



10. THE NEW MEMBER

Ray Burniston writes the tenth document in a series about Committees.

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When I first came into golf management in the 1960's many clubs struggled to obtain members and apart from a small number of what some might call elitist clubs few had a waiting list. Then a certain person called Tony Jacklin came along and coupled with increasing posterity amongst the population he set golf alight. This continued through most of the 70's & 80's with slight hiccups when inflation reached double figures until in the latter half of the 1980's when the R&A produced their report entitled "The Demand for Golf". This produced data, which suggested that to meet the demand the UK would have to build some 600 new golf courses during the next decade. As this came at a time when farming was having land 'surplus to requirements' the floodgates opened and new golf courses sprang up around the UK. Some were built on a tight budget; with others money appeared to be no object and within a few years many of these clubs were in extreme financial difficulties. Suddenly waiting lists at old established clubs got shorter and in many cases disappeared altogether so that today we have reached a situation in which a high percentage of clubs are looking for new members.

The English Golf Union completed a survey recently which suggested there were vacancies for around several thousand members in England. The opening of many courses over the past decade or so has led to some golf clubs now being short of members. This can have a serious effect on the finances because by simple arithmetic if you are ten members short of your budget figures with a subscription of £550 that equates to £5,500 in lost revenue. I have come across clubs that have a deficit of as much as 80/90 members which is causing those clubs considerable concern.

It is now not unusual to see advertisements in the local press for new members extolling the benefits of being a member of that particular club. This happens for both private members and proprietary clubs. The situation is also being affected by schemes such as the 2-for-1 green fee. With the cost of subscriptions rising, many potential members have decided to take advantage of these schemes rather than join a club.

In some cases clubs have dispensed with entrance fees to try to ensure that they keep the numbers up. One of the disadvantages of not having an entrance fee apart from the loss of revenue is that new members who join often only stay for a short time and revert back to playing their golf by way of green fee offers. Not having made a substantial financial commitment the member does not have an incentive to stay especially if they have not settled in the club. In most cases the numbers that drop out each year is considerably higher than clubs who still have an entrance fee.

What can the secretary/manager do to keep the membership levels and income at the required rate? If you have this problem then it is important to look at all alternatives and to put in place a marketing plan to encourage new members to join. One of the major stumbling blocks for potential members is lack of a handicap. Some clubs have a five-day membership, which anyone without a handicap is offered, and full membership follows when a handicap is secured. This can be used as a great opportunity for the club professional to be involved and potential candidates with no handicap take up lessons and the professional decides when they are ready for membership. One club I know of has group lessons for potential members and although many who take up the lessons give up before the completion, the secretary tells me that the club has literally filled its membership by this method.

Most clubs now have brochures, which they send to those inquiring about membership. Many of these are very professionally done extolling all the benefits of being a member of the club. Clubs have “open days” for potential members and this usually starts with a tour of the clubhouse and facilities followed by talks by the professional and club officials, with a free group lesson thrown in. There are those who find visiting the local golf club quite an ordeal. Most of us who have played for many years have visited clubs which have been unfriendly and given the expression that you are not wanted. Even during my reign as National Secretary of this Association I regret to say that there were a couple of clubs which left me with that impression when I visited them. Generally this attitude is changing because clubs realise that they need new members of both sexes and visitors are made welcome at the majority of clubs.

In several instances newly appointed secretaries have told me that part of their brief was to build up the membership to a higher level over a set period. One initiative I have seen involved a private members and proprietary club getting together in an area to offer members of each club a reduced green fee at the other club. In some ways this is more advantageous to the former because members of the latter may well play the course and decide they would like to become a member bearing in mind there are often more advantages at a private club. It appears that there has been a small increase in members. However the proprietary club has an extra nine-hole course, which is available to the general public and gets a steady intake of new members from this.

This is an additional way a club could develop a feeder course for potential members by building an extra nine holes if they had suitable land. With sensible control of its use it could provide not only a useful source of income but act as a means of introducing people to the sport. The increase in driving ranges has helped encourage people to try golf but nothing beats the real thing of actually playing a course albeit it is only short holes.

Check List

- ⌘ Look carefully at your policy for attracting new members and make changes where necessary.
- ⌘ If your membership is decreasing greater than the average over the past years then take action before it becomes a problem.

- ⌘ Try and encourage the professional in any plans to bring new members into the club particularly newcomers to the game.
- ⌘ Having reciprocal arrangements with neighbouring clubs can be an added incentive for persons to join.
- ⌘ If you have surplus land get professional advice to see if you could provide a driving range or another golf course.

Golf Clubs today have to compete with other sports and past times and in most cases being a member of a golf club does not have the kudos it had twenty years ago or more. If you want new members you will have to develop a sound marketing policy to attract them. Also remember that you need to hold onto a reasonable proportion of those who join each year; so look for means of doing this.

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