



Our responsibility to grow the game: How to run a successful tennis venue

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ABSTRACT

Voyager Tennis operates from 13 tennis venues in Australia and Singapore with more than 10,000 players participating each week and 100+ coaches who deliver quality tennis programs and competitions at each location. The academy is fast becoming one of the most impactful tennis organisations in the industry and views itself as responsible for growing and enhancing the game, through increasing participation, upgrading ageing tennis facilities, and developing and upskilling career tennis professionals. In this article we share some of our insights and our approach to running a successful tennis venue. These principles can be used by managers and owners of facilities to help improve participation and to contribute toward growing the game of tennis.

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INCREASING PARTICIPATION

Tennis is a game that can be played for a lifetime, and for the sport to thrive in the long term, a constant flow of new players trying and going on to learn tennis is required. Introducing as many people as possible to the game should be a top priority for every venue. For government owned and leased facilities, it's also particularly important that tennis facilities are well utilised. Underperforming venues can often be rezoned or repurposed for other sports if deemed to be of more benefit to the community. Here are some of the key areas that Voyager Tennis focuses on to increase participation.

Creating the right mix of programming

Every tennis venue is unique and has a varying number of courts, clubhouse amenities and area demographics to evaluate when putting together a programming plan which should consider the following:

- Coaching programs
- Competitions and tournaments
- Court hire
- Restringing
- Proshop
- Food & Beverage
- Membership

A great way to start building a program timetable is to offer a wide range of options initially and then assess the participation of each service offered. Generally, the junior program works best in the afternoons after school, teenagers in the early evenings and adults at night and all programming usually works well on the weekend due to increased customer availability.



Figure 1. Voyager Tennis is focused on increasing tennis participation.

Pricing

The first principle of successful tennis venue pricing is that it needs to be affordable to the local community and allow a broad local audience to participate. Allowing customers to do a free introductory trial is also a good way to ensure that people can try the session before they make any financial commitments.

The second key consideration is that the pricing needs to be high enough to allow the business to pay all operating expenses as well as set aside funds for facility upgrades when they are required. The key is finding the balance, as pricing that is too expensive will create a drop in participation. This will make it difficult to launch new programs and reduce employment opportunities. If pricing is too cheap, the operator will eventually lack the funds to pay for facility upgrades and operational expenses which will produce negative outcomes for all stakeholders.

Marketing

An appropriate marketing strategy is critical to ensure that the business is generating enough demand from customers to create a sustainable business.

Developing and maintaining a quality website is a key component and should clearly display all programs and services on offer including the timetable, pricing, physical address as well as contact phone number and email in a prominent position. Around half of all website views originate from search engines such as google so ensure your website is SEO optimised and your google business profile is up to date.

Another key area is the active management and promotion to your database which can be the biggest driver of participation from our experiences. Capturing all customers phone numbers and email addresses who participate at your facility, and segmenting according to the programs they have enrolled in allows you to market and cross promote programs to participants and their families. Promotional emails generally have an open rate of 25-40% although text messages have a 95%+ open rate and can achieve better results than emails despite the small cost per text message.

Social media can be very effective for developing a brand and reputation for larger tennis companies with a marketing budget. The key channels for tennis venues to invest time and effort into are Instagram and Facebook. To keep your followers engaged we suggest regular weekly posts including a mix of promotions, club news and tennis education such as blog posts.

Most tennis venues may struggle to maintain a strong social media presence and develop enough content to make this avenue worthwhile. From our experience we'd suggest venues first establish a strong internet presence and maximise the promotion opportunity to their database before considering investing time and resources into social media platforms which may not deliver the results you are looking for.

Another key marketing initiative is to contact local schools to request advertising within their school newsletters and potentially holding tennis in school sessions to help promote uptake of tennis programs.

Ultimately, delivering a customer orientated experience on and off the court will help encourage word of mouth referrals and positive customer reviews on Google Business and social media.

Customer Service

Providing a quality overall customer experience is a team effort between coaches and administrators which incorporates items such as the booking process, program delivery, billing, and re-enrolment.

The initial booking process is where the customer often forms their first impression of your business. Responding quickly to their enquiry combined with an efficient booking process can get the relationship off to a strong start. Having quality management software including an online booking system will facilitate this process.

When the customer arrives at the facility for the first time, they should be greeted by a friendly team member. For services involving coaching or competition, a well-trained coach should ensure the customer is in the appropriate group for their level and is provided a quality experience.

Billing needs to be completed with accuracy and the re-enrolment process executed to the highest standard. After the initial tennis session, the coach will phone to check on the customer's experience, provide feedback, alert them of other upcoming participation opportunities and confirm their place for the coming term.

