

## Who wants to know?

*By Barry L. Morgan, FPCM*

The key requirement for building a satisfied membership is a desire for continual improvement. This needs to be a passion that starts at the top and percolates down through the entire organization. Pointed requests for membership input almost always prompt a call for action based on the feedback provided. Researching Member opinion and current satisfaction levels, will in most instances reveal a few unexpected surprises, and can often create a wealth of new opportunities. As you begin explore current satisfaction levels in your Club, a wide range of stakeholders in your organization will soon begin to take notice. The Members tend to be keenly interested in the results of such reviews as are Boards and Committees, and Management as well of course. Those who serve the Members daily and will also look to the satisfaction reviews as a sort of score card to confirm the value of their efforts. Club leaders can be certain that once the process is underway, throughout the Club there will be heightened interest in the needs of the Membership and how to best take the Club to the next level.



Our goal with this article is to help you open a purposeful ongoing dialogue with your membership that will enhance your understanding of their needs and build their confidence in your operation. Acting effectively on new knowledge gained from those you serve can move your Club from good to great! Two way communications with your membership, coupled with a willingness to act on what you hear, is the secret to long term success in any service endeavour. Sustainable Member satisfaction is ultimately the objective of any successful Club. The discourse that follows offers tools to help deliver this primary Club product.

Building Member satisfaction is a tricky business. You need to know what the entire membership wants – not just the ones you see all the time. Your team must have the means to identify obscure expectations and the wherewithal to develop dynamic programs and services that meet a wide variety of needs. They must also be able to render these services consistently. Importantly, you need to know if new initiatives at your Club are working, and how the game is changing as you go along. Satisfaction with service is not an event to be executed, prior to moving on to the next challenge. It's the development of a long term "culture of excellence" that needs nurturing to develop and to continue to grow over time. It's evolution not revolution and this continual growth needs a favourable environment in which to take root. Being "all ears" can be particularly useful and having an open mind to the process is critical. Fundamental to your success however, is the means to chart your progress along the way.

Too often, Clubs rely on sales records to test the mood of the Members (E.G. “Our sales are up so things must be going well”). Conventional wisdom suggests that there is a direct relationship between Member satisfaction and financial success. Unfortunately, research into Member satisfaction suggests that while delighted Members may often be accompanied by a healthy bottom line, profit in a club is not as often a good indicator of a delighted membership. In fact, in some instances they have been known to grumble, “the Club was charging them too much!” Occasional chats with the wait staff and face to face consultations with selected “friends of the Club” can provide better insights into the overall feelings of the Membership, but **no matter what business you’re in – the best way to find out what your customers, or in the case of Clubs, what Members are thinking is to ask them.** Your goal in gathering their thoughts, is to get behind the obvious knee jerk response to anecdotal circumstances, and decipher the real issues at hand. You need to ask the right people, at the right time, the right questions. Most importantly however, **you have to do the right thing with the answers you get back.**

While we are focusing on the importance of building Member Satisfaction, it may be worthwhile to recall some of the many benefits that an effective program designed to enhance Member satisfaction can offer. These include:

1. **Satisfied Members are less likely to leave and are more likely to introduce their acquaintances to the Club.**
2. **Satisfied Members take advantage of the Club’s programs and services and they add life and purpose to Club activities.**
3. **Satisfied Members demand far less Management time and resources. Dissatisfied Members create angst in the community.**
4. **Opening a dialogue with your membership sends a message that you are listening,** that you care, and you that you intend to respond to their concerns. Sharing strategies for improvement includes the Members in the process and helps secure their support in the future.
5. A factual analysis of Member opinion regarding specific sections of the Club, **offers Senior Management opportunities for sharing insights** and initiating the discussion of strategies for improvement. This can be empowering for your team.

6. Recognizing the sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction **highlights the Club’s strengths and weaknesses.** Analysing the sources of Member satisfaction and dissatisfaction helps provide focus for management efforts. Regular reports provide an ongoing record of progress and achievement. This equips the Board and others involved with the governance of the Club with the statistics and factual evidence needed as a basis for measuring ongoing performance.

7. A focus on Member satisfaction as the primary objective at the Club **provides a compass to guide strategic thinking,** and the means to maintain the momentum as strategies for change begin to show effect.



