

# **Building Membership Momentum – Start Your Engines!**

## **(Part II of II)**

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This article is relevant to both arena and dedicated curling clubs.

The question asked at the end of part one of *Building Membership Momentum* was: “What is your club’s most valuable asset?” There was also an accompanying hint that it wasn’t your curling stones. In this article, we’ll talk about various ways you may gain traction and momentum in participation levels for all of your curling events. We’ll also discuss how your club may translate that increased activity into more members. The above question will be answered shortly.

To build the club, it’s necessary to approach various aspects of club operations, especially membership growth and retention, from a business perspective. Nonprofit organizations, such as curling clubs, primarily provide SERVICES in the form of programs or events. Services are personal. They are all about what kind of experience your participants have with your organization. For a Learn to Curl session, this experience starts from the very first email or phone call an individual has with your club to any follow up contact he or she receives after the event. For new club members, the experience goes right from that first Learn to Curl session forward. Do they have the necessary information and support they need to feel comfortable with both the sport and the club? We hope our new club members will eventually become active as volunteers for the club – especially helping other new club members learn the ropes and feel welcome. How we orientate them will affect how they, in turn, assist others.

If we approach our programs and events from a service perspective, what happens when we ensure all the details of our service are taken care of – from our participants’ point of view? Hopefully, they all have a good time and a great experience with curling! We may even get some of them to try it again, or to join our club as new members. Even those who are not able to join will have good things to say. They’ll tell their friends, families and coworkers what a great time they had.

So, we go to a lot of work developing programs, honing our systems and processes to give our participants an excellent curling experience – then we let them walk out the door, never to be heard from, or to hear from us, again. NOT! Obviously, we need to follow through and get some long term benefit from our efforts.

Let’s work through a list of everything your club might have in place to ensure that everyone who contacts, or spends time with, you has the easiest, best experience possible. This is the list I came up with. You might have a slightly different list. We’ll talk more about some of the individual items later.

- 1) Effective communication and publicity from your club to your community
- 2) Specific opportunities planned for people to visit your club and try curling
- 3) Clear instructions who to contact and prompt responses to inquiries.
- 4) Actual bookings or reservations complete with all information participants require regarding costs, times, clothing & equipment, directions, etc. (by email or phone)
- 5) Follow up confirmations by email or phone prior to the date.
- 6) Greeters and sign in procedures at the event - including waivers and a method of collecting email addresses (if you don’t already have them) and/or telephone numbers of all participants visiting your club for the first time.
- 7) Instructors prepared with rosters of expected attendees and an organized instruction program on the day of the event.
- 8) Information to give to participants after the session about the club, league times, upcoming events etc.
- 9) Club members available to answer questions from new participants.
- 10) Follow-up a few days after the event by phone or email.

## **Building Our Most Precious Asset**

We've all heard that one of the best marketing tools of business is "word of mouth marketing" or WOMM. As the saying goes, "A happy customer will tell three friends while an unhappy one will tell ten or more." So, we want good things said about us in our community.

Let's go through the list again:

### **1) Effective communication and publicity from your club to your community**

There are a few ways to accomplish this. The most important way is to have your 24/7 presence on the internet. Your club needs a website that contains an obvious way for people to contact you. Hopefully, the site also provides simple information to visitors as to what curling is and how they may try it. Take a look at your website – is it visitor friendly?

Another thing your club should consider is creating a simple electronic newsletter geared toward both members and nonmembers (potential members). The newsletter may be only one or two pages but it should contain information of interest to the greater community. This includes things like upcoming Learn to Curl events or other opportunities for visitors to come and try curling with your club. There are many places to obtain templates for simple newsletters that are fun, easy to create, yet fairly professional looking. Maybe the newsletter goes out twice a year, or once a month or it varies according to your club's event schedule.

And who exactly do you send your newsletter to? Well... your cumulative database of email addresses for everyone who has ever contacted, or spent time with, your club. If we are counting on people to spread the word about curling, most will have very short memories about what they did even a couple of weeks, or months ago. We need to remind them about curling every once in a while. Sending them, and your own club members, the occasional fun newsletter does the trick. In fact, now all those people have something they can actually forward to others for you – and this happens more often than you think.

It's true that a few people will not want to receive a newsletter from you but the majority won't mind – especially since they had such a great time with your club. As long as they are not bombarded with "spam" from your organization, and names and emails are not visible or available to others, the communication is generally useful and appropriate.

This form of marketing, called "viral marketing", uses social networks to encourage people to pass along information voluntarily. By receiving your newsletter, the contacts in your database now have your message to pass on to their friends etc. They will encourage them to try curling. Every visitor to your club now has the potential to become your best recruiter. This is powerful stuff.

