

Haywards Heath Golf Club: Buddy Membership

Haywards Heath Golf Club is a traditional parkland course set in the heart of Sussex in South East England. This prestigious club provides a warm welcome to members and visitors alike.

The Issue:

The same problem can be seen across English golf clubs – golf club membership and play in general are in decline. Haywards Heath Golf Club is no exception. Numbers of full members had been steadily declining in recent years and the Club recognised the need to adapt to changing times and offer more flexible and affordable membership packages. The Club also faced difficulties in retaining members who joined alone and often had no one to play with.

The Solution:

Haywards Heath's Flexible membership scheme, introduced in 2013, was proving highly popular in attracting new members to the Club and retaining existing members. A Flexible member receives a swipe card topped up with 365 credits when they make their first annual payment of £390. Credits are deducted each time they play, with peak weekend times costing more credits and off peak weekday times costing less. Credits can be topped up a maximum of two times during the year. Flexible members enjoy the vast majority of the benefits available to full members, but can't represent the Club in matches, or take advantage of the reciprocal arrangements with other clubs.

In the summer of 2014, to run alongside the Flexible membership category, a new "Free Membership" initiative, intended to boost recruitment of friends and family into membership, was trialled by the Club. From April to October the Club offered free membership to anyone introduced by an existing member who had paid the full annual subscription of £1,300. Twenty-eight new members joined the Club in the six-month period.

The trial was a great success and demonstrated the value of new members joining with a friend or Buddy. Too many new members leave after one

At a Glance ...

- Haywards Heath Golf Club faced a need to boost new membership and retain existing members.
- A Flexible membership scheme introduced in 2013 was proving highly successful.
- A "Free Membership" scheme trialled in 2014 offered a zero cost subscription to anyone introduced by an existing member.
- In January 2015, the Club launched Buddy Membership: half price subscription to any new members joining as a pair or existing members introducing a new "Buddy" member.
- Introducing a series of Buddies can result in multiple years of reduced membership.
- The initiatives have resulted in a significant increase in new members and in Club revenue.

year if they do not find a friend or integrate. In January 2015 a variation on the Free Membership was introduced as "Buddy Membership". Under this scheme, two new members, or an existing member and their guest, each qualify for half-price membership when linking their memberships together. To encourage Flexible members to upgrade to Full, the Club allows two Flexibles to join together as Buddies. It is expected that this move will reduce the number of Flexible members in favour of increasing the Full membership.

The low cost Buddy Membership is not just for one year only. Members can continue to enjoy the heavily discounted subscription by introducing additional new members to the Club in subsequent years - a big incentive for all members to continue bringing in new people. As an additional incentive, golfers taking out a Buddy Membership on 1 January 2015 were given an extra three months free.

Avoiding Problems

The Club reports no real challenges in implementing its new membership categories. Any potential resistance from existing Full members or loss of revenue has been avoided because of the way the schemes were designed

and implemented. For example, the Flexible membership category was introduced half way through the subscription year so that there was no incentive for Full members to trade down. It was also priced to ensure that it would still be more economical for frequent golfers to take out Full membership.

Impacts:

In its first 12 months, the Flexible membership scheme resulted in 118 new members and a net gain of £46,000 of additional subscription revenue to the Club. The average age of members was reduced with Flexibles averaging 51 years. The Buddy Membership scheme is expected to deliver equally impressive results. In the dark, wet days of January and February 2015 alone the Buddy Membership scheme resulted in fifteen new members joining the Club.

Important spin-off benefits of the increasing membership generated by Haywards Heath's new categories have included no increase in subscription rates for over three years and a significant rise in income from the bar and catering services, with an additional £8,000 generated by Flexible members alone.

“The old business model of members' Golf Clubs has long been broken. We need to innovate if we are to compete against the demands on people's time and finances.”

Tips & Advice:

Hayward Heath's Club Secretary, Graham White, offers the following tips to other clubs considering the implementation of Flexible or discounted membership schemes. First, it is crucial to ensure there are good communications with existing members to convey the benefits of increased membership and the opportunities that the discounted offers can bring to them personally.

Getting the pricing and timing of implementation is critical. The early build-up of a fund of subscription money from new members attracted by the schemes helps show the benefits financially. The fund will also be available to offset any reductions in subscriptions if existing members transfer down.

Communicate information about the Club's

offers by every means possible. A Club's existing members are its prime recruitment force. Word of mouth costs nothing but brings in new members. Pay to promote and advertise the offers to potential customers who live close to Club. "Speculate to accumulate" works in golf clubs with, anecdotally, a ten-fold return on investment in marketing.

“Flexible, Free and Buddy are just new golf membership products designed for people living the modern lifestyle. We have been successful by making them attractive and their cost justifiable to today's hard pressed golfer.”

A final word from Haywards Heath Golf Club:

Haywards Heath Golf Club has not relied on introducing just one innovative membership scheme but several. Flexible, Free and Buddy are now attracting most of the new members. However, we do not forget our Full and Five-day members. Those who play regularly receive a great deal and great value. We are enhancing their membership with exclusive value added benefits such as special fixtures, courtesy rounds and greatly reduced green fees when visiting other reciprocating Clubs.

With our Professionals we have introduced new and very attractively priced Academy packages for adults and for juniors that are tailored towards playing and transferring up through the membership categories. Two Academy members can now join together as Buddies and benefit from a half priced subscription.

Finally, we are working on making our Clubhouse a lively and vibrant centre for our neighbours and the local business community. We have lowered the cost of Social membership and introduced a new low cost Luncheon Club membership.

Success in recruiting and retaining members is not just about one category – it is about a range of different categories that are attractive to the various types of people that make up a golf club. Haywards Heath's success is that across all categories it has achieved a net increase of nearly 200 members over the past two years.

Based on surveys and follow up interviews, the UK and Ireland's Golf Home Unions have identified and showcased examples of "what works" in golf club management in a series of case studies. The focus has been on clubs that have been successful in achieving more players, more members and stronger clubs. The intention is to share information and guidance on effective practices in business planning, customer service, membership, and women's and girls' golf. For further information about this and other case studies and for further support, please go to www.golfcasestudies.businesscatalyst.com.



ENGLANDGOLF