

A survey of success strategies from corporate clubs around the world.

How do 'closed clubs' survive and thrive in today's changing corporate landscape? I asked several Toastmasters clubs from near and far; their insights and suggestions can be applied by new and existing clubs, especially those who have committed to serving a specific group or entity.

Capitalizing on the CORPORATE CONNECTION

By Shelia Spencer, DTM

How did you start a corporate club?

A Toastmasters club usually begins as the vision of one person, often an active member who wants to share the program's benefits with friends or colleagues. In a corporate environment, it often helps to bring the proposal for a Toastmasters club "upstairs." Karen Li, who helped found the COPC Club in Beijing, China, said, "We found that securing management buy-in and using the 'top-down' approach gets people motivated and committed."

Melody Tapley chartered Parkwood Club in Atlanta, Georgia, by presenting a 30-page proposal to the company's Human Resource (HR) department. Her effort paid off; the club was introduced by management at an annual employee meeting, quickly generating the 20 charter membership applications she needed.

Some clubs prefer to be seen as a separate, autonomous entity rather than as a complement to existing corporate training programs. Word Wizards Club of San Jose, California, chose not to seek management sponsorship. Charter President Tony Mannino says, "We are a grass roots effort. Our first meeting attracted 40 people and had a lot of enthusiasm. Our officers are interested in doing what it takes to reach our goals."

How do you nurture a supportive relationship with corporate management?


It is important to reinforce the work-related value of time spent in Toastmasters meetings, so that corporate managers

understand and support the involvement of their workers. "We are experimenting with a Toastmasters Activity Report, which will be sent to each member's manager before the annual review. This will remind the manager of the employees' participation and list all major Toastmasters accomplishments for the year," says Dan Snyder, president of the P.O.W.E.R. Club in Rochester, New York.

Establishing a positive relationship with management also creates a marketing channel for attracting enthusiastic, motivated members. "The company recognizes achievements at an annual banquet, and each member who has completed an educational level within Toastmasters is invited. Also, members who are managers within the company include Toastmasters involvement in employee appraisals," says Wendy Wright, president of the TFI Club in Thomasville, North Carolina.

Tracie Runge, president of OPPD Club in Omaha, Nebraska, has used some creative approaches to promote the value of Toastmasters training: "We regularly volunteer to participate in company events that could use our help, including the Emergency Response Organization's disaster drills, where we play media and other roles." When a variety of employee programs exist in the workplace, it is important to select and focus on those which will showcase the value of the Toastmasters communication and leadership training.

It is also important to establish a healthy balance between "corporate support" and the personal commitment of individual members. Initially, the Zachry Club of San Antonio, Texas, was permitted to award only 25 hours of training credit for completion of a CTM. "A minimum amount of

A photograph of a man and a woman in a professional setting. The man, on the left, is bald and wearing a pink dress shirt and a dark tie with a colorful floral pattern. He is laughing heartily, leaning forward. The woman, on the right, has brown hair and is wearing a white blouse. She is clapping her hands and looking towards the man with a joyful expression. In the foreground, there is a table with a blue cloth, a glass of water, and a bottle of beer. The background is a bright, out-of-focus indoor space.

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**– DAN SNYDER, PRESIDENT OF P.O.W.E.R. CLUB
IN ROCHESTER, NEW YORK**

continuous education is mandated in our company,” explains club president John Thomas. “The downside was, once the CTM was achieved, the employee left the club. Now, management encourages employees to attend at least two meetings. Joining the club is not mandatory. This way, we know the employees have joined because they want to be there.”

Does your club take advantage of corporate communication resources?

Corporate facilities usually provide a variety of communication and promotional resources, such as bulletin boards and employee newsletters. The three UPS clubs in northern New Jersey maintain regular visibility in corporate publications. “We try to get all of the clubs mentioned in the weekly corporate newsletter, by submitting announcements for upcoming Toastmasters events, names of contest winners, and photographs of elected officers,” says Chris Curran, President of the Speak UPS Club in Mahwah, New Jersey.

The electronic communication system is a special boon for Toastmasters marketing efforts. “Our club site on the corporate Intranet provides the ability for members to schedule their own speeches,” says Dwain Gleason, President of S’MartMasters Club in Overland Park, Kansas. The club pages are linked to the corporate directory via several search words, including “Toastmasters,” “Public Speaking,” “Presentation Skills” and “Communications.”

Narina Uys, president of 4th Dimension Club in Johannesburg, South Africa, also taps specific features on the corporate Web site. Because the company generates weekly e-mail announcements about new postings on the site, “our VPPR makes sure there is new Toastmasters-related information posted every two weeks, demonstrating that the Toastmasters club is as active and as dynamic as the company itself.”

How do you attract members?

Closed clubs need to market creatively and consistently within their finite community of potential members. From all clubs surveyed, the most common response to this question was: “Word of mouth is the best promotion.”

Erik Leaseburg, president of the Microsoft LC Club in Irving, Texas, says: “We encourage members to display their ribbons, pins, CTM/CL certificates, etc. in their cubicles, so teammates see what they are doing and start asking questions. When people walk by the glass door to our meeting room, they are curious about what is going on inside. We put a sign on the door inviting anyone to come in and join us for the fun.”

Gore-Talks Club in Newark, Delaware, rotates its meetings among various local company plants. President Alan Weikert has noticed that visitors are more likely to “drop in” when the meeting comes to their immediate work location.



