



**THE  
DEFINITIVE**

**GUIDE TO**

**MEMBERSHIP**

**MARKETING**

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**Gabriel Aluisy**

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# FOREWORD

BY RICK COYNE & GREGG PATTERSON

**T**his book is not about magic elixirs or silver bullets. It's about logic, reality and the psychology of sales. It is about strategy and planning to reach your market's relevancies and sound techniques to increasing sales closing ratios.

Soon after immersing himself into the world of private clubs Gabe realized that sales and marketing were key to the club's financial stability. He also learned quickly that sales and marketing of private clubs was a disturbingly misunderstood process. This book takes a step by step approach and is a perfect primer for Boards, Membership Committees, General Managers and Marketing Directors. There are incredible lessons for the entire team.

Gabe writes very similarly to how he speaks. His message takes a natural progression leading to logical and understandable conclusions. From sales strategies to the building of a winning team, to social media and net-

working, virtually every area of the private club marketing opportunity is touched in this guide book to membership.

Combined with proper market due diligence and intelligence on what your members and potential members want and need, virtually every private club can realize greater potential for increased growth, retention, member usage and member satisfaction.

If you subscribe to and implement the principles described within this book you will most definitely transform yourself and your team into more proficient salespeople and marketers.

As the late Robert Dedman Sr. once said, *“With members everything is possible! Without members, nothing is possible.”* Philosophically, this is the perfect book to get all of your key players on board with the reality of a changed culture and the means to penetrate an ever changing marketplace. Read it and pass it along. It will make a difference in your entire organization.

Rick Coyne

*CEO, Professional Club Marketing Association*

*Managing Partner, Club Mark Partners*

*Lifetime Achievement Award Winner – BoardRoom Magazine*

*2 Time Gary Player Black Knight Award Winner*

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Everyone who's in business wants to sell their "stuff" to people who are hungry for the "stuff" they're selling. Creating, packaging, communicating and selling the "right stuff" to the "right people" requires marketing. And to the innocent, marketing is simple and uncomplicated--find out what they want, then give it to them.

But for those of us who manage clubs, who are in the business of creating, packaging, communicating and selling "the club experience", We Who Do know how tough real world club marketing can be. The devil is in the details. And We Who Do need help "spanking the devil."

We club managers are looking for a Club Marketing Primer that'll give us background into the complex world of club marketing, a document that'll provide insight into the club buying community, a "mentor" to guide our creative process, a document that'll explain how to properly package the goods, services, programs and facilities we've created, how to communicate those packages to the right audience and how to secure a commitment to buy from those we've targeted.

Many of us "out here" in the real world are needy--and lost.

Then along comes a writer who knows marketing, knows clubs and knows how to explain the complex ins and outs of the marketing cycle to those of us who are hungry---but clueless.

That somebody is Gabe Aluisy who's been "in the marketing trenches", knows his stuff and has written the definitive guide to membership marketing---called, not so surprisingly, "The Definitive Guide to Membership Marketing." Better than anyone I know who's "attacked"

membership marketing, Gabe breaks *The Marketing Adventure* into its component pieces, explains all those bits and pieces in language non-specialists understand, provides a “template for action” and does it all in an upbeat, “can do”, positive way that gives confidence to those of us who are hungry for insight into *The Marketing Journey*.

Gabe’s book walks the reader through *The Marketing Cycle*. Membership marketing defined---done. Changes in the wants, needs and expectations of the user community---done. Changes in the way memberships are being marketed---done. Data collection and interpretation---done. Tools club marketers need to generate and deliver the message---done. Channels of communication to be understood and used---done. To sum up “*The Definitive Guide to Membership Marketing*”---Gabe “done good.”

Gabe hits it all. Clearly and succinctly.

If you’re in the club business, you need Gabe’s book. It’ll give you understanding. It’ll give you process. And it’ll deliver a coherent vision of *The Marketing Journey*.

Buy it. Read it. Use it. And give thanks to Gabe for giving us---“*The Innocents*”--- clarity and understanding.

Gregg Patterson

*President and CEO*

*“Tribal Magic!!!”*

*Creators of WOW---Builders of Community*

# INTRODUCTION

**M**arketing has been a dirty word in the private club industry for a long time. I'm intent on disproving that notion. Marketing doesn't have to be sleazy or unseemly and it shouldn't conjure up images of used car salesmen, heavy handed approaches, or the sale of the minute. In fact, much of marketing, what I would call good marketing, isn't even selling. It is much more subtle than that. It's not discounting either. Good marketing will actually help you raise your perceived value in the mind of the public.

