



Marketing Tips	Retaining members	June 2011
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The lifeblood of any organisation is its membership. Each bridge club would have members who renew each year and attend the club regularly, a number who volunteer to take an active part in activities and a number of members who pay their fees each year but only attend special events.

There is, of course, another type of member every organisation absolutely must have if it is to survive – new members.

One goal of a bridge club should be to provide quality services that will consistently *grow* club numbers and keep your members regularly renewing their membership.

Before providing suggestions on how to retain members, it is important to first:

- gain an appreciation of the financial implications attaching to this issue
- gain an understanding of the importance of providing an excellent ‘*experience*’ for all your club members; and
- share ‘*intelligence*’ from recent research undertaken with ABF members and clubs as it relates to this issue.

1 Financial implications

Consider the implications of what happens to your club financially, over a period of one year, when you lose a single member:

Session Fee	Plays twice a week	Plays Weekly	Plays Fortnightly
\$	\$	\$	\$
5	520	260	130
6	624	312	156
7	728	364	182
10	1040	520	260

Management committees need to be mindful of the revenue each new member can bring to their club when making decisions about investing in marketing and/or advertising and also in regard to the need for strategies to retain members in their club.

Another issue to consider is that if a member leaves a bridge club because of an unpleasant experience then the whole bridge community is affected because they are unlikely to return to the sport. This means that bridge will not only attract less revenue but will also have fewer competitors at events.

An unpleasant experience is also something they are likely to discuss with their friends so word could spread that bridge is not an attractive sport to take up.

Each member is important and we all need to work hard to ensure that we provide the best possible experience so that people enjoy their sport and want to participate fully in activities.

2. The club member *experience*

Creating a positive experience is not a magic pill that will result in instant growth. It is not a situation where your management team suddenly announces '*we will give our members a remarkable experience*'. Rather, creating a club culture where a positive experience is possible should be your number one priority.

A positive experience will assist in retaining members and also in enlisting your members as marketing ambassadors for your club. A simple 'good' experience might create a satisfied club member but an 'exceptional' member experience will create an *evangelist* who is essentially an unpaid marketer for your club!

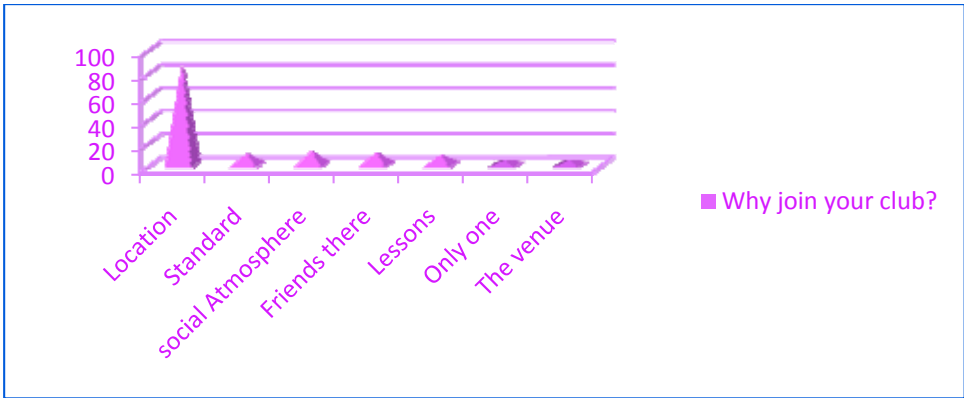
Be mindful that it is the club members, not the management team, who determine what a positive experience is and what it is not. Just to complicate matters, what is positive for one person is not positive for another. As a management team your responsibility includes understanding and, to the extent possible, delivering what your members want.

3. Intelligence from research

Much of the information provided in this document has been sourced from research undertaken with participants at the Summer Festival of Bridge in 2011, with Youth Bridge participants during January's Youth Week and also from information gleaned from the ABF club survey program which was undertaken earlier this year.

