

# Building Up America's Boat Clubs

by Troy Gilbert and Bernadette Bernon  
*Courtesy of BoatUS Magazine.*

The Hudson River from the Ossining Boat and Canoe Club.



*Everyone's on deck at the Ossining Boat and Canoe Club.*

Boat clubs bring individuals and families together into a community that expands their access to and enjoyment of boating.

Why are some clubs struggling, while others are successful?

For decades, to enjoy the sports they love and to be with friendly contemporaries devoted to the same passions, many Americans joined yacht clubs and golf clubs. But over the past five years, that's been changing. These days, there are now more people leaving such clubs than joining them, and nearly 10 percent of America's yacht clubs have closed. This is according to marketing expert Steve Graves, president of Creative Golf Marketing in Manhattan, Kansas, who for 25 years has consulted with golf clubs, boat clubs, and other social clubs to help build their memberships.

"There was a time when clubs had to do nothing to succeed," he says. "Times have changed, yet club leadership hasn't adjusted to the reality that the days of people walking up and looking to join an organization are gone. A club's leadership may be highly successful in their personal careers, but they are likely making club decisions as a group that they'd never make in their own businesses or lines of work."

So why are some boat clubs more successful at building member value than others? In this special report, we'll tell you more about how Graves suggests that some club challenges can be met as well as about how specific clubs have nurtured growth — some even have waiting lists.

Put Out The Welcome Mat, Literally

"There are lots of people in all communities who would love to be members of your club and would be happy to spend their discretionary dollars there," says Graves. "But clubs tend to block their own goals in reaching out to potential members by not appearing welcoming enough. People want to be invited to join, so empower your current membership to invite potential members to visit the club. Be sure your members can answer questions on membership levels, dues, amenities, reciprocal privileges, social activities, and so on. Have the club's management generate a formal follow-up and friendly invitation to the potential member to visit again." Some clubs go as far as to provide special parking places for potential



Kids having fun at the Minisceongo Yacht Club.

BoatUS has a program for clubs that offers annual membership for \$15 – half off the regular \$30 dues – to those boaters who are members of a boat or yacht club that has a BoatUS Cooperating Group affiliation. In addition to range of membership benefits that helps club members get more out of boating lifestyle, the Cooperating Group program offers members discounts at hundreds of marinas, fuel docks, repair facilities, bait/tackle shops, sail lofts, and many other marine related businesses. To sign up or learn more, go here: [BoatUS.com/membership/group](http://BoatUS.com/membership/group).

to your organization; encourage your members to “like” the page. This is a useful way to keep your members engaged and at the same time disseminate information outward. Those posts of photos from grill-night dinners with friends on the dock will be shared, conveying a level of energy and activity that entices potential members. Don’t forget to tag members (with their permission) so they see themselves

Consider creating a volunteer role of public-relations director, along with a small committee of web-savvy members, to accomplish your goal of increasing your social-media presence. Perhaps, along with Facebook posts about the fun your members are having, post helpful boating or maintenance tips. The more people “like” these posts on Facebook, the more your message is shared among non-member boaters in your community. Integrate your club into your community. Participate in community fundraising efforts, waterfront cleanup projects, book and food drives, and so on to show that your club is vibrant, active, and in sync with the tenor of the times in your city or town.

Each club inevitably has a club historian, whether formally recognized or not. Find yours, and encourage these members to do historical boating presentations at your local maritime museum, lighthouse, or neighborhood civic association. Historical presentations using old photographs and trophies can showcase an organization as truly embedded in a neighborhood or city.

#### Initiation Fees & Dues

One of the biggest disincentives to joining a boating club are the initiation fees. The Santa Cruz Yacht Club of California instituted a program in which new members between the ages of 21 and 35 were allowed to apply 50 percent of their monthly charges over time against the \$1,000 initiation fee; the club found its membership rolls growing. The Fishing Bay Yacht Club of Deltaville, Virginia, offers graduated dues requirements depending on the member’s age and whether it’s for a family, single adult, or junior membership. Here are other ideas from clubs around the country:

Offer a “fast-track” membership application for prospective members who are members of other yacht

clubs and have moved to your club’s city from elsewhere.

Start a “Serve to Boat” program in which prospective young members with skills needed by the club can receive a substantial discount to their initiation fees by putting in 50 hours of boating-related service to the club.

Extend to the age of 30 the discount both for dues and initiation fees to facilitate young members joining and staying with the club in their early working years.

Enable intermediate members attending college in the club’s home city to pay the same dues as non-resident members (who are away at college) to encourage them to remain members during this period.

Incentivize your current membership with \$50 to \$75 bar credits for each new member actively recruited by them.

