

St Kilda Bowls Club Victoria

St Kilda Bowls Club is an inner urban club in a trendy suburb of Melbourne.

What was the problem?

From the late 80's into the 90's, the Club was going into serious decline. Members were leaving the Club and there was no influx of new members. This reflected a trend across the whole sport which had enjoyed huge patronage through the post-war years but was shrinking by about 4% per year. This got so bad at St Kilda that by 1995 there were barely enough members to field one Saturday Pennant side, and certainly not the numbers for a Tuesday VBLA side.

What was your solution?

There was and is no single solution or grand plan that can bring about a major change in a Club, however by keeping to three principles we have steered the Club to great success. First, we worked to create the environment that was attractive to the target group to spend their free time in, second, we have kept changing to keep up with the world changing around us and finally, we recognise that the best form of advertising is word of mouth. In the St Kilda Bowling Club's case, it played out like this.

The stiff and formal world of the post-war years were long over by the 80's and 90's, yet the Club continued to operate on that old model, this was completely unattractive to the preferred target group of 30 to 50 years old, so the first stage was to change the environment to suit them, decor, range and prices of drinks available, kind of music played, staff attitudes, and hours of opening were set to appeal to the group we wanted.

Hand in hand with this was the need to get people to have a go at bowling. In a major switch from tradition, the green was made available to casual bowlers. Bare feet were allowed with the Club providing bowls, jacks, etc. Some minimal instruction was necessary - no more than 5 minutes, the old style club coaches didn't work. Initially bowling was free, over time we charged \$5 per person, moving to an hourly charge to cater for the large groups coming to the Club.

We also made the Club available for functions – especially company Christmas parties – that involved bowling. This generated money, but didn't do much for membership.

However what we found was that getting people into the Club wasn't the same as getting new playing members, which is the true heart and soul of a Club. This has required further efforts to create a supportive, respectful and relaxed environment where people quickly feel they belong and will bring their friends into the fold. At first it was hard work, we would 'lean' on guests and new members to play a game or talk a friend into playing a Pennant game. It was hard work, and it needed a thick skin. Still, to start with, it was the only way.

More recently, the Club has moved further to build a strong and self-perpetuating culture among the newest players, picking team managers for their ability to excite and invigorate the new players, rather than an older member. Welcoming any newcomer to the Club is now a common practice among all members and we strongly encourage players to bring friends into the game. We continue to experiment and try different things, including coaching, running AGMs, managing member behaviour, interactions with staff, presentation nights, tournaments, practice, Club Championships, uniforms...everything is open to new ideas and change.

How did you promote it?

The approach that has brought the most new people to the Club and into the playing membership is undoubtedly word of mouth. In recent years we have become more adept at promotion in local papers with stories about the Club and celebrities enticed down for a bowl. This works well for getting people to Open Day events and then the "St Kilda Welcome Machine" takes over.

How successful was it?

The Club has become enormously successful, we now have 5 full sides, with more players than places, and for the 2008/09 season, all sides have made it to finals. This huge success is the culmination of many small efforts over a long period of time. Persistence and enthusiasm.

What didn't work?

Old approaches to offering "bankers" games doesn't work.

What advice would you give other bowls clubs?

Stick with the basics, assess your strengths and weaknesses, decide on a target market, and create the environment that will be appealing to people in that target market. Big changes can sometimes backfire so listen to new ideas and try them, go slowly and surely.

Start doing things you aren't doing now and get new bowlers involved in managing and picking teams. Put people into positions that match your target market, 70 year olds do not know how to attract 40 year olds.

It is up to the Clubs to make changes – others can help, and provide examples of what they have done, but ultimately it is up to each Club to forge its own future.