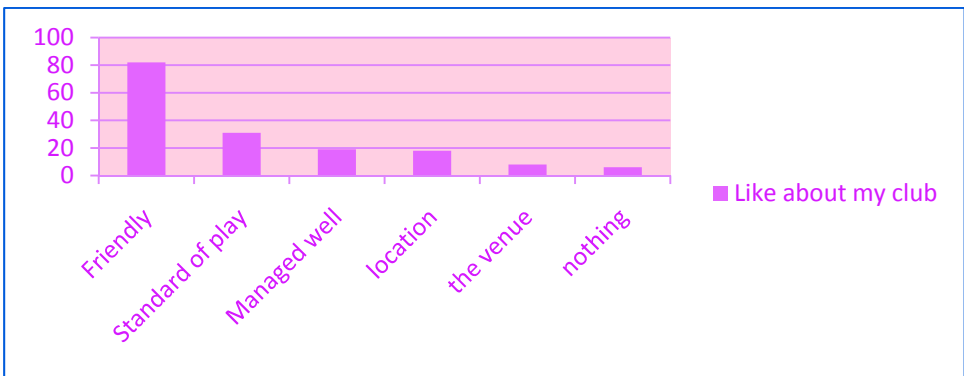
Following is a brief outline of research findings as they relate to understanding how to retain members.

When asked what persuaded them to join their current 'home' club:



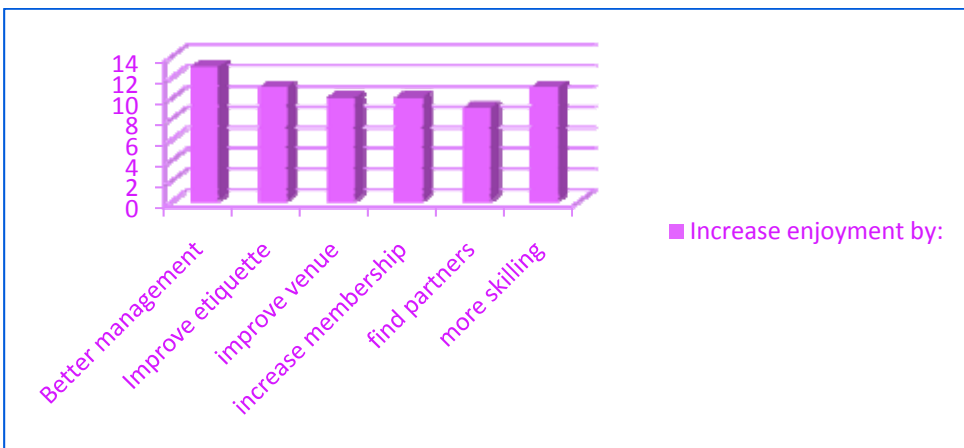
Observation: People will join the club located most conveniently for them.

When asked what they like about their club:



Observation: A convenient location is the main reason people *join* a club but a friendly atmosphere is what *holds* members to a club. The social aspect of the club is more important than the standard of bridge played!

When asked what their club could do to increase their enjoyment:



Particular issues mentioned in regard to these 'categories' included:

1. Better management
 - Provide pre-dealt hands

- Provide hand records
 - Lower the noise levels
 - Use Bridgemate
 - Stick to time limits
2. Improve etiquette
 - Make sure everyone knows and adheres to the *code of behaviour* (directors, players and teachers)
 3. Provide more skilling
 - Provide lessons for intermediate and advanced players
 - Provide lessons for people in country locations
 4. Improve venue
 - Better premises and amenities (*including access for disabled*)
 - Better air quality and temperature
 5. Increase membership
 - ‘Grow’ the club – *including attract more young players*
 6. Find partners
 - Help members find a permanent partner
 - Help members find a temporary partner (*when their partner is on leave/away sick etc*)

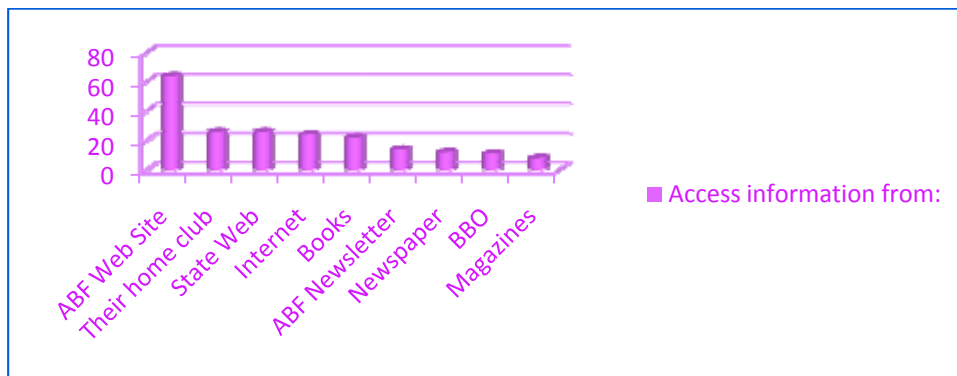
Note: The overwhelming majority of respondents met their current partner at their bridge club. Second most popular partnership link-up resulted from partnering their spouse or a friend followed by meeting through competitions.