This book is the missing guide they never handed you when you took that role as general manager, membership director or membership committee member. It's the down-in-the-trenches lessons that they didn't teach in your college marketing courses. It's the stuff they don't cover at industry conferences.

In the first section of this book I'll describe the current state of our industry and how we got here. I'm also

going to show you why I believe that most clubs are approaching their membership wrong, why they're focused on the wrong things and why they're going about it in the wrong way. And don't worry, I'll be providing you and your club a solution to each of these.

As you progress further into the book, I'm going to equip you with the tools to modernize your marketing efforts. In this book you're going to learn what marketing channels you have available to you right now and how to maximize their uses in growing your membership. I'm even going to share some up and coming marketing channels and tactics that you should know about and start utilizing today. You'll find out what statistics and key performance indicators you should be tracking to ensure you're hitting your goals. I'll also give you some little known hacks for things like building an email list from LinkedIn, negotiating better deals with vendors and getting quoted in major publications.

Finally, towards the end of the book, I'm going to lay out my vision for the future and tell you what you should be prepared for in the next ten years and beyond. I'll share with you where I see clubs and membership marketing going and hopefully get you thinking about the ways you can set yourself up for the future.

My goal in writing this book was to share my strategy and the lessons I've learned from the wins *and* the losses. I've tried just about everything you can imagine both in my own businesses and in the ones I consult. Some things worked and some didn't. I've stood on the mountaintop with my arms raised high and fallen flat on my face just as many times. I'm sharing these tools with you because

I want you to learn from my successes and my failures so that you'll have you a leg up on your competition and be on the right path to membership success.

So what got me interested in working with private club membership? Well, I'm the son of a former PGA club professional. My dad put a golf club in my hands at the age of three and I've had a passion for the game ever since. I was an anomaly growing up in Baltimore, Maryland and playing the game. The city of Baltimore is not a mecca for golf and none of my friends played or were interested in golf. That is, until a guy named Tiger Woods burst onto the scene in the second half of the 90's. Once my friends caught the golfing bug they all took jobs at private golf clubs. They were caddies, bag boys, shoe cleaners and even assistant pros. I spent a lot of time at the exclusive clubs in and around Baltimore in the late 90's and early 2000's thanks to my friends. We played a lot of golf, mostly on Mondays, and I always dreamed of becoming a member of a club someday.

The first private club I ever joined was on a remote island in the eastern Pacific back in 2008. I had been in the workforce grinding it out since the minute I stepped out of college and I wanted to escape my routine for a while. I wanted to break away from the rat race I felt I was in and immerse myself in a new culture on another continent. I decided that I would live on a 30 mile wide speck on the map called the island of Siquijor in the Philippines. My uncle lived there and my best friend Matt was willing to join me. But by the middle of the summer, both my uncle and Matt had gone back to Baltimore to attend to personal matters. This left me all alone in a grass hut in a third world country. It was the first time I'd ever felt truly by myself.

Far from my home and a foreigner in a strange place I began to seek out things to do to pass the time. Luckily, the Filipino people were an incredibly inviting and welcoming bunch. Having always loved sports, I began to play a lot of basketball at the public court. One day while playing, I met some guys who asked me if I liked tennis, and I told them I did. They invited me to the town's only private club, aptly named the Siquijor Tennis Club.

After playing a few times with them, I decided I would like to spend more time there so I joined. The club had a whopping initiation fee of what equated to \$20 USD. It was the best twenty bucks I ever spent.

I spent every morning and evening for months at the club, which consisted of one clay court and a small building. The club employed only one person, who opened the club to line the court, was the ball boy at matches and locked the gates at night. Because the club only had one court, doubles was the most common game. I loved it there and playing tennis every day had me in the best shape of my life.

The guys would often drink beers, smoke and cast wagers as they watched other members play and I was one in particular that people paid attention to. I was the first Caucasian member in the club's history, and as such I was something of a spectacle. I wasn't very good at the time, only a 3.5 level player, but crowds would watch anytime I was on the court. I often chuckle at the irony of the white guy being the odd man out at a private club. I got good playing there though, and by the time I left I was a 4.0 player thanks to a lot of pointers from the members.

I had some amazing meals at the club too. Now, when I say amazing, it was for entirely different reasons than we'd have at our local clubs here in the United States. They once had a potluck seafood buffet with sea snake as the main attraction. Another time, the firemen brought over ribs. As I was enjoying one, they asked me, "So how do you like dog?" I tried not to gag as I smiled and nodded my head.

