



THE EBU MEMBERSHIP CAMPAIGN

For some time the board has been looking at our membership numbers. This is important because changes in numbers and activity rates are key indicators for the health of the EBU.

BACKGROUND THE STATISTICS

In March 2014 there were 54616 members. In the autumn of 2017 this had fallen very slightly to 54579. While some action was required that in itself was not a matter for great concern. This trend seemed to be the experience for many “traditional” leisure activities and though not among the best we were doing better than many other organised pass times.

Yet within that picture there is a steady decline in the vigour of our membership. We have measures for the activity at our clubs analysed from the Universal Membership returns. There is a separate category for those who play less than 12 times a year and another for those who don't play in a club at all but still hold an EBU membership.

Taking those two categories of “occasional” players together, there were 15390 in 2014 forming 28.18% of our total membership. By 2017 this had risen to 16743 making 30.68% of our membership. This compares with the 2011 figures where 12343 occasional players formed 24.71% of the total membership.

So occasional players are a slowly but steadily growing proportion of the membership in absolute and percentage terms.

However the situation is worse than these figures indicate. Approximately 20% of our membership, 10860, is 75 years or older. Nearly all of them are unlikely to be active players in 10 years time. * This is born out in the starkest terms by National Office of Statistics data: the most recent life expectancy figures for those aged 65 is 83.5years old for men and 85.5years old for women. Of course these are averages and we pride ourselves that bridge players tend to live longer and remain active. Nevertheless the message is clear.

We also have detailed information on the “loss” of members and new members joining the EBU, mainly through affiliated Clubs. Between 2014 and 2017 we lost 15187 members; that is an average of nearly 3800 per annum. This may be an understatement as we do not always become aware immediately of the “departure” of a member. In the same period we gained 15463 members; an average of 3866 per annum.

Two quite startling conclusions can be drawn from this.

1) If our membership is 54 - 55000 and we are losing 3800 every year then the average duration of a typical membership is less than 15 years. Since we all know people who have been members for decades there must be many people who are involved with our clubs for only 5 or 10 years.

2) A massive amount of teaching takes place all over the country. However a recent survey of clubs indicated that only 31% of students move from classroom to regular ordinary club play.

The impact of these two factors on membership numbers is that we are working very hard just to stand still. The efforts of teachers up and down the country does no more than counter the drain of members through age infirmity and competing interests.

At the club level this means that a large number of clubs are failing to replace their membership losses. The YCBA's own statistical research showed that such clubs are heading for a rapid failure.

** In some cases these figures contain minor gaps and timing discrepancies but the trends are very clear. If there is doubt on how aged our membership is, a survey of a fifth of our membership showed that 70% of the respondents were 65+.*

THE EBU RESPONSE

The EBU realised that there is a serious issue here and action has to be taken to counter the threatened decline in membership. Early in 2017 the Board agreed to establish a Pilot Membership Campaign in Yorkshire, jointly funded with the YCBA

At the beginning of 2017 the Membership Campaign was placed under the detailed control of the YCBA, who set up a small management team consisting of Ron Millet representing the EBU, Lesley Millet, Chair of the Education & Development Committee for the YCBA and Nick Woolven, Chair of the YCBA. The intention was to have the interests of both the EBU and the YCBA represented as well as being flexible and responsive to any changing situation.

A Regional Development Officer (RDO) was appointed and paid an hourly rate to undertake the detailed work and make the day to day contacts with affiliated clubs. David Guild, became part of the management team, reporting back to it, while consulting on significant developments as they occurred. This neat and flexible arrangement has been an undoubted success. It forms a model for future campaigns elsewhere.

The original intention had been to run a campaign with the involvement of clubs on the basis that those clubs could harvest the results of any interest shown by the general public. Very quickly this approach was abandoned. It was found that the context and predictions of the statistics above were borne out by the actual situations that challenged many clubs. Far from the Campaign looking to clubs for assistance, in some cases they themselves needed help. What started as a Membership Campaign became a rescue campaign for clubs that were in danger of failing or about to do so.

Start up

A selection of clubs needing help and advice was identified. Each one was asked if their Chairperson or management committee would meet with our RDO. In every case there was a positive response. At each meeting the situation as indicated by the statistical work was outlined and the implications made plain.

Since then certain guidelines have developed from the YCBA experience:-

- 1) Before a club's campaign begins the Executive and the members have to believe in what they are doing. "Inward marketing" is required. It follows that the lead has to come from the club itself.
- 2) The role of the County is to advise, guide, mentor and be a source of information and support.
- 3) This activity has no quick fix solutions. With the need for committee decisions and sometimes the membership, it takes 3 - 6 months to set things up.
- 4) Financial support is given but in all cases the club agreed to contribute half towards media costs.
- 5) Given a typical entry age of 50+ gentle Bridge was the suggested route to attract people.
- 6) As a policy unaffiliated clubs were not the target, but if they showed interest we would respond

The Campaign

- 7) The County has a role to play in offering media design and support services including Facebook.
- 8) Traditional forms of media (press, local radio) almost never work. Leaflets do sometimes but are expensive to distribute though cheap to produce.
- 9) Posters at key points are successful.
- 10) Clubs themselves can be inventive and develop new forms of media. One club arranged for electronic leaflets to be placed on the websites of other organisations.
- 11) After word of mouth, the most successful media form is Facebook. This uses advertising targeted by age, geographic area and social interest. Payment is made on response not placement and costs very little.

Results

So far 8 clubs have worked directly with the YCBA. Results vary with one club gaining no new members and at the other extreme a club has increased its membership by a third. Two clubs outside the Campaign used our advice and contacts to extend their own teaching and membership activities. Finally part of another County under our guidance set up its own FastTrack activities and acquired 100 newcomers.

12) A club should spend about £250 to run its campaign with outside support being an extra cost.

13) There is a large potential for lapsed players, low level players, “new to Bridge” people and especially people taught Bridge in the past who never progressed to Club play. This requires appropriate marketing to bring them into our clubs.

The result has been that to date about 230 newcomers have been acquired with at least half brought into membership. This has been at a combined cost of about £5000 including payments to the Regional Development Officer.

The Next Step

To apply the lessons learnt in Yorkshire a working group has been set up to collate and distil the experiences of the Membership Campaign. They will develop a Resource Centre that offers media templates for other areas wishing run a Campaign.

Three factors are vital for this this to be fully effective -

A) Although encouraging and teaching Newcomers is important, it is vital to convert as many as possible to become EBU and affiliated club members. The EBU is developing new routes to membership to encourage this.

B) Information and report back by clubs and Counties is crucial for the effective continuation of a Campaign. There is always more to learn as to what is effective and what isn't. Reportage from the Campaigns is the only way this can be achieved.

C) A tightly organised Management Team supported by a paid Regional Development Officer operating within the designated area is the surest way of ensuring the success of a Membership Campaign.

The Yorkshire Campaign will continue for another 12 months. At the same time the EBU plans to extend this to other parts of the country. A central budget has been allocated for matched funding with any County or group of Counties that want to be involved. This will be the next stage in securing EBU membership levels.