Research identified the following top ten activities which would improve people’s enjoyment of bridge:

No	Issue
1	Player etiquette – <i>eliminate unacceptable behaviour</i>
2	Provide lessons for intermediate level players
3	Provide competitions for all levels of players – eg < 20 MPs
4	Increase membership numbers – <i>particularly younger players</i>
5	Improve amenities at club – <i>particularly air flow</i>
6	Provide more lessons in country areas
7	Use Bridgemate
8	Firmer directors – <i>need to enforce times and code of behaviour</i>
9	More night sessions at congresses
10	Organise invitational games for top players – <i>make the top 100 in bridge meaningful</i>

Observation: The need to improve bridge etiquette emerged as a constant theme throughout all the research findings. This issue should be our number one priority.

When asked where they access information about bridge :



Observation: The ABF web site, State Association web site and an individual’s own club are the most effective communication *channels* for our members.

Suggestions for retaining members

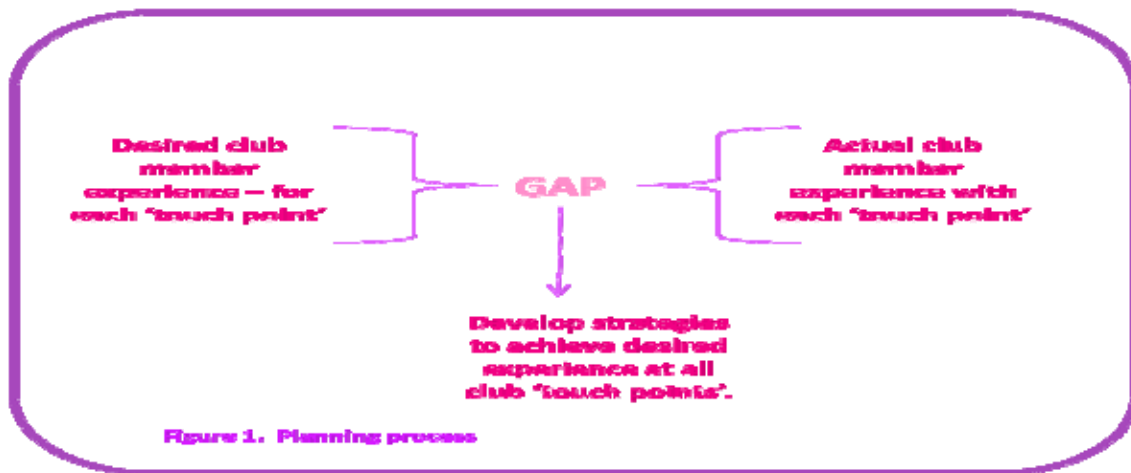
1. Develop a Plan of Action

It is important for a management committee to understand the needs and wants of their members and also to have an agreed set of strategies to ensure that everyone’s experiences at their club are positive and something that they would like to repeat.

Improvements to the club environment would be beneficial to growing the membership so management committees should consider undertaking a planning process to determine:

- a) what your club would like to provide as an ideal club member experience? Think like your members. What do they want? What is best practice?
- b) How you would describe your current club member experience? (*Be complete and honest.*)
- c) What are all the situations where you have the opportunity to come into contact with your members? These are often called “touch points”. Every opportunity you have to come into *contact* with your club members is an opportunity to be positive. Unfortunately, it is also a time when you may prove that you are not. *Touch points* include parking, tea breaks, interactions with directors, scoring method, table etiquette standards, lessons, the club Newsletter etc. Basically, anything which will impact on their impression of their club.
- d) Identify gaps between what is considered ‘ideal’ and what is actually the experience members are currently encountering in their interactions with the club. This gap should inform strategies designed to improve your members’ experience of their club.

Figure 1 below provides an overview of a planning process which could be undertaken by a management committee.



Other than focus solely on the views of management committee members, ways to identify both the desired and actual club member experience with each ‘touch point’ include:

- conduct a brainstorming session with interested parties. Identify first all your ‘touch points’ and ask two questions:
 1. what is the current experience?
 2. what is the desired experience?
- design and implement a club survey. This can be as detailed (*itemizing all touch points and seeking a rating*) or as non-intrusive as you like (*what do you like about your club/ what would you like to have done differently/ what would you like more of/ what would you like less of etc*). Allow participants to be anonymous as this often results in more honest feedback.
- undertake one-on-one interviews with people willing to participate. (*Make sure that whoever does this listens to the member and is not defensive about issues raised.*) Value everyone’s input.
- have a suggestions box and encourage people to use it. This is something to consider having available for members to make anonymous suggestions throughout the year. It gives members an opportunity to be *heard* by their management team.