Surveys provide **an effective means to achieve Member satisfaction**. They help determine the Members' current likes and dislikes, and they elicit input directly from the end user on how to best meet their needs. Given the wisdom of conducting surveys, why do these vital reviews often fall short when it comes to changing how Members feel? Research into survey pitfalls offers the following:

1. **The surveys conducted are merely a gauge for performance rather than the impetus for change.**
2. **The data gathered is overwhelming.**
3. **The analysis is inconclusive or the results are open to broad interpretation.**
4. **The survey is designed to prove a point rather than discover the truth.**
5. **The survey is delegated to someone who is not capable of effecting change based on the results.**
6. **The response to the survey from the Membership is limited or the selection of members to be surveyed is biased, intentionally or otherwise.**

#### **NAME BADGES BOOST SATISFACTION\***

A study, carried out by mystery shopping and customer experience experts Shopper Anonymous ([www.shopperanonymous.co.uk](http://www.shopperanonymous.co.uk)), found when businesses introduced name badges for all staff, customer satisfaction ratings rose by a remarkable 12% almost overnight, in comparison to those that didn't require staff to wear badges.

Making sure your employees are easily recognizable can also help to create a warm, friendly and professional atmosphere within your Club.

"It is very rare to go into a quality establishment these days and find that staff are not wearing name badges," says John Bancroft, managing director of Europe's largest name badge manufacturer, Badgemaster. "The benefits are clearly proven."

\*SOURCE: Club Advisory Council International

So what then are the secrets for conducting a successful review?

It is always good advice to plan before you build. Membership research is no different. Once your objectives are clear, you are then in a position to identify the policies, practices, and circumstances that either facilitate or impede the achievement of your fundamental goals. Armed with the knowledge of what governs your success, you are much better equipped to begin to determine what you need to know about your current operation. In other words, the questions in your research should spring from the process of determining what you want to find out. Too often, Clubs attempt the less efficient approach of starting with the questions, and soon discover that the things they are researching are of more interest than value.

1. **Therefore, the first critical step in a success survey is to establish clear review objectives that are aligned with the Club's strategic plan, before you begin to write the questions.** It is important to realize that the outcomes you are seeking in your long term plan cannot be controlled or managed. They are merely the destination. Your job as manager is to guide the activities that contribute to these outcomes, and recognize the circumstances that might interfere with the desired result. Once you know where you are going, you can determine the factors that will drive your success and identify roadblocks that you need to overcome. These are the operative factors that demand thorough research. In other words, formulate your questions with a clear purpose in mind.

2. **Get input regarding the Club concerns from the membership.** Involve Members in the discussion of issues that need to be explored. Facilitated focus group meetings are a good place to start. Include their perspective. Their concerns may be more closely linked to what drives their satisfaction than are the issues management considers to be important. After all, if you really knew all answers to whatever was the issue at hand, the problem would likely already have been fixed.

3. **Before you start it is critical to secure top level support for both the review process and how the results will be used.** Even the most professional review will have minimal positive impact if the results don't make it out of the in-basket. A properly conducted review will always indicate a need for some change, even if only to build on success. A plan to implement this change should be in place before you start.



In order for the process to be effective, a single individual needs to be made responsible for specific results of the review and for taking measurable subsequent steps to secure improvement. Those responsible for implementing the changes required may suddenly face new challenges that move them well beyond the comfort zone that allowed the current conditions to exist. If the next steps are not built in to the process from the start and if the “boss” has not made it clear that immediate action on the results is a priority, status quo may win the day. Unfortunately, a lack of affirmative response undermines the entire process, discourages the various stakeholders, and tends to discredit all those involved.

4. **Facilitate the review process by using industry standard programs or professional services to conduct the survey.** Avoid the “free” solutions that can sometimes result in embarrassing outcomes, or that more often ultimately demand the extensive use of limited Club resources. There are many excellent programs and services available for a modest cost that can not only assist you in developing the survey, but also help you to conduct it and analyse the results. Take the time necessary to learn how these programs work, and how to take advantage of the many features they offer. Alternatively, employ someone who is familiar with this process. One of the best times to conduct a series of satisfaction reviews is at the peak of the season. Unfortunately, this is not always the best time to divert Club resources to a new project. Turning this work over to a professional can often be the most cost effective way to get the job done properly, at the right time, with minimal disruption “in house”.

5. **Take steps to encourage a solid response.** Keep the surveys short so that Members can respond immediately rather than put it off until later. Typically, a survey should take no more than 10 – 15 minutes to complete. Alert the Members to the pending research and explain how the process has evolved. Outline reasons for conducting the survey and how you intend to use the results. Knowing that the research is sanctioned by the Board can also provide incentive. Occasional reminders during the review are also helpful, providing they are not intrusive. Sometimes, a more direct benefit for participating, (e.g. entry in a draw for a prize or gift certificate) can also be effective.



