

Messages for Club Managers to Use with Members During Tough Economic Times

Introduction

Clubs and their members face difficult economic times, and retaining members (let alone recruiting members) will be a challenge in the coming year. For club members who perceive and receive real value from their club experiences, retaining them may be challenging, but can be accomplished with the right strategy and good talking points (assuming these club members have the financial means to remain members).

For club members who do not believe they are receiving strong value, the economic crisis will likely accelerate their decision to drop membership. For these members, talking points will likely not be effective – their decisions will be driven by their negative perceptions and experience with their clubs. The danger here is that unless clubs have been proactive about identifying and meeting the real needs of members through surveys, focus groups, conversations, and other means, club managers may not even know who these dissatisfied members are. Now, with the crisis upon us, it will probably be too late to turn them around.

There are no “magic bullet” messages that will retain members. Clubs will largely thrive or decline based on the culture, business practices, value, and attitudes they have established. What we are seeing with the economic downturn is a magnification of any existing issues and an acceleration of any problems resulting from them.

Therefore, we offer the talking points below with the following caveat: If clubs cannot deliver on the promises made through talking points, they will not be effective in retaining members. In fact, they could backfire as members who are on the fence about leaving perceive that the club is saying one thing and doing another.

In short, clubs must *live* the brand they want to have with their members. The “brand” of the club is whatever members perceive it to be, not what the club says it is.

Talking Points

1. Clubs are safe harbors in a storm. Think of our club as an extension of your home – a welcoming place where you can enjoy what you like to do and forget about day-to-day worries.
2. Our club and its members have survived 9-11, wars, the stock market crash of 1987, the stagflation and energy crisis of the 1970s, and other economic turmoil dating back to the Great Depression. So we are going to survive this by sticking together. (Modify the message depending on how old the club is.)
3. If you want to find out what is really going on in the community and how the economy is affecting it, come to the club. Our members are the local leaders and know the answers.
4. With every crisis comes opportunity. We are forming an “Opportunity Committee” to develop creative ideas to move the club forward. Will you please join this important committee so we can get some of your good ideas?
5. We have much to be thankful for – our families, our homes, our friends, and a gathering place where we can relax and enjoy ourselves. Let’s enjoy what our club has to offer.
6. This holiday season bring your kids to the club so they can see their friends and enjoy the activities – it’s a safe environment where they can play and have fun.
7. We care not only about you but your family as well. What else can we offer that your family will find interesting and useful? (Kids are arguably the most important members – if they like the club their parents will likely stay.)
8. Club membership is too important to give up because if any members lose their jobs, the club is where they have the friends and professional network to find their next job.
9. It’s always darkest before the dawn, and the dawn is coming. When, we don’t know. But it will come, and we need to stick together in the meantime. We have long relationships and we can help each other with ideas and encouragement.
10. We’re going to sit this one out – we’re not going to participate in this recession. (This is nice positive message to deliver, but of course must be used judiciously so as not to appear that the club is simply ignoring reality.)

Keeping a Positive Outlook

Perhaps it goes without saying that club managers must maintain a positive outlook and demeanor, but it should be emphasized. Words will mean little if not delivered in an upbeat and sincere way. Club employees must exude an unwavering positive attitude and energy in everything they do and say. Any negativity – in words, actions, or attitudes – will be picked up by members and may drive them away, in good times as well as bad.

A recent article in an association industry magazine included the following four tips from Joe Takash, author of the recently released book titled "Results Through Relationships." It is useful advice in these times.

- 1. Practice emotional control.** Takash cautions leaders to watch out for the inner and oftentimes impersonal autopilot that kicks in when times are tough.
- 2. Provide frequent updates.** Takash believes many executives create unnecessary stress and resentment by not sharing what's going on with the organization.
- 3. Become an exceptional listener.** Takash points out that getting people to perform in tough times requires understanding and that requires attentive listening.
- 4. Lead with (realistic) optimism.** Because negativity, anxiety and stress are contagious, Takash suggests that while leaders need to paint pictures that are reflective of the truth, they must also speak about the possibilities and opportunities that might be buried in the challenges the organization faces.

Ideas to Add Value to Club Membership

Hold a financial seminar featuring an investment expert (preferably a club member). If such a member does not exist, try to find one in the community.

- Hold a Town Hall meeting where members can offer ideas about how the club can change and provide them more value. They will appreciate the opportunity to voice their ideas and reinforce their connection to the club. For clubs that have not changed what they offer for many years, such a meeting is particularly important. A related strategy is to conduct a member survey. Again, members will appreciate being asked and give them hope that value can be increased.

- Engage families – An individual may see value in his or her club membership, but if the rest of that person’s family is not involved, the club membership becomes an item that might be cut from the family budget in favor of things that benefit the entire family. Clubs that have programs to engage spouses and children will be better off.
- Bring-a-Friend Program – Offer programs and events that allow members to bring friends, which can add value for them and also expose your club to new people who may want to join. Relaxing the guest policy is not only a nice gesture to club members in tough times but an excellent networking and marketing tool. Most new club members come from current member referrals.
- Change means opportunity – even if the change seems daunting at first. Create an “Opportunity Committee” and recruit members to join it and come up with new ideas to move the club forward. People want to be asked and will be energized by the chance to do something meaningful for the club.
- Assess your attitude and that of your staff – is there a positive attitude and energy that permeates your club and makes members feel welcome? If not, change it. Negative vibes will drive members away.
- Be transparent about markups on certain products and services so members can be confident they are receiving good value. For example, if they know there is a limit on how much a bottle of wine in the dining room will be marked up (such as a markup limit of \$30 or \$50), they may be more comfortable ordering it.