Once you have completed your information gathering process, develop strategies that best serve to retain members. Address the gap between where you are now and where you want to be in providing best practice. Prioritise your strategies and appoint responsibilities for implementation. Focus.

2. Re-engineer your beginner program (if necessary)

This is perhaps the most important issue for retaining members. If people respond to your marketing/advertising and sign-on for beginner classes, you need to make absolutely sure that the experience you are offering them is one which will encourage them to continue to play bridge, hopefully for the rest of their life.

From a marketing perspective there are several critical issues to consider in regard to beginner programs, including:

- a) Length of program – should be no more than 4 – 6 weeks. Consider what is best to attract people bearing in mind that the longer the program the less likely you are to attract people as many will not be able to commit for lengthy time periods.

Reasons for this include:

1. they may be going on leave
2. they may have travel commitments for work; *and*
3. they may have to sacrifice other things to attend the classes (*short term not too much of a problem but the longer the course the more difficult this becomes*).

- b) The quality of the experience itself, including:

1. Is the teacher skilled and properly trained on adult learning principles? Most importantly, do they understand the imperative to treat people with respect and dignity. If they do not, do not continue your program until you acquire someone with the necessary skills because you will be turning people off the game and they may never return.
2. Does the teacher have the necessary 'blue card' or equivalent (*depending on your State legislation*) for teaching children (*if this applies*)?
3. Do you provide professional materials for the course?
4. Is the teaching environment conducive to adult learning; ie is it located away from a busy playing area, is it quiet, is furniture comfortable, do you have the necessary equipment etc?

- c) Retention rates of beginner classes. The management committee should identify acceptable rates to determine whether there is a problem with your classes; eg do you closely monitor what percentage:

1. complete the course
2. continue to supervised play; and
3. sign on as members?

It is to be expected that there will be drop-outs from beginner classes as people may realise that bridge is not for them, they or one of their family may fall ill or work commitments may interrupt their attendance. However, it is essential that a management committee monitor what is happening and take action as necessary. Conduct 'exit' interviews with people who dropped out during the program. Make sure that you understand the reasons you are losing people.

Set percentages for what is considered an 'acceptable' retention rate for each of the three categories listed. If you fall below your targets, investigate why!

d) Evaluation of all your beginner classes. Clear and constructive feedback is critical for improving a teacher's performance, bolstering morale and, in the case of beginner classes in particular, ensuring that people want to continue to play bridge. Feedback assists in improving the efficiency and effectiveness of training course design and environment, use of club resources, retention of participants and provides value for the marketing investment made by your club. It is through the provision of feedback that teachers can:

- ✓ recognise the need for any improvement in their teaching skills
- ✓ receive suggestions for improving future teaching programs
- ✓ identify whether the materials provided 'hit the mark'
- ✓ determine if the teaching program matches beginner needs; *and*
- ✓ continuously build and improve their teaching skills.

An example of a feedback form which could be used for your classes is provided at Attachment A.

Implementing a very structured approach and evaluation program for your beginner classes should not be construed as any criticism of existing teachers or practices. Rather, it should be viewed as effective management practice given the critical importance of the activity to retaining potential members and the resultant impact on the financial resources of the sport. It will allow your club to continually improve its 'product'.

3. An approach for new members

Who doesn't like to feel welcome and valued? There is no ABF research data available at the moment but in many organisations the major drop-out time for members is within the first two years.

Members' first experiences greatly affect their propensity to either join a club or renew their membership. The quality of their club experience will be determined by:

- ✓ How easy it was to join
- ✓ How timely was the processing
- ✓ How professional was the communication
- ✓ Were any difficulties resolved
- ✓ Were they made to feel welcome
- ✓ Were club values evident and congruent with their expectations.

