

Member Relations

The term “Member Relations” encompasses the most difficult and challenging area in the club business. It is difficult for the same reasons that managing employees is difficult – it involves people with all their needs, desires, agendas, and egos. But a significant difference between member relations and employee relations is that managers have the means to control their employees’ behavior and attitude, while managers have only the ability to influence members’ perceptions. It is also understood that all service employees, including managers, are in a subordinate position to members in that your jobs involve serving these people who are your ultimate bosses.

Given this recognition, it is imperative that all club managers, from General Manager to department heads to supervisors, devote time and attention to the many challenges and pitfalls of member service.

The following material is an effort to put member service in the context of a manager’s overall responsibilities. While there is no single managerial skill, ability, or attitude that will deal satisfactorily with all situations involving members, there are certain guidelines that should help in most situations. Beyond that, managers will have to use their best judgment and discretion in dealing with the variety of situations that may arise. Member relations is an art, not a science. Judgment and discretion are paramount. But as with any art form, practice and experience develops a skill set that can hopefully meet any challenge.

The Customer is Always Right!

“The customer is always right,” is an old adage often given as a guide to follow when dealing with angry or troublesome patrons. But you must understand in the service business, all concepts of right and wrong are irrelevant. There is only the member’s perception of a problem. This is your only reality, and you have but one course of action – to positively influence that perception. By disputing the perceived problem, you are only amplifying and reinforcing a member’s annoyance.

First and foremost when dealing with a complaint, do not become defensive. It’s not easy, but if you allow yourself to put up your defenses, you’ll send the wrong signals to the member and you will never hear what he or she is saying. Try to mentally step back from the situation and realize that the member is not attacking you personally, though it may sometimes seem that way.

Whatever has happened up to the point of the complaint is unimportant compared with what you are about to do. Take a deep breath if necessary. Focus all your attention on the member to find out what he or she is really saying. Do not assume you know what the complaint is. Listen patiently and sincerely. Ask questions to ensure you understand. Be sympathetic. The problem is yours, not the member’s, and you must do everything in your power to resolve the situation.

Offer to replace the item or correct the problem within the limitations of your responsibility. In all cases, do not offer a negative answer to the member before you have consulted your supervisor or Manager on Duty. No matter what has occurred your goal is to make certain that the member is satisfied.

Communicating with Members

Many problems with members can be avoided by good, ongoing communications. When members understand the club rules and regulations, when uncertainties are clarified, when changes in policy and procedure are announced in advance, members are not confused or embarrassed by a lack of information.

Some communications are routine, as in the monthly club newsletter; some are formal, as in periodic letters from the General Manager; but the greatest and most comfortable type of communication is from managers who are highly visible in the operation and interact with members on a daily basis. This informal communication and contact will build the greatest level of trust and rapport with members and will assist management when unpleasant news, such as dues increases, must be communicated.

Further, this daily interaction with members will allow small problems to be defused before they become big issues. A side benefit is that it permits you to “take the pulse” of the membership on an ongoing basis and keeps you from being “blindsided” by festering problems that suddenly blow up.

As with employee relations, the key to member relations is trust. Members trust management that is visible, concerned, proactive, reliable, and easy to approach. This trust is essential in any long term relationship.

Training Staff

While you as a manager may have an excellent understanding of member relations, it is also imperative that your employees are trained with the same understanding and skill set. Just as you rely on them to accomplish the work of directly serving members, you must also rely on them to interact professionally and appropriately with members at all times.

To do this they must be well-trained. This requires good initial training and ongoing reminders of the importance of your service standards. As with all other training, member relationship training is the absolute responsibility of managers. If any one of your employees renders less than outstanding service, you are the one ultimately responsible for this failure. While the club has provided certain material to help you in this training responsibility, it is you who must make it happen.

Use this material and help your employees understand how it can help them do their jobs. Your employees must do more than just read the material; they have to interact with it. In other words, if someone is told to sit at a desk and read the training material, they may only remember 10% of what they read. Role-play with them and have them treat you as if you were a member. Have them perform the tasks that are taught in the training material. This will help them remember what is expected of them. A Chinese proverb summarizes this theory: *I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand*. Show them the correct way of performing their tasks and then have them reinforce it by performing it for you.

While teaching employees the right way to do things, don't ever miss an opportunity to learn from mistakes. Without embarrassing the offending employee, discuss service failures with your employees and let everyone learn from the mistake. Often such review and analysis will point to better ways of doing things or improvements to training materials.

Quality, full-service training (learning) for all employees who interact with members is paramount to the success of the club. Take advantage of all the training resources at your disposal and encourage employees to search out ways to increase their knowledge of the business. Reinforce their learning with praise and acknowledgement at every opportunity. This praise will reinforce the positive things they do until they become habits. Great habits make great employees! Aristotle said: *Excellence is an act won by training and habituation. We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence then, is not an act, but a habit.*

Setting the Example

While training employees is extremely important and prepares them for the challenges of members relations, nothing is as important as you setting the example for your staff. Managers at all levels must “walk the walk” as well as “talk the talk.” If you preach one set of standards to the employees, but practice another, they will not only lose respect for you, but they will follow you in all the bad practices you exhibit.