Viral marketing is also known as "stealth marketing" and that's probably a more accurate term. For in the case of a curling club, especially a new curling club, the email database is going to be pretty small to start. But with time, it will grow to include thousands of names. This is the engine that will drive your increasing participation levels. This is your club's most valuable asset enabling you to create your curling juggernaut.

Of course, other forms of publicity are helpful such as TV, newspaper articles or radio spots. For most clubs, however, access to print and other types of media may be out of their price range and reporters tend to give us more attention during peak opportunities like around the Winter Olympics. Take advantage of every chance you have in these areas and any increased interest they generate.

### **2) Specific opportunities planned for people to visit your club and try curling**

These would include events like Learn to Curl, introductory leagues and regular leagues etc. with specific dates and times. They may even include Open House events – preferably with prescheduled participants (see below).

### **3) Clear instructions who to contact and prompt responses to inquiries**

Have you ever had to search on a website, or newsletter, for contact information - frustrating isn't it? Even worse is actually taking the time to email the contact then hearing nothing back for days or weeks. Both of these situations send a message – “You're not very important”. Is that the message your club wants to send?

We want to start our relationships off on a positive note. Make it easy for people to find, contact and meet you.

**4) Actual bookings or reservations** complete with all information participants require regarding costs, times, clothing & equipment, directions, etc. (by email or phone).

From my experience, people appreciate, and are more likely to show up for, Learn to Curl sessions or Open House events if they actually have a scheduled time to be there. Remember the “Open House”? It doesn't really have to be unscheduled. Record their names and the number of people they are bringing with them - and book them in.

If I'm at home on a Saturday night, I'm more likely to get up off the couch to go curling if I've formally booked it. I've got a spot saved – people are waiting for me. For many, this is an important part of the service experience. Things are organized and structured so there's no guessing, therefore less anxiety. They know where to go, what to bring and how long they will be there.

Many clubs have developed systems for how they schedule people in for introductory curling sessions. Some require prepayment and some don't. Some do things like overbook by 10 to 20% to account for any no-shows. With experience, they figure out what works for them and they are always looking for ways to improve their processes.

Pre-booking also helps from the club's point of view as we have a better idea how many volunteers to schedule. Even if we still have a few participants drop-in – that's okay. We can fit them in if possible, or we can book them for another day. Try getting as many people as you can to pre-book. You may be surprised at how many more people you have attending your events.

Systems for booking can range from a club member responding to inquiries by phone or email to more elaborate systems that include e-commerce capabilities.

A simple system might include a club email box that perhaps the membership committee has access to. The workload of contacting people and scheduling can then be spread out over a few people instead of everything falling on a single individual. This can be important especially in very busy times like the Olympics!

The club email box also eliminates any response delays that can happen if inquiries are directed to a personal email address. If that person is unavailable for some reason, others can still check email and respond to inquiries. It also helps with continuity if the membership committee changes or a contact person moves away and is no longer with the club.

U.S. curling clubs now have access to more formal systems of club management through companies such as Compete-At.com. Using the Compete-At system, you can have your participants register online for any curling events – and they may even prepay using a credit or debit card. There is a small charge for this service. Curling clubs, especially those currently dealing primarily in cash, may find that sales of things like leagues or memberships actually increase when they are able to offer this additional payment option. For a Learn to Curl session, the small charge may either be absorbed or the admission fee slightly increased to account for the difference. With Compete-At, you can also automate parts of the registration process such as confirmation emails etc. The link for Compete-At.com may also be found on the main page of the USCA website [www.usacurl.org](http://www.usacurl.org).

**5) Follow-up confirmations by email prior to the date.**

Send a note a few days in advance reminding participants of their session and other information, such as proper footwear and clothing. This helps to ensure that your attendance is close to what you expect. You can ask them to confirm - most will. Some may tell you they can't make it and ask to be rescheduled. If you have any other inquiries, you could then still have time to try and fill the space.

**6) Greeters and sign in procedures at the event** - including waivers and a method of collecting email addresses (if you don't already have them) and/or telephone numbers of all participants visiting your club for the first time. This is an important way we make our service personal. Our visitors have most likely never actually seen curling except maybe on TV. They don't know what a curling club is and it's entirely possible that this is their first visit to your particular arena facility.

It's uncomfortable for people to wander around wondering if they're in the right place. Something as simple as a friendly face waiting to welcome them is profoundly appreciated by most people. They need information on things like where to put their belongings and where to wait. Perhaps we introduce them to a club member who gives them a quick tour or provides them with name tags.

