

Your Club Experience Is Your Marketing

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In today's economy, people remain reluctant to commit to long-term contracts and hefty annual fees, so more members are reserving the option to stay with or drop your club every month. That means the key to continued robust sales is less about attracting new members and more about retaining the ones you have.

Customers also are becoming more knowledgeable and discriminating. They're swayed less by savvy salespeople and cool promotions, and their brand preferences are formed more by what they experience when they do business with your company. People also rely on the actual experiences of others, which they now hear about through a plethora of review websites and social media, to make their purchase decisions and they in turn use these new tools to share their own opinions to influence others.

In this environment, traditional sales and marketing tactics are becoming less important and your club experience is emerging as your most powerful marketing tool. Here are four ways to ensure the daily experience you deliver is marketing your club appropriately:

1. Engage employees with the brand. Everyone who works for your club should share one common understanding of your brand so that they create a customer experience that builds the brand image and equity.

Ensure that all employees understand the values and attributes that define and differentiate your club, and how they should interpret and reinforce these in their daily actions and decision making. It may be difficult to engage a workforce with high turnover and, in some cases, low commitment to the company, but these are the very reasons why doing so is so important.

This isn't about hanging a mission statement on the wall; it involves providing ongoing training and coaching to establish appropriate behaviors. Many retail chains create tools and learning experiences to facilitate employee brand engagement. Fitness clubs would do well to follow their lead.

2. Identify and optimize priority touchpoints. Equipment selection, signage, club layout, employee uniforms, service standards and procedures, sounds and smells, etc. all contribute to the perceptions of your brand.

A great club experience isn't simply a matter of delivering efficiency and quality in these areas—it's about creating a great brand experience. Each touchpoint represents an opportunity to make a 'deposit' (positive, differentiating and remarkable) in your brand equity or a 'withdrawal' (disappointing, unmemorable or inappropriate).

Audit and assess all of the touchpoints that comprise the member experience at your club, and then use customer input to determine which have the most impact and which are the most 'off brand.' This will enable you to develop strategies and plans for optimizing the priority touchpoints.

By taking a comprehensive and systematic brand-based approach to improving the club experience, you can ensure all of the pieces come together to establish and sustain brand differentiation and competitive advantage.

3. Focus your energies. In an effort to compete with well-resourced competitors, some club operators may be tempted to try to do everything. They try to offer lots of special classes, or all the latest equipment, or a whole host of services from personal trainers to massage therapists. But doing all of these things well is not possible for most clubs. There just isn't enough time, money or energy to do everything well, and poor execution in one area detracts from the entire customer experience.

Instead, real competitive advantage is created through focus. Choose the one or two things you can do better than anyone else and then over-deliver on them. Clubs can learn from other retail businesses, such as fast-food chain Chick-Fil-A, which intentionally offers a limited menu so that it can focus on making great chicken sandwiches.

Playing to your core strength focuses your resources on creating a brand-building customer experience.

4. Develop fans. A club's most enthusiastic members are not only more likely to stay with you long-term, but they also are your best promoters. So don't use a one-size-fits-all approach to engaging members.

Make a special effort to cultivate personal relationships and retain members through personalized service, ongoing two-way communication and offers of exclusive experiences to your best members, such as free passes to a trade show or testing new products first.

Encourage members to spread the word about your club. Connect with them through social networks so their connections learn about you virally. Design special offers like those used by apparel retailers, such as The Gap and Abercrombie & Fitch for their customers to forward onto their friends and family.

With budgets so limited these days, you can't afford to spend your precious marketing dollars on promoting your club, only to see them wasted when a member walks through the door. Optimizing the club experience needs to be a marketing top priority.

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