

THE SECRETS OF A WINNING CLUB

In April 2007, King Club Health and Fitness was presented with the accolade Australian Fitness Facility of the Year at the Australian Fitness Industry Awards. Earlier this year the club was sold to Goodlife, and in May the King Club's manager, Monique Robinson, completed her handover. Here she looks back at the marketing and retention strategies that built such a successful facility.



KING CLUB IS A UNIQUE FACILITY in the eastern suburbs 'family belt' of Melbourne. It officially opened in April 1985, and at 22 years old is notable for having members who have been with the club for 5,10,15, and even 22 years. Importantly, the club also has members of staff who have been on the team since the very beginning. Winning the Australian Fitness Facility of the Year Award for 2007 was the cherry on the icing of the cake – a wonderful way to be rewarded for going the extra mile with members and staff alike.

I officially started working at the King Club in 2000, but as it was my family's business I had been involved in many roles since it first opened. My background is in hospitality and I have a diploma of Applied Science in Hospitality Studies; I just love people, and I love making things happen. When I became club manager I chose to apply my hospitality skills to the business – fitness is, after all, a people-based industry. I set myself the mission of looking at every square inch of the facility through the eyes of our customers and improving everything that I could.

A mission and a vision

To achieve real success, I knew that the club required the buy-in of the staff. We then set about making two important things happen that really shaped our future.

We invited all of our staff to attend a brainstorming weekend, with the aim of creating a mission statement and a vision for the club. I could have just come up with these myself and handed them to everyone, but creating ownership by the team meant it was more likely to stick and to be real. As a group we wrote down words that best described us and the club and after two days of discussing and composing we agreed on an amazing mission statement and vision. This was then printed on cards and given to every employee, printed on big signs and prominently displayed around the club for our members to see what we were about, and it was constantly referred to by staff and members.



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When I felt the time was right for us to use radio advertising – which is a big move for a single club – I was asked what our tagline was. Drawing on the feelings of connectivity and loyalty expressed by our members and staff our tagline was born – 'It's where I belong'. We used it in our radio branding campaign, painted in enormous letters on the wall of the club, on the uniforms, bags, hand towels, drink bottles, everywhere, and from that moment forward, everything we did was based on making our members and staff feel like they belonged.

Don't discount – add value

After winning a few local awards, we decided to survey our members and ask them about their club, why they came, what they wanted from us, how effectively we were meeting their wants and what we could do to improve. We employed a market research company to conduct this so that members felt more comfortable in giving genuine answers. This provided incredibly useful data to help sculpt the next stages of our club's development.

As a result of this process, I was introduced to the brilliantly insightful Leonard from Woof Creative Solutions, who worked with us to brand the King Club very strongly in the market place. I looked at the way the big boys did things; Coca Cola, McDonalds and Hertz, to name but a few. These companies do not advertise based on price and they do not discount. They are also very strict about how their logo is used. We applied many of these principles to our own advertising, both internally and externally and ensured that our ads were offering solutions to our consumers.

Prior to becoming manager of the King Club, I had worked for a retail giant for nearly a decade. I decided to adopt some of their 'value adding' techniques for our campaigns, but never to engage in price wars. We therefore often offered huge prizes, such as two-week cruises, reserve tickets to the AFL grand final with accommodation and limousine transfers, hot air balloon rides, stays at retreats and so on. We also introduced 'King Club bucks' – gift vouchers for use in the club which could be spent on personal training, membership, products – in any way the member liked.

Research and educate

Attending conventions such as FILEX also contributed to our success. Meeting amazing presenters from Australia and overseas such as Paul Brown, Rowena Szeszeran-McEvoy, Petar Lakovich, Derek Barton, Victor Brick and Joe Cirulli was invaluable. The ideas and experiences that are shared by the people you meet at these events is incredibly useful. I always make a point of asking lots of questions – I love to chat, especially if I can pick up some brilliant business tips! To widen my educational experience I also started attending the IHRSA fitness convention in the United States. Before and after attending the event, I would travel to clubs in the US owned and run by successful industry figures. It was great to see how they did things, and how their clubs looked and functioned.

The marketplace is full of 'how to' books, and selecting ones which offer pertinent advice can be daunting, but there are a few which are truly inspiring. Among these are Jim Collins' *Good to Great*, Stephen Lundin's *The Fish Philosophy*, Justin Herald's *If Nothing Changes, Nothing Changes* and Charles Kovess' *Passionate People Produce*. I implemented many of their suggestions and bought copies of the books for our staff. I even arranged for Justin Herald and Charles Kovess to come and address our staff and our members, which was a fantastically invigorating experience.