Change your payment system from a once-a-year dues payment to monthly automatic credit-card payments to keep members from opting out when their membership fees are due. This eliminates sticker shock when the bill arrives, and it’s easier for members to rationalize a small monthly item on a credit-card bill, it’s easier to renew, and it’s easier for the club to collect. Encourage this payment system by giving those who sign up a small credit.

Encourage members to pay future year’s dues in advance with a multiyear discount.

However, according to Jim Ellis, vice-commodore of the Annapolis Yacht Club in Maryland (and former president of BoatUS), simply lowering your initiation



Arial view of the Tarrytown Yacht Club.

fee is a poor strategy for growing membership. “You need to offer strong member value for your target audience and a compelling club with good services.”

An important note: Most yacht clubs and boat clubs in the United States are considered to be “private clubs” and therefore enjoy non-profit designation. In your efforts to expand your club, be sure that you’re not construed by

the Internal Revenue Service to be advertising for members. Check with your club’s tax attorney to be sure you operate within the rules.

### How To Build Member Value For Your Existing Membership

Welcoming new members is important, but making sure your existing members find real value in

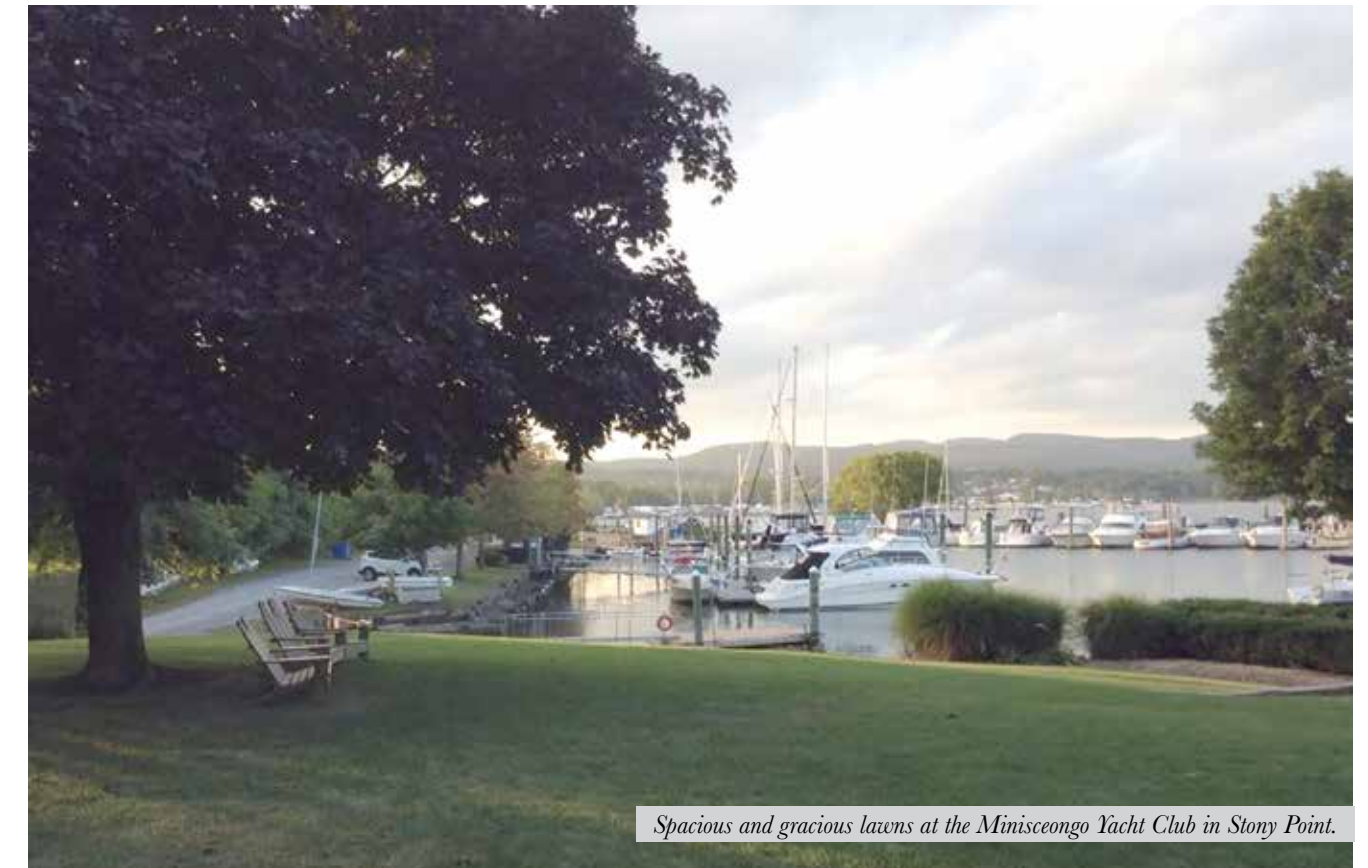
members, including a “We Welcome New Members” sign outside, and inside offer a welcome package of information available for visitors. Such positive optics matter for the short and the long term.

