

# CLUB LIFE

## Empower, Engage, Sustain

### What can sports clubs learn from business?

To paraphrase Charles Darwin "It's not the strongest, fittest or fastest who survived but those who can adapt the best." This is as true for sports clubs as it is for the animal kingdom.

We live in tough economic times so no longer is it just ok for sports clubs to expect members to renew annual subscriptions year on year. Family incomes are under pressure so something has to give and many are asking "am I getting value for money from my sport club?" Golf clubs have particularly suffered from this but it is not just them. The Sport and Recreation Alliance estimates that the majority of sports clubs are operating at break even or at a loss.

Sports Clubs need to adapt what they do to a wider audience if they want to survive. So in these difficult economic times, what can sports clubs learn from the business world that will not only help them to survive but actually thrive?

Over the past few years I have identified 5 characteristics of a thriving business and when considered in the context of a sports club they give us something to thinking about. The 5 characteristics of a thriving business are

1. **They have the right people in the right roles:** By this I mean that they identify the skills that are required and appoint people to the required roles. They have strong leadership and look after their staff
2. **They have a clear plan about where they want to be and how they are going to get there:** More importantly the business plan is understood and owned by everyone with the business as they all have a part to play.
3. **They are visible to their customers:** It's not just about the customers they have now but also potential new customers. They understand how they can raise their profile and communicate with customers
4. **They look after their customers who keep coming back:** They know who their customers are and what they want. They understand that by keeping existing customers and attracting new, they will grow and strengthen the business
5. **They are viable:** By having the right people, understanding where they want to be, attracting and keeping customers the money takes care of itself, with a little help from the accountant. They also have a number of income streams (products or services) so they can adapt if one is hit

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So what has any of this got to do with sports clubs? If we look at each of the 5 characteristics, shared above, I would suggest that they also apply if you want a thriving sports club.

### **A Thriving Club has the RIGHT PEOPLE in the right role**

There are many different roles required in running a successful club; it's not just the usual committee roles and club coaches; how many clubs have recruited (they could be paid but most likely are a volunteer) someone to look after the online presence including website and social media (more about this later), a club manager to look after the off field business elements and who is looking after the welfare and growth of their volunteers to name three key roles?

Ok! I hear you shouting "it is hard to recruit volunteers", which it can be, but how many clubs when registering children actually register the parents and find out what skills they may bring? Sport Wales' research tells us that some of the best ways to recruit volunteers is to have a clear job description, understanding of the time commitment required and to just ask the right person. Therefore, if you think about matching skills to roles within the club and asking for help you are more likely to get support. For example, if you identify a parent with social media skills and have an understanding of what you require they are much more likely to help in reviewing the club's online presence. After all, if you ask for 2 hours support a week, for a specific role, people are more likely to say yes than if you said 6 hours a week or indeed gave no indication of the time commitment.

Parents are extremely unlikely to come forward and say "can I help" as they might not want to upset someone and don't want to end up as a coach, which is what happened to me.

Thriving businesses often have a charismatic and visionary leader who is able to engage people at the same time as driving the business forward. This is as true of thriving sports clubs though sadly in my experience leaders of sports clubs tend to do things in isolation and are blinkered to the wider role the club should fulfil and mainly focuses on the results on the field as opposed to what is happening behind the scenes.

### **A Thriving Club has a CLEAR PLAN about where it wants to be and how it is going to get there**

How many clubs have a comprehensive Club Development Plan (Business Plan) that is owned by all those in the club? The Plan should look at all elements of the club and not just the playing side. Might I suggest that in most cases plans are in individuals' heads and they don't always correspond with other committee members or people within the club therefore there is no agreed direction of travel, indeed different people can be working against each other.

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The Plan is also critical to engaging the community as it is the “window” to the club and is a great way to showcase what you are trying to do to prospective members, funders, partners and sponsors. In the words of Benjamin Franklin “If you fail to plan, you are planning to fail!”

### **A Thriving Club is VISIBLE in the local community**

A thriving sports club should be at the heart of the community and not just something for those that want to play a particular sport. The more people you engage in the club the greater opportunities you have to grow. For too long sports clubs have been inward looking. If you only offer a single sport you are only visible to those that want to play that sport.

There are hundreds of examples of clubs who have diversified their offer and as a result they make the club more visible in the local community. In being more visible you are more attractive to new players, supporters, funders and sponsors.

For example, Lymm Rugby Club stage a pantomime every year bringing much needed additional funds into the club. A sports club might run keep fit classes during the week again to bring more people into the club. Tredegar Rugby Club in Blaenau Gwent has become the home for Tredegar Netball Clubs. Markham Rugby Club in Caerphilly Borough by working with StreetGames has not only increased the number of teenage players but they are also seeing a greater number of people supporting first team matches. You don't need to have your own facilities to capitalise on wider market segments, Richmond Volleyball Club in London does not have its own facility yet it has over 4,000 people on its contacts database from running local, regional and national fun and competitive tournaments, all of which bring in much needed funds to the club.

