What Do Members Want?
By Harris M. Plotkin

We recently completed an attitude survey of the members of a 100 year-old private country club in an area that has been economically depressed for the last five to ten years.

The club had recently decided to operate without a general manager. Instead, the hostess in the dining room, the chef in the kitchen, the bar manager, the head pro, and the golf course superintendent run their own operations, reporting directly to the Board for guidance. The Board was interested, among other things, in finding out whether the members felt this form of management was better than in previous years when there was a general manager. Over the past ten years, the club had spent quite a bit of money through members’ assessments to significantly improve the clubhouse as well as to continue to improve the quality of the golf course through an overseeding program and other improvements.

Our survey was sent to the members as part of their monthly statement, asking them to evaluate the various aspects of different departments in the country club with regard to service, attitude, staff knowledge, cleanliness, appearance, hours of operation, selection of merchandise, food, keeping promises, and prices. They were also given two open-ended questions where they could write their comments on which aspects of the club they liked best and their suggestions on how to improve the club’s operation.

What did the survey reveal?

1) GOLF SHOP. Same story we find in many clubs—overpriced and poor selection of merchandise as far as the members are concerned. Typical answers, unfortunately. Too many head professionals who operate these golf shops appear to be taking advantage of the members by charging higher prices than the discount golf shops that are popping up all over the country. Therefore, their “trapped audience” of private members rebels against this attitude and buys merchandise at the discount shops. Members wanted prices lowered and a better selection of merchandise.

2) THE DINING ROOM. The same complaints we see almost every time. The staff doesn’t pay attention to the customers. They tend to gather by the coffee station and talk among themselves
while keeping their backs to the members who may need attention. Also, members complained about the poor attitude of the waitstaff when waiting on members.

These comments are repeated many times in surveys we’ve previously done, but rarely is anything done to correct them. Most private country clubs are unwilling to pay to have their employees trained on how to give above and beyond customer service to the members. Video-based training programs tailored for private country clubs are available to the golf industry, but are rarely purchased by Boards of Directors. They tend to hold the general manager responsible for training the staff, and say they are paying him or her a lot of money and they should be able to train the employees. This is a very narrow attitude, as many general managers do not have the skills or experience to do this type of training without the use of a training program.

The menu took a beating as it usually does over the lack of interesting meals. Also, members would like the menu changed more often. Pricing of food and drinks also took some knocks as it always does.

3) THE GOLF COURSE. The comments from this particular club were quite good. Members had problems with the greens over the years, and had gone through a number of superintendents. Though it was a battle to get it approved, the overseeding program the club started eight years earlier was finally accepted by most members. The program has given the course a consistent quality in winter as well as summer. Overall, there were as many good comments as there were bad comments—this is typical.

4) There were a variety of comments on the pool operations, including the season is too short and longer operating hours are needed during the summer. Negative comments about the tennis courts and skeet range were also made.

5) Other miscellaneous issues that usually show up in a member attitude survey involve theft of food that goes out the back door of the kitchen and theft in the locker room by employees as well as members and their children, and, too often, the prevalence of selling and using drugs in the kitchen and among the waitstaff. However, the biggest problem still is the indifference of the staff to the needs of the members. The members come to the club to relax, not to be stressed out by rude service.
The members’ comments, both positive and negative, will allow the Board to address issues that need attention and appropriate action. One decision the Board made immediately was to hire a general manager.

Hiring the right person to be the general manager or the head golf professional is difficult. Much of the work we do is helping golf management companies, as well as hundreds of private and public golf courses, hire general managers and department heads through the utilization of our pre-employment tests. These tests assure that the applicant has the right attitude toward customers, is responsible, dependable, and honest, and has the other necessary qualities to be a good general manager, good head golf professional, good food and beverage director, or good golf course superintendent. What we can not tell from tests for a private country club is whether the applicant fits the “culture of that club”.

A Board of Directors can do themselves a service to reduce turnover among general managers, head golf professionals, and other department heads by thinking long-term rather than short-term. They should try to determine what the culture of their country club is, and evaluate candidates to see if they fit within that culture.

Conclusion
What does a member attitude survey do for a Board of Directors? It gives them insight into what’s really in the hearts and minds of their members, many of whom would not speak personally to a Board member, but are able to express themselves in this type of anonymous survey. Surveys place an objective ranking of problems on a numerical basis so the Board knows which problems need the most attention. The survey tends to identify individuals who are causing problems to the organization or those who are great assets to the organization. Also, it usually produces a number of useful suggestions on how to increase revenues of the club without raising members’ fees.

About the author... Harris Plotkin is the author of the recently published book, Building A Winning Team, and creator of the ABOVE and BEYOND customer service training program designed exclusively for the golf industry. For more information about employment tests, call Harris Plotkin at (800) 877-5685. He is the founder of The Plotkin Group. This 30-year-old management consulting and training firm uses the latest scientific employee testing and training programs to help private and public organizations select and train employees. They have several thousand clients, including Kinko’s; The PGA Tour’s Tournament Players Clubs; Family Bargain Center; and Countrywide Funding. Their ABOVE and BEYOND customer service training program is approved by the PGA of America and the CMAA for continuing education credits. They travel around the country training PGA sections and CMAA chapters in that program, as well as their BUILDING A WINNING TEAM workshop. In addition, the CMAA has endorsed all of their testing programs to their members.