Reward and communicate

I strongly believe that member retention and staff retention are linked. And I strongly believe that you need to value your people. I say 'people' because it applies to members and staff alike. Treat them like people not numbers.

With the assistance of my wonderful team, I created systems and procedures for everything and then set about making sure they were implemented. We knew what we wanted to achieve and set about doing so. If you don't have a goal or a destination, how do you know when you have arrived? When we did arrive at each goal, we celebrated these achievements with our people and we kept them informed.

A wonderful addition to our communication with our members was a 12 to 16 page full colour newsletter that was sent out quarterly with the start of each season. These days, with direct debits (priceless though they are!), it is too easy to not stay in touch with your members. Our newsletter became our way of 'giving' to our members. We packed it full of club news and social events, 'how to's' with regards exercise prescription or use of equipment, member achievements and all of our session programs, from baby classes to our active adults in their 80's. And we always packed it full of photos – members love to see themselves in print! It also proved an effective method of promoting member referral offers; referrals accounted for around 70 per cent of our new members.

We also started our own rewards program to say thank you for referrals, and this ran successfully for several years before I implemented the fantastic FitRewards program, which is customised to your club and operates just like the Frequent Flyers program.

Show them you care

Another member retention technique we employed involved sending a monthly postcard to every member who had not used the club in the previous month. The number we sent out was sometimes as low as 300, sometimes as high as 500. We had four different varieties, with funny pictures on the front and cute sayings, like 'The cl_b is missing u' inviting them to get back into a routine of attending and to bring a friend for free, with the postcard doubling as the guest card. It showed that we knew they hadn't been along recently, that we cared, and that we wanted to do something about it. We did this because all of our members could cancel at any time – they were not in lock-in contracts, which are quite different. But even if you have lock-in contracts, this strategy helps to bring absentee members back to your facility. And when they use the club they get results, feel better, stay active and tell other people how they feel, how great your club is and how much you care about them. It certainly worked for the King Club.

Nurture members and make them belong

We also had a wonderful new member introduction and initiation program, which was a structured series of contacts over the first year of membership. Operated by a small team from membership, gym floor and operations, it involved a seven-day welcome letter, a 14-day membership phone call, a one-month postcard advising them of our rewards program and a two-month postcard about our personal training program. After four months we sent a letter regarding all of our social events and other programs, and at six-months members received a postcard offering a complimentary piece of apparel. At nine months we sent a short survey about their membership so far, and at 12 months we sent a birthday card and commemorative keyring to celebrate one year of membership.

We charted the percentage of active, cancelled and suspended members throughout the first 16 months of membership and found that introducing the member initiation program increased our retention figures by around 15 per cent. We had helped more people to feel 'It's where I belong'.

We also made sure that all of our staff and members had loads of fun together in a non-fitness environment at our annual ball, where we recognised male and female members of the year and presented awards in much the same way as the Brownlow medal in AFL! We awarded 5, 10, 15 and 20 year members on this night



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with commemorative gifts including apparel and fine wine, and placed every winner's name on the honour board for all to see.

Finally, we ran the 12-week 'Change the Shape of your Life Challenge' twice yearly, and smaller programs like 'Around the club in 30 days' throughout the year to attract different types of people with different motivation factors. Through these many programs and initiatives the King Club kept its' members active, happy and connected. They felt as if they belonged. And members who belong, stay. ■

HOW TO MAKE YOUR MEMBERS BELONG!

- Get great people and value them – and *show* them how you value them.
- Stay connected with your people, ask your people, empower your people, educate your people. Make sure you have great systems and procedures and software to make those systems happen, and then measure and manage the results.
- Read and learn and implement!
- Dare to be different – you don't know if you don't give it a go.
- Create a mission statement and vision *with* your team – and then live by it.
- Create a tagline that is what you want for your members and then do everything to make sure that it happens.
- Recognise and reward your people.
- Stay enthusiastic yourself – surround yourself with vibrant, energised people.
- Make your club energetic, fun and safe.
- Energy is not lost – you get what you give, so give a lot!



Monique Robinson

Monique is the former manager of King Club Health and Fitness, the 2007 Australian Fitness Facility of the Year. With a background in hospitality, she is a people-person whose strength lies in making things happen. After taking some time away to undergo shoulder surgery and spend more time with her children, Monique will be returning to the industry in early 2008. Monique can be contacted at monique@thejewelbali.com



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