“Meetings must be organized and fun at the same time. We advertise our meetings as an oasis in the middle of a busy week.”

While it may seem easier to start a Toastmasters club in a large company, the right effort can start and sustain a successful club, even in smaller companies. Shannon Bond, president of the Orange Toast Club in Orange, California, told me, “Our staff is only about 50 people. We use the monthly staff meetings to present CTMs or other Toastmasters awards, so that members receive recognition in front of their work peers. After every meeting, we put a poster in the kitchen area. ‘Would you like to know how to meditate? This was John’s topic at the last Toastmasters meeting. Come by to see what you’re missing.’”

Peggy Hernandez, president of the Shell Club in New Orleans, Louisiana, emphasizes the personal approach. “We greet every guest and give them a welcome package. They take with them not only a memory of the meeting, but an application and testimonials from club members about how Toastmasters has affected them.”

How do you retain current members?

Corporate changes can make membership retention especially difficult. Benefits of membership must not only be extended to new members, but sustained for those who already belong to the club.”

“All new members are assigned a mentor, and we also mentor each other for specific goals such as working on our humorous speaking skills, or effectively evaluating speeches,” says Michael D’Almeida, acting president of AxcioMasters Club in Conway, Arkansas.

Cynthia Wheeler, past president of Georgia Power Co. Club in Atlanta, Georgia, feels that the cornerstone to success includes “a strong and committed group of officers who focus on the basics. Passion in your officers will produce passion in your members.”

Karen Cox, charter president of P.D. Masters Club in El Paso, Texas, emphasizes that “members must be given

positive reinforcement, and believe that they are making progress within the Toastmasters program. Meetings must be organized and fun at the same time. We advertise our meetings as an oasis in the middle of a busy week.”

What are the keys to maintaining a healthy club atmosphere?

Successful corporate clubs fulfill the Toastmasters mission by providing a mutually supportive learning environment and ensuring that every member has the opportunity to develop communication and leadership skills.

Darrell Pitt, charter president of the ASX Club in Sydney, Australia, has proof that even a new club can generate mutual support and commitment from members. “We’re still a very young club, six meetings and counting. We are very conscious that everyone should be as involved as possible. If you’re not giving a speech, we try to get you in for a Table Topic or a role at the next meeting. Some people have been pleasantly surprised to see that they are suddenly the chairman – and they’ve only been to two meetings!”

Developing and following a Club Success Plan is a great way to start. “Sticking to Toastmasters guidelines, working with the Distinguished Club Program, and attendance at district training and events really helps keep people goal-oriented and motivated,” emphasizes Jane Dodge, president of Voices of the Masses Club in Bothell, Washington.

A supportive educational environment needs to be inclusive and unconditional. Every guest and every member should feel equally welcomed and encouraged. “Because of our history in South Africa, the challenge has been to get more involvement from people of all ages and races,” explains S’bongiseni Vilakazi, president of the Nedcor Club of Johannesburg, South Africa. “For this, we have ensured that we keep meetings formal but light-hearted, provide support and guidance to new members and encourage them to get involved.”

How to deal with corporate mergers, reorganizations and downsizing?

Corporate clubs are often affected by changes in the company. One club asked to remain anonymous, because their worksite had recently been purchased by another corporation. Management support ceased, restrictions were placed on meeting announcements and facilities access, and the 20-year-old club was forced to develop new, creative marketing approaches in response to these obstacles.

Some “closed” clubs, when facing membership challenges, decide to switch to an “open” membership policy. However, company clubs may need to restrict membership in order to retain corporate sponsorship. It’s good to know there are other options. “After the initial excitement about chartering the club died down, management’s involvement


was no longer a driver for membership,” says Narina Uys of the 4th Dimension Club. “We changed the club constitution to include employees, spouses and ex-employees, and increased our marketing efforts to the 2,000 employees on the premises.”

Physical change within a company can be just as disruptive to meetings as a policy change. “Our corporate offices were expanded from one building to several spread around the city,” says Dan Snyder, president of the P.O.W.E.R. Club. “It was not until we made the decision to have all meetings in the largest location, and focus on one building, that we have begun to rebuild confidence in the club and its objectives.”

Adaptation takes many forms, so flexibility and creativity are helpful. “Work is heavy now, and some members are taking classes that conflict with meeting times,” says Paula Pease, president and charter member of the Laser Systems Toastmasters Club in Apopka, Florida. She encourages overscheduled members to consider integrating manual objectives into their business presentations. “They invite another member to witness and evaluate a talk they are giving, if it meets the guidelines for a manual speech.”

Other compromises include more flexibility within the meetings themselves. “Our biggest obstacle last year was when workloads forced many areas to shorten their lunch breaks,” says John Potts, VPPR and charter member of Voices of Interest Club in Birmingham, Alabama. “We encouraged members to come, even if only for part of a meeting, and emphasized it’s better than not attending at all.”

Some clubs face unexpected adversity and become even stronger as a result. “This year, our club president died in a car accident,” says Kathy Brand, member of AxcioMasters Club. “We developed an award in her honor for the person who gives the most speeches in a year. This keeps people motivated and honors her memory, since this is something she promoted in our club.”

For each of these clubs, success is the result of sustained, focused effort... and a game plan. Try some of these “survive and thrive” strategies in your own club! 

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