

health club management

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MOVEMENT, COMMUNITY and SERVICE



The team at Rochester's Midtown Athletic Club believes there's no charitable cause too big or too small to support. Ray Algar reports

When I look at some of the world's most remarkable health club brands, I often discover a strategic intent to play a proactive part in the prosperity of their communities; they're not just there harvesting its resources. They forge a reputation for compassion and generosity and over time become an influential, valued, integral part of the community.

This month, I want to share the story of how Midtown Athletic Clubs in the US has embraced a strong sense of corporate citizenship and a wider definition of community to enable its clubs to flourish even as competition intensifies.

Three generations

The Schwartz family founded its first club, the Midtown Tennis Club, in Chicago in 1970 with a simple everyday mission: "Bringing out the best tennis player in you." The club was founded by Alan Schwartz and his father Kevie, who were passionate about tennis and used the club as a vehicle to help grow the game. The company expanded and during the 1980s began adding fitness areas to its tennis clubs.



CEO Steven Schwartz (right) and colleagues at the IHRSA awards

Steven Schwartz, Alan's son, joined in 1987 to help position and grow what has become the Midtown Athletic Club brand.

Eight Midtown Athletic Clubs now operate in what Steven Schwartz – now president and CEO – describes as the 'upscale sports resort' segment. The brand's mission has also evolved beyond tennis: it aims to inspire through a pledge to 'movement, community and service'.

Leading by example

True to its mission, earlier this year the company's second club – which opened in 1974 in the city of Rochester, New

York State – received IHRSA's Outstanding Community Service Award for its sustained contribution to, and impact on, its wider community.

All of the Rochester club's charitable activities are driven by its 7,000 members and staff. "We're a club of people who believe in giving, and nearly every charity or organisation we give to is the beneficiary of a suggestion or request from one of our members," says general manager Glenn William.

This large, multi-purpose club – around 15,600sq m (168,000sq ft) of fitness, tennis, pools, spa and retail facilities – is a formidable size by international standards, but the extent of its charitable activities is remarkable. This single club contributes to 17 charities and altruistic organisations, with its efforts encompassing more than 275 annual events. That's equivalent to five events a week, every week of the year. "There is no cause too big or small for the club to support, either through event hosting, sponsorship or in-kind giving," explains William.

One nine-year partnership is with the American Diabetes Association and its Tour de Cure bike ride – a mass participation fundraising event held across 40 US states. The Midtown

Gymtopia – a place where clubs do social good

Gymtopia was conceived by founder and chief engagement officer Ray Algar, who believes the global health and fitness industry has enormous influence and potential to do good in the world, beyond its immediate customers. The idea of Gymtopia is simple: to curate and spread remarkable stories in which the fitness industry uses its influence to reach out and support an external community in need. It was created with the generous support of five organisations: Companhia Athletica, Gantner Technologies, Les Mills, Retention Management and The Gym Group. Gymtopia received an Outstanding Achievement Award in the uktacke Matrix Flame Awards 2014.

Read more stories and submit your own: www.Gymtopia.org





The fitness brand has so far raised US\$100,000 for the EquiCenter charity

Rochester club spends 10 months organising a one-day ride, which in 2015 involved 1,800 member and community riders. The club serves as the official indoor training centre for the Rochester event and provides free weekly sessions for non-members and members.

The club's own cycling team – called Chain Reaction/Midtown – has grown from nine riders in the first year to around 200 riders in 2015. The team has raised US\$330,000 for diabetes research and treatment over the nine-year period; this year it raised US\$73,000.

Tom DeRoller, the club's lifestyle director, also serves as chair of the planning committee for the Rochester Tour de Cure fundraising ride. "The great thing about the Tour de Cure fundraiser, and all our community service efforts, is that they produce a different dynamic with members, creating a closer member-club relationship," he says.

A local partner

Another more local project involves providing financial support for EquiCenter, a non-profit organisation that provides therapeutic equestrian activities for people with disabilities, military veterans and vulnerable young

people. So far, US\$100,000 has been raised through weekend table tennis tournaments and other events.

The club is also a long-term supporter of the area's only children's hospital, as well as the Bivona Child Advocacy Center, which supports children who have suffered sexual or physical abuse.

Rather than simply write cheques, the club prefers to raise awareness of a charity by operating in-club events.

Clearly these are not fleeting acts of 'charitising' where advertising the business is the real motivation, dressed up as some superficial and short-lived charitable act. Community is a core pillar of what the brand stands for.

Return on investment?

For all you financially-driven operators eager to understand how all this generosity is feeding the club's bottom line, look away now. "We don't think about it in terms of retention, or what's good for the business, or the bottom line. We just want to share our knowledge and all of the good things we're going. It's about opening your doors and hearts," says William.

Nevertheless, he believes having a philanthropic orientation correlates

with long-term success. "Success can be measured many different ways, but I believe that philanthropy – and serving others who are in need – is a key measurement of personal, professional and corporate success," he explains. "Our members give, and it's our mission to take every opportunity to support them by giving along with them."

In fact, the parent company goes further and donates 10 per cent of the group's net profit to charity each year.

Over to you

So what should your business be doing? The Edelman *goodpurpose* 2012 global consumer survey asked what role business should play in positively contributing to societal issues.

Fifty-one per cent of respondents expected companies to be donating a portion of their profits, with 50 per cent expecting donations of products or services. Four out of 10 wanted companies to give their staff the opportunity to volunteer.

This was the fifth annual survey showing a clear trend. Businesses that demonstrated a strong social purpose were more likely to be recommended, promoted and chosen. ●