My days spent at the club were relaxing and filled with interesting conversations with warm and welcoming people. Some of them became like family to me. These folks showed me the power of community. They helped alleviate that alone feeling.

Today I'm a member at a country club in Tampa called Carrollwood Country Club. It has 1,200 members, 27 holes, 12 Har-Tru tennis courts, a resort style pool, gym, bocce ball courts, restaurants and bars and everything else you would expect from a fine private club in the United States. But you know what? At its core, it gives me the same things as that little club in Siquijor. It's camaraderie, community, competition and a place where I can be myself. I need that club and they need me. It's a special relationship I know that I won't find in any other place.

Gregg Patterson, the famous former club manager of The Beach Club in Southern California, says that those of us in the private club industry are "on a mission from God." He's absolutely right. Our private clubs are one of the last vestiges of a society that has become cold, impersonal and even dangerous. It's a haven that the world needs to escape to and it's our job to make sure it survives for generations to come.

When I got back to the United States and got back on my feet, I started up a design and marketing business. Naturally, I was drawn to golf and private clubs. I began to work with them almost immediately. Today I have the pleasure of working with and speaking to clubs all across the country. I'm able to interview the brightest minds in our industry on my show, Private Club Radio. It's an honor and a passion of mine and I'm so happy that you've also found this as your calling. My sincere hope is that we can move this industry forward and take it to new heights together.

# CHAPTER TWO

## MEMBERSHIP IS NOT A SPRINT

**W**hen it comes to private club membership, sales are not a sprint. Most people will agree with that simple and trite statement. You've probably heard it before from a board member or even a general manager. The problem is, the advice that comes next is often wrong, too. The classic follow up to "it's not a sprint," is usually "it's a marathon." I'm going to show you why it's not a marathon either. In fact, effective membership sales are actually a series of short sprints, more like a relay. Just like a relay, you need to have a strong team from beginning to end and you need to maximize every leg of the race.

The overwhelming majority of private club marketing directors I've met treat the sales process like a sprint. Here's the classic scenario I've seen played out over and over. The prospective member is referred to the club or finds the club through some marketing channel. The membership

director schedules a tour and in about an hour will briskly shuffle them from one area of the club to another. They'll probably hop in a golf cart and see a few holes, stop by the pool or fitness facility, have a peek at the tennis courts, tour the dining rooms and banquet facilities and arrive back at the clubhouse and in the MD's office. The prospect will then be handed some pamphlets about the club and talk numbers. The savvy membership director will ask for the sale because that's what they've been trained to do at some point in their career. After all, good salespeople ask for the close, right?

The problem is, that tried and true membership sales process isn't working like it used to. But why is it getting harder and harder to sell a private club membership? I've heard a number of theories posed from industry experts who talk about more competition, changing value systems, time-constraints, aging populations and so on. All of those have some truth to them. But I think there's something right under our noses that's even more important to recognize and it has to do with the methodology of *how* we're selling.

A few months back I had the pleasure of speaking with Susan Greene on my show, *Private Club Radio*. Susan is the current PCMA President and membership director at The Oaks Club near Sarasota, Florida. If you have the pleasure of meeting Susan, you'll be instantly struck by her bubbly personality and bright floral outfits. She's a Florida gal, after all. But beyond her famously welcoming personality lies a very sharp salesperson. She's keenly aware of her market and the strengths and selling points of her offering. Suffice it to say, if she got you in a room for an hour she could sell you just about anything. However, instead of sharing

her tips for getting a prospect to put pen to paper, she made a statement that caught me by surprise. “Your goal as a membership director shouldn’t be to make the sale, it should be to move the sale forward,” she told me.

I’d love to tell you how when that line hit me, the clouds parted and the trumpets sounded. Except it didn’t happen that way at all. In fact, I said something mundane like, “Great advice, Susan,” and moved on to my next question in the interview. In the days and weeks that transpired I let that statement marinate. I knew this simple truth had something profound behind it, but I didn’t know how it all fit in just yet. It took me talking to psychologists to figure out why it was so important.

## **KEY CONCEPTS FOR A DISRUPTIVE IDEA**

I regularly chat with psychologists. Not to clear my head or work through a deep-seated issue, but to pick their brains on my marketing ideas. You see, I firmly believe if we can understand how our market thinks and how they will instinctively react, we can better position ourselves for optimal results. Who better than a psychologist to tell us what our prospects are thinking?

During one of these conversations I focused my questioning around creating desires. What does it take to create a desire in the mind of a consumer? The discussion naturally wove its way through a number of concepts, but eventually landed on the notion of habit formation. It made a lot of sense to me. We desire things for which we have built a habit. Conversely, habits can be built by associating ex-

periences or things with a desirable outcome. It's a simple concept and it was my first key.