A number of Gymnastics Clubs have diversified their offer since moving into their own premises. For example Valleys Gymnastics Academy started out as an artistic gymnastics club but they now offer rhythmic gymnastics, adult keep fit, adult gymnastics, birthday parties, cheerleading as well as outreach activities in other local authorities.

I heard recently about the rugby ladies of “Team Pink” in Wattstown, Rhondda Cynon Taf who have produced a chair exercise DVD for use in the local elderly care homes, which is raising their profile in all sorts of ways.

The “day of the poster” is dead so I hope that none of you are thinking about this as your method of communication. Your clubs need to embrace new technologies and social media to build your profile with existing and potential new customers. If you personally don't know what to do, then find someone who does. After-all a business that doesn't raise its profile to potential customers is never going to sell enough of its products and will be out of business very quickly.

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Attracting new customer is only the start as you have to keep them and this brings me to the next point.

### **A Thriving Club is a VIBRANT place to be**

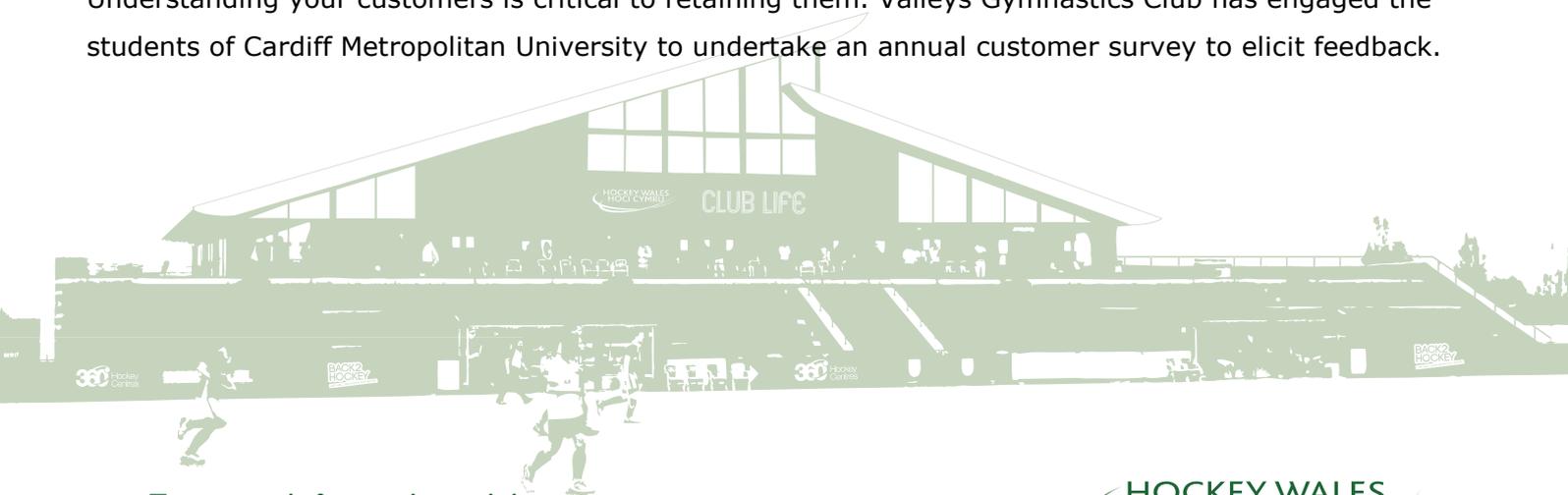
If you want repeat business and for people to keep coming back you need to offer them something they want to purchase. The atmosphere in your club has to be comfortably, people have to be welcoming but most of all people want to have fun if they are parting with their hard earned cash. If none of this is in place then you risk losing potential customers to other things or worse still to your local rivals. Customers have choice so you need to be better than your competitors.

Too many clubs, when having an open day should not even bother as they fail at the first hurdle. There is nobody welcoming people and helping to make the introductions to the club and existing members. Over the years I have turned up at too many clubs for the first time and nobody has said hello, which for someone who is a little unsure, about themselves, can mean they never come back. In thinking about how your club welcomes new people to the club, consider this. A new customer who walks through your door could be the answer to your prayers, but if you don't make them feel welcome quickly you will never know if they could have helped you or not.

Another thing to consider, when thinking vibrant, is do you offer opportunities for all abilities – from beginner to elite, males and females, all ages or at least more than just elite competitions. Someone turning up for the first time may not be looking for regular commitment and high level competitions so what are you able to offer.