Of course, waivers are an important part of risk management for our organizations. They also provide a quick way to collect contact information like email addresses and/or phone numbers. This is all the information we really need from our first time visitors.

**7) Instructors prepared with rosters of expected attendees and an organized instruction program on the day of the event.**

This is the actual program you are offering. Volunteers providing the program should have training. If there are "product" components to your service, this is one. (The other one would be the ice surface quality including stones.) Everything else is about good customer service – and creating that positive experience.

The Level I USCA Instructor program is geared exactly for preparing your volunteer instructors with the information they need to introduce curling in a safe, organized and fun way. Instructors are able to include appropriate information in the time you have available.

Hopefully, your club has some USCA Instructors. I encourage you to make it a priority to attend instructor clinics whenever you have the opportunity. Instructors in your club can act as lead instructors for sessions and train other club volunteers to assist them. Level II Instructors are able to assist your club to retain members by helping them improve their deliveries and other technical skills.

Remember that your club is in direct competition with other sports and recreational activities for your participants' limited resources – namely money and time. Curling is not well known, or understood, in most areas of the U.S. To "sell" curling, we have to convince people to put their money, and time, into a sport that most of them know nothing about. Think about it. If you walked into a karate studio, and the program was unorganized, unstructured – and unprofessional, would you invest your precious money and time there? If you had a burning desire to learn karate you might, otherwise – not a chance.

As for the instructors being prepared with rosters of expected attendees, this gets back to the customer service aspect. When possible, it's good for instructors to be prepared in advance with regard to how many participants there are so they know how many teams they might set up etc. This keeps things moving quickly instead of wasting time trying to count people and organize teams etc. In addition, there is nothing more powerful than using people's names whenever possible. Name tags are a big help. This is an important way to personalize the experience, plus it's better for both the instructors and other group members to be able to address somebody by their first name rather than "Hey you".

With practice, your club can get very good at both introducing people to the sport of curling and helping them improve their curling skills so they'll want to continue as members.

### **8) Information to give to participants after the session about the club, league times, upcoming events etc.**

Now that you've got them there, and you have gone through your excellent program, what's the next step? You need to have options available. They may not sign up right then, but at least they have something to consider.

There are certain instances where you should be ready to sign people up and accept payment immediately. During the craziness of the Winter Olympics, curling clubs prepared with lessons, leagues, Olympic memberships etc. were basically able to "sell out" of pretty well everything they had planned to offer. During these times, you need to know your available capacity – and be prepared to sell it!

Heads up for arena clubs, it's not too early to approach your arena managers to set aside extra ice time for February to April (or longer) in 2010. Start working on them now!

### **9) Club members available to answer questions from new participants.**

Again, it's the personal touch. It's helpful for club members to visit with people so they can answer any questions participants might have. Many people are reluctant to join leagues because they think they are not "good enough". Newer club members are especially good at using their own experience to provide reassurance to potential club members.

### **10) Follow-up a few days after the event by phone or email.**

You need to find out 1) if they had a good time and 2) if they are interested in coming back to try it again. Their next experience might include options such as: playing in a fun game, sparing in an actual league game, or joining a short mini-instructional league. Book an actual time for them to come back, ensure that someone is there to welcome them and include them in the group right from the start.

Of course, if they didn't have a good experience you can hopefully get some constructive feedback on where your organization can improve. There's always room for improvement.

## **Recruiting Experienced Curlers**

Most of the information we've talked about has been geared toward creating a good first impression with people new to curling. What happens when someone contacts your club who has previous curling experience?

I've heard the story before. An experienced curler shows up at an arena curling club, takes one look at what's going on there and high-tails it out of the place - never to be seen again.

Arena or dedicated, we need them. YOU need them – as many of them as you can get. I can't stress enough how important it is to have this kind of knowledge and skill inside your organization. The learning curve for new clubs is incredibly steep – almost insurmountable if you don't have experience in your corner. Somebody who has curled in an established club elsewhere knows two very important things: what a curling game is supposed to look like and, more importantly, what a curling club looks like. In my opinion, the demise of many new arena clubs is a direct result of not having this information and perspective.

This also applies to dedicated clubs. I've seen many clubs enjoy incredible growth as an outcome of interest from the Olympics etc. The result is a membership where curlers with relatively few years of curling experience far outnumber the experienced curlers. These clubs also need to make a point of recruiting experienced curlers. Newer curlers have a good deal to learn about the sport of curling and an important way to do this is to play with, and against, people who have much more experience than you. Increasing the number of experienced curlers increases the knowledge - and the level of competition - of the club.

