

RYA Webinars on the Future of Sailing Summary for BSC Committee

Background

Late in 2019, the RYA ran a series of webinars that explored the membership and revenue challenges facing UK sailing and yacht clubs and what strategies some clubs have adopted to develop a sustainable membership and revenue base for the future.

The webinars drew on professional market research commissioned by British Marine (BIA equivalent) into consumer boating and sailing participation trends, then presented half a dozen case studies from English sailing clubs that have turned around their declining membership and revenue by adopting a range of new initiatives.

The clubs varied in scale and scope significantly - from very small (<200 members) volunteer-based sailing / boating clubs that operate on a part time basis, through to much larger (>3000 members) yacht clubs with gambling and full facilities with full time employees that operate seven days a week. Interestingly, the future membership issues are pretty consistent across all UK clubs and are also relevant to BSC and other Australian clubs.

Similar to BSC, most of the clubs have been operating under a traditional "series racing" focused model, with some non-series events. A few clubs run sail training programs and / or some limited cruising activities. Under this approach, their membership base was aging, the number of full memberships were declining, and a consequential erosion of revenue. Larger clubs were cross-subsidising racing activities from other revenue sources, but the smaller volunteer dependent clubs were struggling.

The key messages and conclusions from the webinars are summarised below.

Consumer insights

All sailing clubs have a substantial membership deficit in the 20-40 age group, a key group to attract for sustainable long-term operation.

The research indicates this group have different interests, needs and expectations

- Less disposable capital, less interest in 'ownership'
- Time poor, often with young families
- Technology changing purchasing behaviour – 'collaborative economy' – do it now
- Attention spans reducing – online games, fitness, shopping – 'instant engagement'
- Lifestyle spend is up, quite prepared to invest in 'experiences'
- Shift from competitive organised sport towards 'personal challenge' type activities

There is a definite growing consumer demand for 'pay on demand / pay to play' services where participants can engage in outdoor activities on a subscription or casual basis that fits in with their time limited lifestyles. A critical gap relates to the opportunity for family-based engagement in sailing / water sport activities at a reasonable price, either for competitive or non-competitive use.

A couple of clubs surveyed their local community. The consistent response was that they don't want the (risky) initial upfront cost of purchasing a vessel but would happily pay to access to the required equipment (sailboats, kayaks, SUPs), particularly if this package included some initial training and maybe some follow up coaching. Owning a boat and racing is a possibility but only once sailing confidence has been developed.

Experience with BSC Sailing School participants would support this insight. Whilst quite a few graduates have joined yacht crews post training, many more graduates wish to build their sailing skills in a non-competitive way. Many have asked if casual boat hire is possible.

Sailing Club Initiatives

The following summarises the most relevant and successful actions by clubs, some may be worth consideration by the BSC Committee.

In a nutshell, all of the successful club's strategies focused on:

- diversifying club activities – increased utilisation of club facilities
- re-packaging fees and services to offer a wider range of options to potential members
- reducing barriers to participation (skills, time, cost) as much as possible and then keep people engaged via a range of club activity alternatives
- developing more sophisticated approaches to marketing and communication, with particular focus on good website design to attract new and communication and the ease of online purchasing

Acquiring Club boats

Quite a few clubs acquired a small fleet of suitable sailboats for use by their sailing school, new members and for casual rental. The intent of this approach is to keep new sailors engaged, provide vessels for training, ongoing coaching and racing. The boats are also used for casual rental on non-racing days and have proved popular for family sailing.

The vessels have been particularly chosen for stability and ease of sailing for novices and those less able. Some of these boats were acquired via government sporting grants, some were acquired with member financial support. A couple of the clubs intend updating the vessels every few years, ideally selling the old boats to their recently minted sailors to race in the fleet.

The availability of club boats has in all cases increased club membership and introduced new people to the sport.

Kayaks and Stand-up Paddleboards

Dave has already started on this - Most of the clubs have introduced a sub-group for paddlers, focusing on kayaks and SUP's, attracting new members who are not interested in sailing. SUP's in particular have proven to be extremely popular. Similar to the club boats, a core fleet of these vessels have been purchased for rental or for use in training sessions that are offered at alternative times to usual sailing activities. Clubs have purchased hard SUPs for durability and minimal maintenance.

A couple of clubs initially started women only SUP classes and sessions that developed into a core paddling group that then expanded to family and mixed cruising and racing. Quite a few participants were partners of existing sailing members.

These clubs also brought in external freelance instructors to run beginner through to advanced kayak and SUP coaching sessions. Quite a few graduates have now purchased their own kayaks and SUPs and pay storage fees to the club and/or allow the club to rent them out to others when not in use.

There has been some crossover to try sailing from these new members (on windy days).

Part time bosun

A few clubs have appointed a part-time bosun to maintain their various fleets and be available to assist with rigging, launching, sailing support, coaching as required (some paid, some volunteers). One club has adopted shore to boat communication headsets that have greatly improved coaching and racing education.

Taster sessions

One club had good success by running regular free 'taster' sessions to get local community people to come and try out sailing or paddling.

Non-competitive events

Most clubs increased their non-competitive and social sailing or paddling activities such as social racing, cruising, adventure paddles, free open coaching sessions, novelty events etc. Popular with novice sailors, paddlers and families.

Social activities

The successful clubs have made sure that their expanded activities include a strong social component to better utilise club facilities, make it family friendly, increase cross-fertilisation opportunities between activities, etc. In particular, the racing sailors have been very inclusive in welcoming new paddling members and those engaging in new activities.

Boat storage

To maximise the utilisation of boat shed storage, many clubs introduced 'use it or lose it' policies, even when fees were being collected from owners of under-utilised boats. The argument for this is to prioritise storage of vessels for active members, provide space for club boats, or provide space for additional revenue earning vessels such as kayaks and SUPs.

Some clubs offered the owners of under-utilised vessels the option to make their boat available to new or existing members to race or to use for other club activities such as training, social sailing, casual hire etc.

Club fees / membership options

Most of the clubs were operating on an annual fee structures very similar to BSC – ie single and family membership, storage, plus race fees.

Alternative membership approaches adopted by different clubs to suit their needs included:

- Basic single / family annual membership, plus race fees, storage etc (same as BSC currently)
- Subscription approach to racing membership – proportionally higher monthly fee than annual
- Join the club and receive access to a vessel plus initial tuition
- Family packages - boat hire/ + tuition / + race coaching, etc
- Kayak and SUP packages – use of vessel / plus tuition
- Casual hire of vessels
- Member discounts for food, drink, casual hire

Key messages from this:

- don't be afraid to charge a reasonable rate for vessel hire & tuition
- price it to be sustainable for the club (including maintenance costs)
- tailor packages to meet demand
- people will willingly pay if it is easy to engage, the kit is good, and they have fun

The types of packages offered depended on the club objectives:

- Maximise revenue?
- Attract new members?
- Appeal to a wider group of members?
- More family / kids involvement?
- Better utilise facilities?
- All of the above?

Marketing / Communication

- Web and other imagery should focus on people having fun, less on boats, racing
- Potential members need different information to existing members
- Keep information relevant and up to date
- Open days for local community
- Draw on web / social media skills of younger members (or member's teenage children) to improve online engagement
- Utilise readily available (often free) on-line systems to help with comms and purchasing
- It's not expensive, just requires routine effort
- Appoint a communications officer
- Your members are your best marketing resource