Becky Jones, General Manager of Planet Gymnastics "we have recognised that we need to offer activities that reflect what individuals want, which may be to compete, but may also be for social purposes, to build performance skills. We offer activities for all needs and levels"

Do you listen to your customers and find out what they like, don't like or would like done differently. Understanding your customers is critical to retaining them. Valleys Gymnastics Club has engaged the students of Cardiff Metropolitan University to undertake an annual customer survey to elicit feedback.



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## **A Thriving Club is VIABLE**

By following the rules above you will now have more people helping to run the club, you will have a clear plan on where you want to get to, you will be more attractive to sponsors and other community partners and you will have a variety of income streams from diversifying your offer.

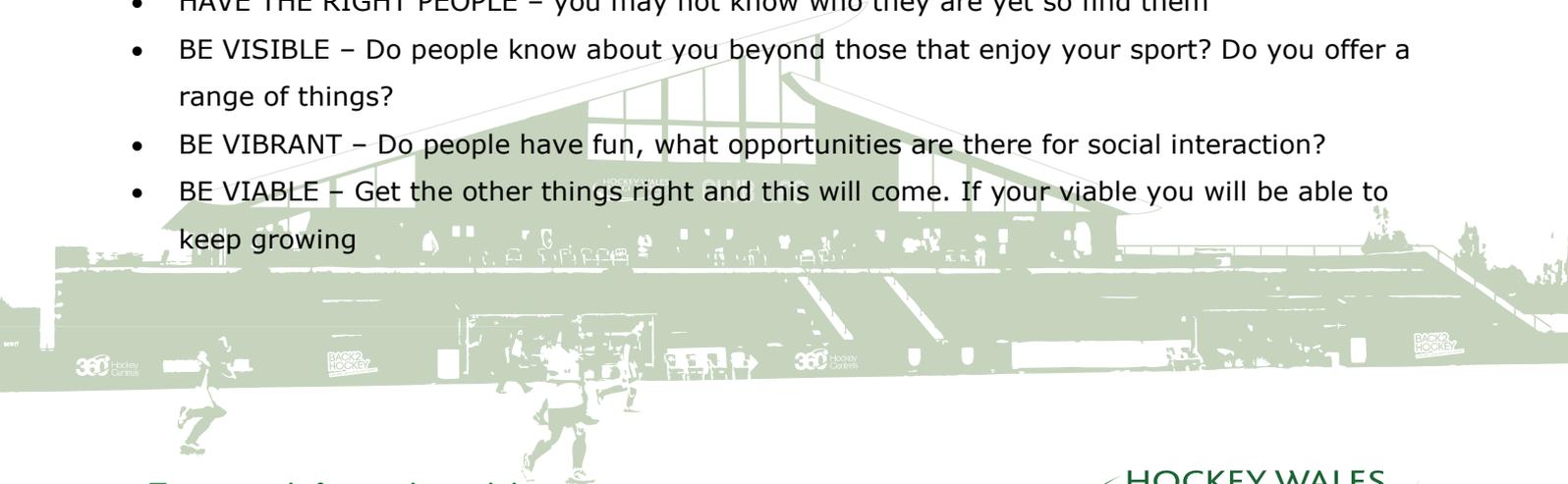
A further benefit of this approach is that should there be a down turn in core membership you will have other incomes making up the short-fall. Successful businesses rarely operate with just one product or service as they would be too insecure to changes in the market.

For too long the word "profit" has been seen as a dirty word in community sport but this is not the case. Profit or surplus, if you prefer, is critical to your survival and more importantly growth. For too long, clubs have been reliant on membership and grants but in these difficult times a new business model is essential.

Some people I talk to do not regard a sports club as a business but if you look at the evidence it is clear. A sports club provides a service to paying customers (members and guests), it has a management team (Committee) and it has to generate a profit (surplus) to survive and support future growth. In the words of John Metzger, Queens City Gymnastic Facility, Cincinnati "don't tell me that profit is a dirty word, it is essential for me to employ 150 people from the local community"

In summary I would argue that in a modern sporting context our sector needs to learn lessons from the business world.

- We have to start thinking about our clients as Customers
- We have to give our customers a great experience
- Profit is not an option its essential
- PRICE is important – cheap is not always best
- HAVE A SHARED PLAN – not something that is in one person head
- HAVE THE RIGHT PEOPLE – you may not know who they are yet so find them
- BE VISIBLE – Do people know about you beyond those that enjoy your sport? Do you offer a range of things?
- BE VIBRANT – Do people have fun, what opportunities are there for social interaction?
- BE VIABLE – Get the other things right and this will come. If your viable you will be able to keep growing



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