

## ***How to grow sports participation... introducing the Welcome Pledge***

*"However beautiful the strategy, you should occasionally look at the results,"* Sir Winston Churchill

*Sport England's latest Active People survey confirms what most of us who work in community sport have long realised: that participation in most sports has been in decline for a number of years across the UK.. (Somehow, don't believe the situation is much different in other parts of the British Isles).*

Some commentators have blamed external factors such as funding cuts and the recession for this situation and, no doubt the competition for people's leisure time and pound sterling is getting tougher but that shouldn't mean that all of us cannot do something about this situation. Based on our work with 3,000 community sports club and providers Sports Marketing Network has a solution which could solve a big part of this problem.

Because, to be honest (and a bit brutal) **too many of our community sports clubs, leisure centres and activity providers are simply not welcoming enough to towards potential new members, users and volunteers.** Research and anecdotal evidence indicate that people feel uncertain on how to dress, behave and what reaction, if any, they will get when they walk in through the door. There are too few activity providers where the whole culture is focused towards creating an atmosphere where new people are welcomed. Interestingly, such places can often be very welcoming when you have first been introduced.

***Our sports clubs, leisure centres and other activity providers must become more welcoming and deliver greater sporting and consumer experiences***

### ***An unwelcoming Open Day***

*Not too far from where I live there is a waterskiing club which had put up a big board advertising their Open Day. So one Saturday afternoon my wife, the Golden Retriever, Mozart, and I went down to the lake and enjoyed watching the 40-50 people having a great time on the water. Everybody, apart from us were in waterskiing gear, so we were quite visible, especially as Mozart was loudly demonstrating his keenness to join the water skiers.*

*Wearing our 'smart casual' and not waterskiing gear for 20 minutes we stood there and no one came to say hello or welcome and we then went home. Surely, that would not happen at your open day? Some possible new members and volunteers being lost.*

*You would make sure that newcomers were made to feel welcome and that you got their contact details and then sent a follow up email or letter, wouldn't you?*

*You may say that you are far too busy on your match days or at your events to say a personal welcome to everybody, but there are many other ways you can make people feel welcome.*

***Your best marketing tool is a customer who has just had a great experience at your club***

Remember, sports clubs and other activity providers are in the Experience Industry, competing for people's leisure time and spend. You, your coaches/instructors and the rest of your team must focus on providing the best sporting and customer experiences possible.

And remember - we are all different, so what you think is a great experience, may not be the same to a 26 year old recreational player or a 42 year old 'returner'.

Help newcomers ease into the place, so the initial 'like-first-day-at-school' nerves disappear and they become advocates for you.

## Being welcoming by 'doing a Svend'

In 2009 Sports Marketing Network ran a workshop for the ASA North East region on a *How to be a Welcoming Club*. One of the clubs attending was Bingley Swimming Club. At this workshop Svend Elkjaer ran a very simple exercise on simply saying 'hello' and 'welcome' to every new person, young or old, who came to the club.

In September 2011, as part of my preparation for delivering workshops at the ASA's National Conference, I visited Bingley Swimming Club in Bradford to get a better insight into the challenges and opportunities of running a swimming club in 2011. At the end of my visit, Di Whitaker, the Head Coach, then told me that they did indeed attend the workshop I had run three years earlier. Since then the Chair of the Club has made a point of shaking hands with every newcomer to the Club. "Three years later, we still call it 'doing a Svend'," Di then added.

If we could get all our community sports clubs to become that bit more welcoming by using such simple tools, we would see them flourish...

Help people to try out new activities without having to commit themselves. SMN call it

### ***Dip a TOE = Trial, Observe, Experience***

encouraging activity providers to give potential members the opportunity to test their experiences. Having been involved with your sport for years or worked at your facility for a long time, spare a thought for those people who would like to try your sport or use your centre. They are probably as nervous and uncomfortable as you are when you go somewhere you haven't been before and you don't know anybody there!

*Welcome is a culture and then a skill.  
It is something we always do, not just a one-off  
It is passion **and** process*

### **Commit to being more welcoming - sign the Welcome Pledge**

The Welcome Pledge has been developed by SMN in cooperation with Pro-Active North London (the local County Sports Partnership) and is designed to focus people's attention on the often small, but significant differences a welcoming culture and attitude can make in providing great experiences. All we are asking you to do is to print this out, adapt it to your specific place and then get as many people, volunteers and staff, to commit to and then sign the **Welcome Pledge**.

And then tell your whole community about your welcoming culture and then stick to it!

### **The Welcome Pledge - helping to grow sports participation**

I will do all I can to:

1. smile at everybody I meet *at (name of club/centre/deliverer)*
2. greet anybody who appears to be new or does not seem to feel at home
3. encourage my colleagues to be as welcoming as they can be
4. learn from other welcoming people and places
5. influence, where I can, how we run *name* and make it a more welcoming place
6. focus on the things I CAN do to make people feel welcome and not what I CANNOT do
7. celebrate and learn from our successes in making *name* a welcoming place
8. learn from our failures in making *name* a welcoming place

So this may not be rocket science, but if it was that simple, why are so many places where we do sport then so unwelcoming and attracting fewer people? Remember, all this does not cost a penny, but does require change and a more open mindset and perhaps here lies the challenge. SMN can help you with some thoughts, tools and to-dos on how to become more welcoming and grow.

### **Workshop and Guide on being more welcoming from Sports Marketing Network**

We run a three-hour workshop and publish a guide on **How to grow your club's membership by being welcoming and providing great experiences.**

This workshop and 48-page Guide will help you to develop your club, centre or provider into a place where everybody is comfortable, enjoying themselves and wants to come back and recommend you to their friends.

#### **The content**

1. What is a 'welcoming' philosophy and how to create it
2. How to identify target markets
3. From 'my' club to a place for all the community
4. 'Welcoming' is a culture first and a skill second
5. See your club through the eyes of the newcomer - the way newcomers see you rarely tallies with the way you see yourself
6. How to create really great sporting and customer experiences
7. Use social and new media to inform and engage
8. How to attract people by being 'out and about'
9. Develop 'come 'n try' programmes for different sports
10. How to listen to 'people's lives' and speak their language
11. Develop great service and experiences aimed at different customer segments
12. Identifying different types and their preferences
13. Treat people as guests - as if they are coming to your house

If you want to learn more about SMN can help you grow by being more welcoming please do get in touch.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Kind regards

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