It only takes a quick glance at modern technology success stories to realize why habit forming behavior is the Holy Grail for brands. The very mobile device in your pocket or purse right now is the best evidence I can present. Surveys have shown that nearly a third of folks would prefer to give up sex before they gave up their mobile device. Why is this? Because our phones have become our biggest habit. Everything that is contained in them has been designed with habit formation in mind. Every time you see a little red circle around one of your apps it's a trigger that leads to a behavior. You see the notification icon, you want to press the button, you get rewarded with something. Maybe it's an important email, maybe it's a cute picture of your friend's baby on Facebook, or maybe it's the next episode of that podcast you're really into.

Nir Eyal's brilliant book, *Hooked: How to Build Habit Forming Products*, explains the process of how habits are formed with our everyday tech. It's a four-step process of triggers, actions, variable rewards and investment. Using our example above, that little icon on your phone's screen is the trigger. That trigger causes the action of you opening the app. The reward is what you see or experience, like that cute picture of a baby. You're then asked to make an investment, whether that's filling out your profile, responding or leaving a comment, sharing something yourself, etc. Now, it's critical to note that rewards must be variable for these habits to form otherwise the monotony would cause boredom and use would drop. If I just saw cute babies all the time, I'd get bored. I need to see links to informative articles, photos of my friends, or a funny video every once

in a while to keep me guessing and keep me interested. Once this four-step process is repeated a few times, habits get formed.

As the conversation progressed, I found the second key that would unlock Susan's statement: habits take 30 days to form. A month's worth of electrons firing and dopamine spreading and all that other good brain stuff causes those synapses to build and eventually a habit is made.

## **MEMBERSHIP MARKETING REIMAGINED**

So armed with this knowledge on how habits are formed and how long they take, I once again contemplated the sage words of Susan Greene. As I alluded to earlier, the problem of private club membership isn't the offer, it's the process. It's the way we're going about trying to sell something. If we can think of the sales process as a 30-day habit-forming process, instead of that proverbial "three-hour tour", I think success will come more easily. Those close ratios will go up. You'll turn more prospects into members. It's science.

My challenge to boards, GM / COOs, and membership directors is to begin to treat the membership sales process as a relay race spread out over 30 days. Break that down into a 4-week period where you can get a prospect immersed in your club. Give those prospects variable rewards and let them begin to associate the time spent at your club with the "good times". Get them in that habit.

In practice, this is a 40,000-foot view of how it might look. Week 1, prospects tour your facility and are intro-

duced to key staff. Week 2, prospects are invited back to play a round of golf or hit some tennis balls or sail around your harbor so they see what it's like to decompress after a tough day at work. Week 3, invite them to have a meal at the club so they can have a sensual experience that equates your club with delight. Week 4, invite them to one of your affinity groups, like a wine club, so they can interact with folks that they can see themselves relaxing with. All the while, it's important for the membership director to follow up and make sure they are "moving the process forward," as Susan so eloquently said. After those 30 days of experiencing what it might actually be like to be a member of your club, that prospect is going to be in a much better state of mind to pull the trigger. *That's* the time to ask for the close. They'll have built those neural pathways that associate your club with pleasurable moments. They'll have made your club their habit!

This is a disruptive concept. This is outside the box. Some boards and management will be opposed to this idea. I understand that. But it takes something disruptive and scary to affect change. It's going to take a mindset shift to turn the tide and revitalize this industry we all love. This isn't the only answer, but I think it's a strong one that will help many of your clubs out there. If it's not right for yours, that's ok too. Please keep searching and remember that it's when we think we've got it all figured out that we're in the most danger.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gabriel Aluisy is the founder of The Private Club Agency, a Tampa, Florida based design, marketing and consulting firm focused on membership marketing and retention strategy at private clubs. He is the author of the bestselling book, **Moving Targets: Creating Engaging Brands in an On-Demand World** and the host of *Private Club Radio*, the industry's first and only weekly show dedicated to private club education.

Gabriel has been featured in *Entrepreneur*®, NBC, iHeart Radio, and many other leading publications. His keynotes have included the PCMA National Conference, The FLCMAA Club Summit, the Asia Pacific Golf Summit and many regional events. He is a graduate of American University's School of Communication.

Gabriel resides in Tampa, Florida with his wife, Ana, and two sons, Lucas and Marco. He's passionate about golf, tennis, travel, culture and automatic timepieces. Visit [aluisy.com](http://aluisy.com) to learn more.

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