To limit the possibility of drop-outs during this period, consider what your club should do to make new members feel valued. Some suggestions for when someone signs on to become a member of your club:

- Respond in a timely manner (*set of benchmark of no more than 5 working days*). This is probably the most important piece of paper that will cross your desk.
- Send a welcome letter from the management committee (*or the Club President*)
- Provide them with a new member kit containing:
 - ✓ a calendar of events
 - ✓ the name of a mentor *should they wish to take up the offer*
 - ✓ a copy of the club's latest Newsletter
 - ✓ a list of committee members and their contact details
 - ✓ the club web address (*and advise how to access results if this applies*)
 - ✓ a list of session times at their club
 - ✓ a copy of the 'code of conduct'.
- Welcome new members in your club newsletter.
- Offer incentives to new members to recruit people to beginner classes (*including a mention in your club newsletter*).
- Contact new members a couple of times during their first year to check on how they are going and if they have any issues they would like addressed.
- Issue a special letter of thanks to first-time renewals.

4. Code of Conduct

Research indicates that a lack of table etiquette is possibly the most significant challenge facing the bridge community. It is a huge deterrent to experienced players so it is highly probable that it could be a major cause of people disengaging from their club and the sport. It is essential that each club consider whether this could be an issue in their environment and if so to address it as soon as possible. It is particularly important to ensure that students and novices are not subjected to intimidation or rudeness as they are more inclined to withdraw from the sport as they may lack the confidence to '*stand up for themselves*' in a hostile environment with more experienced players.

If your club has a 'Code of Conduct' or an agreed '*set of behaviours*' then it should be made known at beginner classes and reinforced regularly in all club activities. Standards for behaviour may form part of a club's constitution. Consider placing your agreed behaviours somewhere visible in your club; refer to them regularly before sessions, publish them regularly in your club newsletter and, most importantly, enforce them. Create a club culture which is intolerant of breaches so that all your members feel free to enjoy their sport. Make the values of your club very clear to everyone (*players, directors, teachers, volunteers etc*).

Do not excuse poor behaviour, even someone who has been involved in bridge for a significant period of time and who has done a lot for your club in the past. Loyalty is great but if they do not adhere to your agreed standards then be courageous and do something about it. They are most probably costing you members.

Remember that your agreed behaviours apply to all interpersonal situations at your club (*including amongst volunteer staff and committee members*), in any forum, in any snail mail or emails, in telephone conversations etc. The standards should include being:

- Considerate: Bridge is about partnerships so people need to be considerate of how their actions affect their partner, their fellow club members, club visitors and their club as a whole. Encourage your members to wear name tags and to introduce themselves before play commences. This is a very basic courtesy.
- Respectful: People should treat one another with respect. Disagreements are no excuse for poor behaviour or poor manners. We might all experience some frustration now and then but we cannot allow that frustration to turn into a personal attack. It is important to remember that a community where people feel uncomfortable or threatened is not a productive one. You will not retain members.
- Collaborative: Disagreements happen all the time. Debate and constructive criticism is often how progress is made and are a necessary part of learning bridge. The important goal is not to avoid disagreements or differing views but to resolve them constructively (*and, preferably, in private with your partner*). Above all, avoid making disagreements about bidding or play of the cards personal conflicts. Debate should never include reference to someone's nationality, gender, religion or other personal characteristics. Discourage a culture whereby people continue to discuss their bidding or play of the cards in front of their opposition. Encourage them to do this in private.
- Compliant with the rules.

5. Health and Wellbeing Approaches

For many of our members, a bridge club provides more than just an opportunity to play bridge. It can be an essential element of their ongoing health and wellbeing and may, in some cases, be one of the few occasions when they interact with others.

Social wellbeing is basically the interaction people have with their community. Satisfying relationships, having support networks, participating and contributing to the community all contribute to a positive state of social wellness. We can generate experiences of health and wellness through the environments we create. The bridge club environment should be

relaxed, harmonious and inclusive: offering a sense of belonging and security to a wide cross section of people.

To be proactive about the health and wellbeing of members, appoint a *social* director and consider introducing a process for:

- checking on elderly members who fail to attend their regular bridge session – perhaps just a quick phone call to ensure they are OK.
- arranging transportation for people who, through failing health or an accident, need assistance in getting to and from the club
- alerting members to the death of a club member. If appropriate, have a card available for people to sign. Let members know of funeral arrangements and acknowledge the person's passing in your club newsletter or on the Notice Board.
- organising bridge *get-aways*. Organise a trip to a destination at last one hour's drive away (*so people will stay overnight*) – arrange accommodation, social activities and bridge sessions over a week-end or, depending on the demographic at your club, during the week.
- introducing 'strictly social' days. Allocate one Sunday every quarter to a purely social day with prizes, raffles, refreshments and lots of fun.
- organising day trips to places of interest.
- organising group evening activities – dinners, shows etc
- establishing a regular social hour before/ after sessions. Take time, in particular, to meet and greet new members
- holding an annual awards ceremony to reward achievements (*competitions/ masterpoint rankings etc*)
- introducing 'theme' events; eg 70s week, Green day, tiaras and bow tie days etc. Have fun. Mix it up.