### Communication & Outreach

Today’s boat clubs have many outreach tools at their disposal online; having a website and Facebook presence is crucial. Your club’s website is a virtual representation of the vibrancy of your club, is important for member communication, and is likely the first impression many non-members will experience. Make sure yours is professional, streamlined in appearance, and full of activities and photos. Your club should have a Facebook page dedicated



Sunset from the Cortlandt Yacht Club.



Spacious and gracious lawns at the Minisceongo Yacht Club in Stony Point.

*Shattemuc Yacht Club, Ossining*



their club memberships is critical. One of the challenges for boating in general, as well as for clubs, is that most of your members own boats but don't use them as much as they'd like. Your club can help, and at the same time build a real value proposition for your target audience. Some ideas:

In your monthly newsletter and on your website and Facebook page, announce lots of events that encourage member participation: rendezvous to nearby coves or interesting towns, fishing trips, family destinations, even extended club cruises. Plan dockside "open-boat" or "boat-walk" parties, for members to visit each others' boats and see some of the cool projects or systems people have installed.

Put on DIY sessions, or bring in interesting speakers, such as a local boatbuilder, an environmental organization, or a local game warden. Try this especially during the off-season.

If your club is geared toward cruising and powerboats, organize cruises to local boat shows, a nearby destination, or to other clubs. For many, a sense of camaraderie on the water, and pride when the group of boats fly their club burgees, can be deeply satisfying. Not only is a raft-up of club boats highly visible at a boating event; it also demonstrates the organization's vitality. Skippers will inevitably invite friends on these cruises, and they may fall in love with the fun. Just make sure your members know details about the club, how much it costs, and how to join.

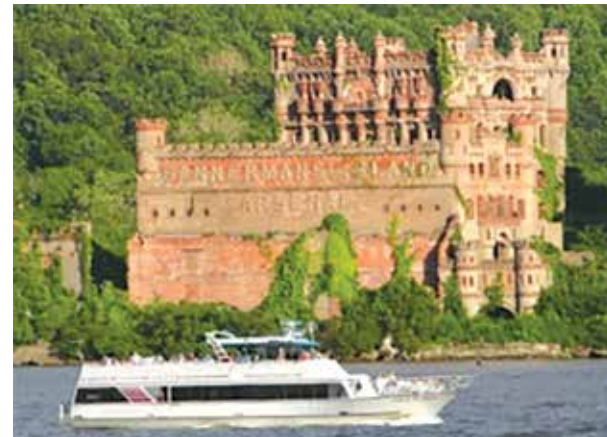
Successful clubs have members become mentors to welcome and guide new or potential club members. Joining a new social circle is intimidating. Volunteer mentors can be assigned to assist in each new member's early navigation of the club and its social life — but make sure the mentors are passionate and educated about your club.

The majority of club family memberships are held under one person's name, usually the husband's, and only he has signing privileges at the bar and restaurant. This can leave the spouse feeling like a second-class citizen, when that spouse may be responsible for paying half the bills. To solidify a married couple's membership, consider allowing couples to join equally, which will engage the spouse's interest in the club. Consider allowing married couples joint membership under one account, or at least give signing privileges to both individuals. Start women's boating, fishing, and sailing groups.

Formally reach out to area high schools and colleges to sponsor boating or sailing clubs within these institutions, with free and open enrollment. Junior programs establish a history and fond memories for these young people as they learn boating skills and independence on

the water. They'll remember this into their adult lives, and they'll want to become members.

Whether you're a sailboat or a powerboat club, start a junior program or a weeklong summer camp to teach the basics of boating, and open it to the public. You'll build the next generation of boaters and fishermen, and all could be future members, including the parents, as they become familiar with the club.



*Newburgh Yacht Clubs Commodore's Cruise*



*Nyack Boat Club*

Reach out to the local Coast Guard Auxiliary or Power Squadron and leverage the use of your facility as a regular meeting space on a quiet weekday night. As boaters and active volunteers already, members of those groups are a good resource for potential membership and for educational boating presentations for your club.