Recovering from a Bad Member Experience

Despite your best preparation, practices, and efforts, there will inevitably be an occasion when you or your staff fails to render the appropriate level of service. It may or may not be directly or indirectly your fault, but a problem has been created nevertheless. The key here is not what went wrong (though this should always be examined after the fact to avoid repetition), but how you recover. In these cases, recovery is always the key!

Sincere apologies on the spot and attempts to rectify the situation are always the best solution, but are not always possible. In some cases, the member has gone away mad. When this happens, it is essential to follow up the next day or the first appropriate opportunity. A phone call to the member or a letter expressing your sincere regret and giving some indication of how the problem will be fixed to avoid future incidents is appropriate. In some instances, this type of follow up when the member has cooled down can be an opportunity to build a higher level of trust. The key is to take personal responsibility to repair the damage.

Time is the most important element in making a recovery. You must be willing to get involved in the moment and handle the crisis in a timely manner. Making a recovery can provide you with the highest level of personal gratification. If you are successful, you gain the member’s respect and you will foster a rewarding sense of self-worth. Hopefully, the need to make a recovery with a member will be a rare occurrence, but you should hone this skill at every opportunity. It will serve you well in any endeavor.

Basic Service Issues in Clubs

There are certain basic service issues common to most clubs. These issues are discussed below to provide guidelines to you and your employees in their dealing with members.

Maintaining Decorum

Clubs typically develop an atmosphere that is a reflection of its membership. Whether formal or casual, the attitudes and behaviors of members will establish an appropriate decorum for the club in general and various areas of the club in particular. Employees need to be aware of and maintain this decorum.

Often the decorum of adjacent areas will be different, for instance the bar and dining room have different atmospheres. The bar tends to be more casual and boisterous with members watching sporting events on TV and generally enjoying a convivial atmosphere. The dining room, depending upon day of week and time of day, will typically be more subdued. There may be members having a business luncheon or a group of ladies entertaining their garden club or a mother and children having a quick bite to eat before heading to the pool.

While employees cannot always control members' behaviors, it is important that they maintain decorum as formal and subdued as the most formal group of members present. In most cases, member behavior is self-regulating and management should only have to step in should a member's behavior be out of line.

Avoiding Familiarity

Many members live a more casual, relaxed lifestyle and they naturally carry this casualness into their interactions with club employees. Some members ask employees to call them by their first names and enjoy joking and exchanging banter with employees. This, however, can create a potential minefield for employees.

Employees must always remember that they are in a subordinate position to the member and can never tell when their banter or joke may prove offensive to the member or any other member within earshot. The repercussions of such offensive behavior may include complaints to management and disciplinary action for the employee – regardless of whether or not the member instigated the situation.

Avoiding Sensitive Topics and Language

Club employees should always avoid engaging in or responding to conversations with members on sensitive or controversial subjects such as religion, politics, discussions of other members, and ethnic or off-colored jokes. Employees may hear members using offensive ethnic slurs or speaking derogatorily of other individuals or groups of people.

While employees cannot put a stop to this, they should not engage in such language or discussions themselves and, in fact, should remove themselves from the offending members' presence as much as possible. Other members overhearing such conversation and being offended by it may judge the employee by association even when the employee is not involved.

Enforcing Club Rules

Each club has rules and regulations for its members to follow such as dress code, proper golf course etiquette, ready play, prohibition of carrying coolers on the golf course or in the pool areas, etc. Unfortunately, when members do not follow the rules, it is up to employees to enforce them. Often the infraction is unintentional and the member simply needs a reminder. In some cases it may be best to make an exception in the immediate case to avoid embarrassment, but the member should always be educated in the process to avoid future problems.

Clubs can help themselves by making an effort to foresee which rules may present a problem, for instance a requirement that men must wear jackets in the dining room on certain nights or after certain hours. In this case, management should have spare jackets in a variety of sizes to offer members and their guests who may arrive without a coat.

When informing members of a rules violation, it is always helpful to offer an alternative to the member to avoid embarrassment, for instance, seating inappropriately dressed members in the bar to eat instead of the dining room.

If a particular member repeatedly ignores club rules despite being informed by employees, the situation should be referred to the General Manager for action.

Offering Special Touches

There are some small, yet special touches that demonstrate your commitment to service. This list is for a beverage cart attendant and is by no means all-inclusive. Similar special touches should be devised and included in all areas of the operation.

