THE SEVEN COMMANDMENTS FOR THE CLUB OF THE FUTURE
By Richard Kopplin

The old private club model is broken and no one is going to fix it. What is emerging in the private club world is a new model that will have sustainability for the foreseeable future. I see successful club boards engaging seven new guidelines, rules, precepts; we might even call them the Seven Commandments for the club of the future.

First: We shall not have board meetings that last more than ninety minutes. Private club governance has become more focused and in the process, thankfully, the talent pool of board members has become very strong. The board members of the future have successful business’s to run, careers to advance and families that require increasing time. No longer do board members want to devote three or four hours to endless discussions at a monthly board meeting. They know that the club has engaged a talented General Manager/COO to handle day to day operations and they (the board members) can stay focused on policy and results.

Second: There shall not be any refunds of membership deposits. Too many clubs in the past have struggled with what can only be viewed as “a Ponzi scheme for private clubs.” Club members will pay a reasonable initiation fee without expecting any return when they leave so that, in fact, they can leave when they decide the club no longer is a value proposition for them. The only way to avoid the “death spiral” of refund ability is not to create it in the first place.

Third: Cell phones and denim shall be allowed in the club. Yes, the cell phones must be on vibrate and common sense should prevail when phones are used in the dining areas and denim may be still be dis-allowed on the golf course. I recently visited a very traditional club and they were emphatic about no denim or cell phones in the club. As I left the club on Saturday night I noticed that there were only two or three occupied tables in the main dining room and it reminded me of a morgue and not a private club.

I had dinner a couple blocks away from the club at a popular restaurant and noticed a couple with club logoed sweaters (from the club I had just left) at the next booth with their two teen age children. The parents were both talking on their cell phones and the teenagers were texting and all four were wearing denim. Club members are voting with their feet; you can keep the old policies but the very consumers you need to support the club will be going somewhere else.

Fourth: We shall banish forever the title “Junior Memberships.” The club of the future will create a dynamic pool of younger members who may be given discounts on membership deposits and dues until they reach a certain age but they will not be called
junior members. It is a pejorative term and should be replaced with legacy or platinum or executive membership; anything other than the term ‘junior.’

**Fifth: We shall encourage six hole rounds of golf whenever possible.** The biggest challenge most club members have is the ability to enjoy the game of golf without committing an entire day. Lack of time is one of the major reasons members are leaving clubs. Change that! Let’s allow for people to play six holes before work or after work and six holes with the kids after school and six holes with the spouse in the evening. Create a six hole score card and some six hole events; think creatively and use the golf course in ways that will encourage play. Golf could actually be fun again!

**Sixth: We shall be “family friendly” and mean it!** The buying decision that determines if a family joins a private club is no longer being made by the adult male of the family. Some private clubs are having their best year ever in 2010 and they typically have one thing in common. They are focused on family activities and have created such a strong family friendly environment that the kids, the grandkids and the teenagers want to go to the club rather than McDonalds or Chucky Cheese. Once that “buzz” begins and families enjoy all the club facilities, members view their club as the “safe harbor” for family activities and the dollars spent on dues become a real value not an expense!

**Seventh: We shall build a fitness center.** You don’t need to build a fitness center or enhance the one you currently have; you can simply watch all of your members leave for a club that provides that facility. This is a trend that is getting stronger, excuse the pun, and will continue to be a critical factor in a prospective member’s decision making process. I don’t think any other amenity has a faster return on dollars than fitness and many clubs are offering a fitness/social membership which has allowed the club to keep dues dollars for full memberships very competitive.

The private club of the future is being shaped by the leaders in the club industry and I have observed that the foundation of their success is based on these seven commandments. The new club model is sustainable and here to stay; create your own commandments and join the future!