Reach out to local kiteboard or paddleboard groups, many who simply communicate with each other via email or a Facebook group, and invite them to use the club for periodic meetings or to visit the bar after their afternoon on the water. As more potential members become familiar with your organization, some will become interested in joining.

Does your club offer member use for private parties? Weddings? Children's parties? These kinds of events foster new membership. (Keep in mind that the unofficial rule of thumb is that no more than 15 percent of your revenue can come from non-member sources, or the I.R.S. may start taking a closer look at your tax-exempt status.)

Have members of your club offer free introductory boating instruction and safety classes; call them Dockside Boating Clinics. Promote them on social media. These fun, informative classes will grow interest in boating and further grow interest in club membership as potential members become aware that one doesn't necessarily need to own a boat to join a boat club.

Offer an annual or seasonal free fishing clinic. There is much local knowledge that can be shared — with your members, and with your local non-member boating-community neighbors — by the experienced fishermen in your club, who can reveal the rigs and lures they use and share local fishing information. This is a win-win situation: You give your members another reason to love using their boats, and you encourage non-members to join and learn from the best.

Nothing is more successful to the longevity of a boating or yacht club than actually getting prospective members out on the water. For sailing-oriented clubs, a successful recruitment tool is known as Wednesday Night Racing; these midweek after-work fun races have drawn thousands to become interested in yacht clubs and sailing. For more than 40 years, the New Orleans Yacht Club typically has 50 to 60 boats on the water every Wednesday evening throughout Daylight Saving Time — each one carrying regular crews, plus several novices and friends of friends. Competitors



*Albany Yacht Club*

race for fun and gift certificates from area restaurants and bars. Afterward, the club holds an open and festive night at the club with live music and a bar packed with racers and a long line for the grill.

Encourage young families to join by creating amenities they'll appreciate. For instance, the Annapolis Yacht Club, just before it suffered a severe fire in December, had recently announced an initiative to build a "family center" with a pool, a gym, and a casual restaurant. Even though the center won't be finished for another two to three years, the membership immediately went from having open membership positions to an 80-person-long, two-year waiting list. As the club rebuilds from the fire, Jim Ellis says, "Though it's too early to tell, the club continues to receive new membership applications, and prospective new members see great potential for the future."

#### Modern Leadership

According to club consultant Dan Ehrmann of ClubExpress, "Five percent of members run the club and show up for almost every event, and another 15 percent of members regularly participate. Another 20 percent occasionally participate. But the remaining 60 percent never show up for anything!" This is important when considering that the average age of a club's existing membership and leadership can be more than 60. Individuals in their 60s are looking for a different club experience than potential new members in their 30s or 40s, who are looking for a more casual, child-friendly experience, adventure on the water, and maybe even live music at social events. Make sure you



*Rondout Yacht Basin in Connelly, NY*

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have younger members in your leadership ranks and constantly be on the lookout for younger members to be groomed for later leadership roles.

Officers of the Chicago Yacht Club, for instance, searched their database looking for younger members with the potential to become the next level of leadership, both on committees and on the CYC board, and encouraged them to get involved. The club also added new activities to drive member usage, including more activities focused on families, and a number of women's activities (networking events, the Women On The Water racing club on Sonars, and happy hours).

Your facility's amenities are an immediate selling point, as are access to club-owned boats or even paddleboards; clubs with swimming pools, for example, certainly offer an attraction for young families. But the majority of clubs don't have such amenities or full-service restaurants. Smaller clubs that are part of large regional organizations, such as the Florida Council of Yacht Clubs or the Gulf Yachting Association, can start by selling a potential member on the use of reciprocal privileges at the other member clubs. Discounts provided via reciprocal privileges for slips, along with the opportunity to have a welcoming port of call in a new destination, help to further a potential member's cruising dreams and increase the value that he or she puts on membership.

For clubs with physical facilities that require them to pay for land costs, staff, maintenance, insurance, and power bills, the challenge is always about maintaining and growing membership to cover these expenditures while also allowing for long-range capital improvements. Monthly dues on average, according to the Club Managers Association of America, make up 50 percent or more of the organization's yearly income; initiation fees can total another 25 percent, while bar and restaurant sales contribute only about 9 percent of the bottom line. Membership growth is critical for success.

There's no silver bullet that works for all clubs, but the ideas in this article are a good start for how to build member value so your club stays strong.

#### VIDEO: BoatUS Has Help to Grow Boat Club Membership

Video: "Growing Boat Club Membership": With some up-to-date tips and ideas to help clubs grow, this short, five-minute video is great for showing to membership at club meetings, or emailing a link to club members to create a discussion. Go here to view: <https://goo.gl/v5UORv>. or scan this with your smartphone:



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