- Use a clean towel to wipe off beverage cans before giving them to members.
- If players look hot or tired, offer them a wet towel. Wring excessive water out of towel before handing it to them.
- If you are out of a product that a particular member wants, make a point of getting some of that product the next time you pass the Turn House. When you see the member again, inform him or her that you now have the requested item.
- If appropriate, offer your umbrella to a member who does not have one. You can get it back later.
- If a player hits a shot into the woods and you see where it went, wait there and point it out for him or her. This is important as you will be asked frequently if you saw where someone's ball went.
- If you find a golf club on the course, backtrack to see if anyone in the previous few groups lost a club. If you cannot find the owner, call the Pro Shop to tell them you found a club, on which hole it was found, and what make of club it is. Turn the club into the Pro Shop the next time you pass by.

Meeting Service Requests

As an operation that caters to the needs and desires of its members, clubs will make every effort to meet the special requests of its members. The following guidelines should help food and beverage employees meet the special requests of members. The same principle applies to any other area of club operations. Going the extra mile to provide service will always impress members and their guests.

- Food service menus are established to provide members with a varied selection of food service items while maintaining the efficiency and profitability of the operation. There are times when menu items do not meet the special needs of individual members. In such instances, food service staff should be able to provide alternate suggestions.
- Ultimately, the decision as to whether the club may meet any special food requests rests with the General Manager, Chef, or Sous Chef. Front-of-house staff should consult with these individuals before making any promises to members. The best course of action is for the Chef or Sous Chef to speak directly with the member and to offer suggestions.
- Pricing for any special items should be determined by the Chef or Sous Chef based upon ingredient costs and standard menu markups.

- Special request items should be rung up on the point of sale terminal using the Special Item key.

Satisfying High Maintenance Members

Employees should understand that there will always be "high maintenance" members. Satisfying their higher expectations is part of the cost of doing business and the ultimate challenge of service. So employees should not dwell on the difficult few; rather, they must recognize each request or complaint as legitimate and focus on the solution.

Usually experience with individual high maintenance members will give managers and employees a better understanding of their particular needs and allow prior preparation to better serve them. One dining room manager privately told a high maintenance member to personally call him when the member was coming in to dine so he could give the member "his individual attention." This special attention went a long way in diffusing the member's complaints.

Knowing your Facility

Every dining room has good seats and bad seats. The good seats are near the fireplace in winter, overlooking the verandah in summer, or a booth for quiet, intimate dining. Conversely, there are bad tables under air conditioning vents, near pantry and verandah doors, or near a large party of young children.

You and your employees should be aware of the good, the bad, and the ugly of your club and seat members accordingly. If you know Dr. and Mrs. Turner are coming in to celebrate their anniversary, give them the table of their choice or one that will provide the intimate setting for their celebration. Make sure that you do not seat a large boisterous party near them during their meal.

Knowing Member Names

Members want to be recognized and acknowledged at their club. These are the main reasons people join clubs. Strive to learn their last names and address them as Mr., Mrs. Ms., etc., every opportunity you can. Remember their special preferences and go the extra mile to provide their special requests without being asked to do so.

Knowing Member Habits

You and your employees should make every effort to learn the habits of members, particularly those who use club frequently. Whether it's Dr. Jones liking his martinis dry and straight up or Mrs. Smith's inability to tolerate dairy products or Mr. Martin always having a Courvoisier after his meal, these tidbits of information, when followed up on by employees, provide a higher level of service and a personal touch that is always appreciated by the member.

A simple way to record and share member habits is to keep an alphabetized ledger in the dining room pantry and at the bar. Whenever, a server or bartender learns something new, they should record it in the ledger under the member's last name. Over time a sizeable body of personal preferences will be accumulated.

Prior to each meal period, servers should review the reservation list and use the book to remind themselves of the preferences of any member coming in for that meal period. The preference book is also useful as a training tool for new employees.

Reinforcing Club Value

It is through the daily casual conversation with members that you have the ability to build value. Most members pay dues monthly or quarterly, so we must reinforce to them that their money is well spent. Talk about the upcoming club activities and events, talk about an exciting new offering in the dining room, talk about items of interest that will help them see the benefits of being a member at their club.

Maintaining Club Appeal

One way to ensure that the club is appealing to members is to pretend you are the member every time you enter the facility. Each time you arrive to work, walk into the club facility as if you were a new member and were entertaining guests. Walk around the clubhouse, view the dining rooms and bar area, take a look in the bathrooms; all the time acting as if you have never set foot on the premises. Look from top to bottom and see if you discover something that is out of place, dirty, or in need of repair.

Establishing the WOW Factor

We must all recognize that what excites and astounds today will be seen as old news tomorrow. In order for the club and its employees to continually provide the unexpected service touches that wow our members, we must challenge ourselves to brainstorm and plan for ways to continually impress. We cannot leave it to chance.

Just as the Chef will change menus periodically to provide new and interesting dining offerings, all areas of club operations must be continually on the lookout for new ways to offer service. Such ideas must be shared with other department heads and their planning and implementation coordinated so that members are treated to a continual parade of “knock your socks off” special touches. With proper planning and implementation of these service touches, members will experience the Remarkable Service we aim to provide and recognize their club as the leader in personal service and service delivery.