6. Skilling opportunities

Research indicates that people want more opportunities for improving their knowledge and skill levels. People in country areas in particular would like to see more learning opportunities being made available to them.

Skilling opportunities can be considered at three separate levels:

1. National Education Program

In January 2011 the ABF appointed Joan Butts to the position of National Teaching Coordinator. To date this appointment has seen the introduction of an education program for bridge teachers (*currently under way*) and provision of a celebrity speaker event at some

of our congresses. Let your members know that all handouts from celebrity speaker events are available on the ABF web site.

More is to happen at a National level including trialling lessons being made available for viewing on the ABF web site. *Stay tuned as it is early days yet.*

2. Regional Education Program

Clubs should encourage their members to participate in any education programs conducted within their State/Territory. This could include events such as “Teams of 3”, guest presenters etc. Have your club council representative identify opportunities or, if not enough exist, agitate for more to be done or volunteer to trial Regional initiatives in your club.

3. Club Education Program

Apart from beginner classes (*separate topic*) there are a number of things which could be done at a club level to continually improve on the skills and knowledge of your members. This includes:

- providing supervised play for those people who have completed beginner classes (*make sure that people are nurtured throughout this process*)
- introducing a mentoring program for interested members. Have an experienced player (*with appropriate inter-personal skills*) link up with a novice to provide support and advice (*maybe play once a month*).
- encouraging your members to compete in red and gold point events. Stress that these are graded and designed as much for enjoyment, social interaction, confidence building and skills development as for attaining masterpoints. Offer to assist in finding partners for individuals or to help get numbers to create a team to enter these events. Mentor your beginners. Have an experienced competitor take them under their wing and explain the process and scoring approaches used at events.
- celebrating any successes your members may have in red and gold point events. Mention at club sessions and highlight in the club newsletter or on the club notice board.
- recognising the achievement of your members as they reach milestone rankings with their masterpoints. Publicise in your club newsletter or place a notice on your club notice board.
- introducing an information session before starting play. Let members know that a ½ hour before play commences on a certain day there will be a 15 minute session conducted on a difficult hand from the previous week’s session. Explore the bidding process (*what was the best contract*) and play of the cards. Discuss.
- asking members if they would like a debriefing session following completion of play. Would they like time to discuss hands with their partner before vacating the club

(*and to do so over a coffee*) or would they like an opportunity to discuss hands with an experienced player facilitating a session. Trial different approaches to find what interests and suits your members.

CONCLUSION

Remember that the best time to retain members is BEFORE they show signs of dissatisfaction. Make sure your members know they are valued. If they start missing sessions or are becoming less involved in activities, give them a call to find out why before it becomes a chronic situation.

As a management committee, continually review your *value proposition*, ie be very clear about why your members should remain at your club. Consider your:

- ✓ membership service – *does it encourage membership retention?*
- ✓ brand – *what do you represent? Does it need to change?*
- ✓ product mix – *what do you provide? Does it need to change? Does it meet members' needs?*
- ✓ interactions or *touch points* – *are they positive experiences?*
- ✓ place – *can you improve your environment?*
- ✓ Session fee – *does it need to change?*

Good luck in retaining your members.

Any queries in regard to issues raised in this document should be directed to the ABF National Marketing Coordinator, Sandra Mulcahy, at marketing@abf.com.au .

The xxxxxxxx Bridge Club is keen to continually improve the quality of our classes and seeks your assistance in helping us to achieve this.

Please indicate your impressions of the items listed below. Place a tick in the relevant box.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. The classes met my expectations.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. I will be able to apply the knowledge learned.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3. The training objectives for each topic were identified and followed.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4. The content was organized and easy to follow.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
5. The materials provided were pertinent and useful.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
6. The quality of instruction was good.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
7. Class participation and interaction were encouraged.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
8. Adequate time was provided for questions and discussion.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
11. How do you rate the training overall?					
Excellent	Good	Average	Poor	Very poor	
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	

10. Are there any aspects of the class which could be improved?

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11. Other comments?

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Thank you for taking the time to complete this feedback form. We appreciate your input.