But a curling CLUB is about much more than whether we make our shots or not. Curling has its own history, traditions and culture. Every club member has most likely seen “The Spirit of Curling” as printed on the back of every set of the USCA *Rules of Play* pamphlet. Curlers from established clubs instinctively know these traditions of sportsmanship and goodwill. They are able to guide the club as role models, influencing this very important aspect of club development, both on and off the ice.

How can you keep those experienced curlers from running away from your club as fast as they can?

When I was president of the Pittsburgh Curling Club, I made a point of personally meeting all experienced curlers who contacted the club. I set up a time at a curling session when we would get together. When they got there, I blocked the exits so they couldn't leave. Just kidding (sort of).

You see, when someone who has curled in an established, dedicated curling club walks into a fledgling arena club for the first time, the first thing they see is a lot of very inexperienced curlers playing on somewhat dubious ice conditions. I know that was the first thing I saw. I found myself longing for my old club – wondering “Back home - where did all those wonderful curling buildings come from? I promise I will never take them for granted again!”

The second thing I saw was work – a whole bunch of work including a lot of teaching other people how to curl. All the setting up, tearing down, and training - just to be able to play the “odd” game again (pun intended). This is the part where many experienced curlers turn around and disappear into the night.

So, what do arena curling clubs possibly have to offer these people that might actually get them to stay? The answer is – the opportunity to be a part of curling history with your club. To help build the sport of curling, literally from the ground up, in a place that didn't have it before or where it's not well established. This is uncharted territory to those of us from areas where curling was established long before the time of our great grandparents.

I don't try to sell experienced curlers on our league play, convenience, price or anything else of that nature. They can see right through that. I explain what we are about – and I ask for their help. I offer them the opportunity to be a part of curling history in our city. Then, in their moment of weakness, I take them around and introduce them to the rest of the gang – who welcome them like a long lost friend. And, faster than you can say “sweep”, they're part of Instruction & Training, or some other committee that can best use their skills and interests.

Sounds a bit sneaky doesn't it? Not at all. Most people thoroughly enjoy being part of the curling community again, and it usually doesn't take them long to get back into the bonspiel scene either. As for curling with an arena club, I consider it one of the best experiences of my life because arena curling clubs are ALL HEART. I'll venture to say that some dedicated clubs I've belonged to could use a bit of the enthusiasm, pride and camaraderie of many U.S. arena clubs. I believe that many of these clubs also possess the tenacity required to eventually move into their own facilities. To do that they need lots of dedicated members, of all curling skill levels, to stick with them. You can't just show up when the going's good.

## **Ready for 2010**

This all sounds like a lot of work, right? It is – but it's also an investment in your club's future. Plus, much of it is work that can be done from your home (computer).

If you go back and read Part I of this article in the previous issue of the Curling News, we've addressed all four of the “guiding principles”. We've increased the value of each curling session by ensuring our organizations are well run. We have a system to fill our curling ice to capacity with prescheduled participants. We will learn more and more about the bigger picture of curling by actively recruiting curlers of ALL skill levels and developing our

organizations in the process. And we'll improve our relationships with our arenas by growing our numbers and proving curling as a valuable contributor and partner for them.

In this article, we talked about how to create the engine for your curling club – your database. When you take care of all the details that go into creating a good experience for your participants, this engine becomes a powerful word of mouth marketing tool, enabling your club to enjoy the residual benefits of your work for years to come.

Let's not allow our participants to walk out the door, thinking happy thoughts, never to hear from us again. They'll want to hear from us – trust me.

See, every four years, there's this huge curling extravaganza called the Winter Olympics. Around the time of this event, curling becomes a superstar and the most popular game in town.

Your database will be there for you. They will remember. They'll come back, bring their friends and this time more of them will stay with you. It will be like a reunion. You kept in contact with them – remember? They've since encouraged several of their coworkers to contact you.

You'll also be ready for all the new inquiries you'll receive. The Olympics can bring frenzied interest that can quickly fade away in just a few months. You must be prepared to handle that interest and, in the process, turn your four cylinder engine into a Kenworth. Your hard work now will make it effortless for new people to find you and spend time with your club. Most curling clubs, arena and dedicated, have approximately one and a half curling seasons to get ready for the 2010 Vancouver Olympics. Even if you are able to implement just a few of the things described here, you will be much farther ahead. Take advantage of the tidal wave that is poised to hit your clubs in the spring of 2010. Start your engines and get ready!

Feel free to send comments or questions to Sandra at [s.mcmakin@comcast.net](mailto:s.mcmakin@comcast.net).

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