons members participate in our club are:

1. Health and fitness - 85.5% of members nominated this as a reason for their participation.
2. Racing competition - 56% of members prefer competitive sport and love to race.
3. Social participation - 44% of members participate for the social aspects of the club.

Getting hard-data revealed a clear misalignment between the clubs' offering and what members wanted – the club was still operating as a racing club and was focused on racing, yet racing participation numbers were declining – like so many volunteer organisations, this was not sustainable. The reality was that the club was unaware that almost half of current members did not want to race, preferring to participate socially and for health and fitness.

Tip: Understand what drives members and provide for that need.

So why the decline in racing participation when all the focus, presumably, was on being a racing club?

- One of the answers comes from looking at the sport itself. The sport over the past two decades entered an era where national participation numbers had grown significantly. This has seen new clubs emerge, increasing competition for members and causing a geographic reorientation of member bases.
- Secondly, races were not being marketed well and communication surrounding them was poor. While other clubs were embracing social media, digital marketing and presenting a far more vibrant experience for members, we were not.
- Finally, the club had not implemented or invested in any new development pathways for Juniors and Seniors or cross-over programs to bring social participants to racing and vice-versa - this meant new talent began to dry up.

And what about the 46% of members that do not want to race? How could the club provide experiences to engage this significant portion of the member base? To address this, the club appointed a Social Sub-Committee that met monthly and created a calendar of monthly social participation events, an annual Social Dinner and took charge of driving communications across all aspects of club life.

Tip: If possible, look after the needs of all members; be prepared to let go of the past.

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It is important to note that the 46% of members who do not like racing, could in fact, join other clubs or organisations. In this scenario, it is crucial to understand why members join a particular club. When we asked what our members saw as the benefits of participating in our club, their responses were surprising and (ought to be) informative of the direction the club should be heading in:

- Camaraderie - meeting like-minded people - having fun.
- A sense of belonging and being part of something bigger than themselves.
- Improved health and fitness through participation.
- Financial and general support for representative races.
- Motivating one another to be better and having racing and training partners.
- Discounted Third Party Accident Insurance.
- Discounts at sporting shops.
- Invitations to organised events and exclusive offers.

Understanding these drivers helped the club to set goals, improve benefits and meet more of the members' expectations. As a result, we reduced the number of people leaving the club.

Tip: Ensure member benefits match the expectations of members.

To help identify priorities for improvement, we asked members what were the most important opportunities for improvement that the club should focus on – this is such an obvious question, but for some reason most organisations are reluctant to go there. Here's what we discovered:

1. Develop youth - they are the future of the club.
2. Be more inclusive, fun and social - build a sense of camaraderie.
3. Race attendance and competitiveness - return the club back to its glory days.
4. More opportunities and pathways to develop members – for example, pathways from social participation to racing competition; from beginner skills to expert skills; from administration skills to club management.
5. Provide more support for members where appropriate (financial, logistical, motivational, new events, technical etc.)

Some of these priorities require significant commitment, funding and people power, however, now that they are known, the club has set goals and put plans in place to achieve these. The club has also put key performance metrics in place to help better manage progress and return on effort, for example:

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membership numbers, budget against actual expenditure, race attendance numbers and social event attendance numbers.

Tip: Ensure you understand what members regard as priorities and focus on those.

Tip: Ask members what they regard as priorities and what they want administrators to focus on.

Tip: Set performance metrics to track progress – whether you're a corporate, a volunteer organisation, a member-based group or a government agency – what gets measured, gets done.

The Recalibration of a Member-Based Club – What have been the Results?

- Racing participation in the first year increased 45%. This meant that the club was close to the course limit for more of its races. This increase and near capacity has been maintained with a marquee event selling out for the first time.
- Weekly social participation has increased 100%.
- Membership has stabilised.
- In the latest survey, 76% of respondents said the club is performing very well against commitments to improve social participation events, communication, sponsor participation and general support - there is still work to be done with 24% of respondents rating performance as average or below.

Insights – How to Turn Things Around

1. Passion – a real desire to cultivate a thriving, engaged and sustainable organisation.
2. Understand what members want - always have a member focus – if you do not, you risk being relevant and will ultimately lose members.
3. Understand what drives member behaviour – ask them.
4. New thinking - a willingness to challenge the status quo and embrace new ideas and initiatives.
5. Communication – this remains at the heart of engagement and connection to your constituents.

Improving Engagement

1. Introduce new people with fresh ideas to leadership and administrative positions, those who are prepared to challenge the status quo while respecting and honouring history, traditions and the mainstay volunteers of the organisation. Where appropriate, form sub-committees or introduce new positions to give volunteers greater focus and empowerment to drive real change.

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2. Engage with members directly, more broadly and deeply, either via a feedback survey, inviting them to planning meetings, taking part in focus groups or simply talk to them about what is important to them. This signals a willingness to listen to and learn what members want and breaks-down assumptions. This of course must be followed up by acting on what was learned and communicating actions being taken.
3. Formally document your organisation's structure, vision, values and direction and circulate for feedback. This process can highlight gaps and blind spots that lead to new initiatives or make them more successful.
4. Ensure alignment to the club's 'Purpose' – for most organisations they will first have to define this and ensure there is consensus around why the organisation exists and what its mission is.
5. Open up executive committee or leadership meetings to include more office bearers, members and stakeholders. This generates more ideas for new initiatives, identifies improvement opportunities and increases buy-in for decision-making.
6. Review or formulate your communication plan. Ask members what they would like to have communicated, how and by when. Utilise social media to drive up engagement and direct email for more sensitive member only communications. Regular contact and engagement is critical, especially if you have a dispersed member base. Ensure your contact lists are updated, post suitable content in a timely fashion on your Facebook Page or Group Page and send regular newsletters or updates either weekly or as they occur.
7. Look for symbolic change initiatives that visibly show members you are changing and moving forward, such as rebranding and updating web sites and club clothing to match member expectations - consult members and allow them to have a say in new designs and functions.
8. Review current events and formats and make them better. Introduce new ones and delete old ones where appropriate. Bring your members together through a mix of weekly, monthly, and quarterly events as well as annual events like a 'presentation and social' dinner.
9. Introduce marquee events that have more member, crowd and sponsor pulling ability so as to attract greater participation and buzz.
10. Continually ask: 'How can we do better?' – then act on the data you uncover.