Note however, that Members have a stake in the outcome of sincere efforts that are designed to improve the services and facilities that they are being provided. Usually, they welcome the opportunity to have their say. Nonetheless, occasionally they are reluctant to “speak their mind”, as is often the case if they think that their individual comments, out of context, may be put on public display, or that their identified response or suggestion might become a source of amusement or worse at a committee meeting. In some instances, Members may suspect that any negative comments will simply be discarded by the staff, especially if they are critical in nature. In all such cases, a third independent party conducting the review can offer the comfort of privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality and the assurance that all comments will be given due consideration.

6. **Use a smaller, representative group to help ensure that the volume of comments and suggestions received is manageable.** A manageable level of response will allow you to give all of the ideas you are offered the attention they are due. Make sure the rest of your members, those not included in the sample, know that there will be an ongoing opportunity for them to offer input. Use communication tools effectively to keep the topic top of mind both for the staff and for the Members who are aware of the ongoing effort to improve. Members want to know that you are listening and that eventually you will act on their input too. In instances where the implementation of change will be a lengthy process, it is even more important to let the Members know when they might expect to begin to see results. In the absence of such information, they will speculate and develop their own usually negative opinions as to what is being done with their suggestions.
7. **Use frequent reviews to experiment and measure the results.** A primary benefit of this process is to allow you to try new things in your operation, see how these initiatives work, get more feedback, make additional changes, and then test the water again, and so on. Four reviews per year of 25% of your members each time for example, provides an opportunity for all of your members to have a say and offers you ongoing input every 4 months. You can’t address all the issues at once, but you can knock them off one at a time.

8. **Make the reviews a process rather than an event.** Surveys done every five years or so provide a lot of good and necessary feedback. Often they can be helpful in developing strategic plans and establishing future directions for the Club. However, since these reviews are done infrequently they tend to be comprehensive in nature and lead more to planning than action. While this sort of in depth review provides a useful overview, they usually can't provide the focus of a short review that zeros in on a specific aspect of the Club's operation. Pointed reviews that deal with specific areas and track outcomes tend to be more effective as a tool for implementing and monitoring change.

Surveying the Members more frequently also helps to keep tabs on their changing opinion. You need to know what's happening now. Members who are dissatisfied with some aspect of your service won't wait years or even months to have their concerns addressed. They want to tell someone about it now and see something happen as a result. Addressing dissatisfied members' issues promptly is one sure way to turn unhappy Members into advocates for your services.

9. **Plan to review the survey process and frequently modify the survey to better meet your needs over time.** While it is useful to ensure that the metrics used from review to review are comparable, it is also important to ensure that the information being gathered tells you what you need to know.

10. **Ask your members for feedback on the process once your ongoing reviews are underway.** You may be pleasantly surprised. Recently, CCMIS completed an initial series of several Member satisfaction reviews at an exclusive, multifaceted country Club with over 2000 members. We asked the members at the end of the first round how they felt about the reviews. 87% said *"The survey process is generally non-intrusive and I do not feel that I am being unnecessarily asked for my opinion."* 85% said *"I would like to see this program of reviews continued as an ongoing means of encouraging Member input into the operation of the Club."*

Member satisfaction is the key to the success of any Club and it's a topic of interest for everyone on your organizational chart. It's the Club's reason for being. The various amenities and facilities offered by a Club are important and in fact, our research has shown that the quality and condition of club facilities is one of the more important determinants of Member satisfaction. But unless there are enough satisfied Members to enjoy the Club, the Club ceases to exist in its current state. Member satisfaction may not be the only thing that is needed to guarantee the continued success of the Club, but dissatisfied Members are likely a solid indication of looming failure. Measuring Member satisfaction and taking action on the issues highlighted, communicating this effort to the membership and monitoring the progress of improvement over time may not be a simple solution to ensuring a sustainable membership but it is a sure way to move the Club forward from good to great.

*CCMIS has provided the Canadian Club Industry with benchmarking services since 2006. Recently, they introduced a **Member Satisfaction Builder** program that helps Managers gauge the performance in specific areas of the Club, and monitors the members' opinions over an extended period. The principals of CCMIS are Mike Hammond, a well known Canadian Club consultant, Barry Morgan, FPCM and Larry McKenzie, CCM, who are both long time members of the CSCM.*