UPGRADING AND MAINTAINING FACILITIES

In the 1970's and 1980's tennis was booming, and many tennis facilities were built over this period, particularly in Australia where our organisation is based. As of 2022, there are many venues that are in poor condition due to a lack of investment over several decades and are under threat of being rezoned or repurposed for other sports and activities. One of the primary goals of Voyager is to improve the game of tennis by reviving and upgrading ageing facilities. This reduces the risk of losing tennis courts as well as making tennis more attractive by providing a venue that enhances the experience of each participant.

Asset management plan

To help build the foundations of a sustainable tennis facility, a venue needs to have an asset management plan in place so that it can build a sinking fund to pay for upgrades and replacement of tennis courts, fencing, lighting, clubhouses, and other amenities as and when required. The plan should consider the current condition of the facilities, the timing in which assets need to be upgraded or replaced along with the associated costs with inflation factored in. This needs to be a long-term plan spanning over a 10+ year period or to the end of the guaranteed tenure of the contract.

Budget and operational plan

Once the costs associated with facility upgrades are known, a budget can be developed with the aim of the revenue covering all operating and capital expenditure requirements. Unfortunately, there are many examples of venues having good asset management plans in place and still not generating enough income to pay for facility upgrades. Therefore, it's so important to have the right mix of programming, appropriately priced and effectively marketed so that participation is high enough to run a sustainable business. It's worth noting that sometimes the poor condition of facilities is not always the fault of the venue operator as there can be restrictions and limitations with the contract with the landlord including having limited tenure.

Engaging contractors

Engaging multiple companies to execute facility renovations is a big decision and is worth taking the time to research given that the investment is often several hundreds of thousands of dollars at a time. Our philosophy around selecting a company for court resurfacing, fencing, lighting or clubhouse and amenity upgrades is to inspect the contractors previous work and ask for references from associated venue owners as to how effectively and timely the upgrades were executed as well as the usability after the work was completed. Although sometimes more expensive, we prefer to use the most reputable companies in the industry with a strong track record to ensure they have the resources and experience required to execute the job to the desired standard.



Figure 2. In 2022 Voyager is investing in resurfacing 16 tennis courts, installing new lights over 19 courts, upgrading fencing and refurbishing 6 tennis clubhouses.

COACH DEVELOPMENT AND CAREER PATHWAY OPPORTUNITIES

The third key area that Voyager contributes towards the growth of the sport is providing world class coach development opportunities as well as offering a rewarding career pathway. Below are some of the key areas that we focus on to provide career development to our team members.

Career pathways

We are passionate about providing a rewarding career pathway that enables coaches to progress into leadership positions that attract more responsibility and quality remuneration packages. Unfortunately, many former tennis players drop out of the game and pursue other non-tennis careers as they don't view being a tennis professional as a viable career pathway.

At Voyager we run a part-time assistant coaching program for our teenage players who support the 12/U programs and holiday camps. For the participants this program provides an employment opportunity that increases their own game and personal development as well as positively reinforces tennis coaching as a possible career.

Recruitment

A critical component for any tennis venue is attracting coaches that align with your company culture and philosophy. This will vary for every facility operator. At Voyager, we identify, find, and develop leading coaches from around the world and strive to set the highest standards in all aspects whether that be facility presentation, customer service, coaching or competition delivery.

We have interviewed and trialled over a thousand coaches since Voyager commenced in 2011 and over time have developed a clear set of criteria that we assess in the recruitment process for all new coaches, to include:

- A positive attitude and personality that fits in well with existing teams and customer demographic.
- A minimum number of years coaching experience which varies role by role

- A strong work ethic and drive to maintain full time coaching hours.
- Good availability to meet customer demands which can include evenings and weekends
- A strong standard as a player
- Coach qualifications
- An appropriate wage expectation that our business can sustain

Due to our strict criteria, only a small percentage of job applicants are successful which can vary and depend on the strength of the job market at a particular time. Each club should develop their own recruitment standards and take action on attracting the type of team members they are looking for. Your coaches are your brand ambassadors so it's critical to get it right.

Coach Development

Delivering quality training to coaches is one of the keys to providing a great customer experience. Combined with providing career progression opportunities to tennis professionals, these factors help to retain and engage those individuals.

For new coaches, we provide a ten-week coach development program commencing at the beginning of each team member's employment which is delivered by senior Voyager team members. The aim of this program is to align coaches with the company philosophy and enhance their skills. This training program ensures that Voyager coaches can consistently deliver tennis services that meet and exceed the customer's expectations.

Smaller clubs that don't have the scale or required skill sets to run their own internal coach development programs should investigate courses delivered by their tennis federation and offer these courses to new team members as part of their induction program and employee benefits.



Figure 3. Voyager Tennis is delivering an accredited coaching course NSW in partnership with AATC.

GIVING BACK TO THE TENNIS COMMUNITY

Many of our team have enjoyed playing tennis for their whole lives and are passionate about giving back to the game and contributing towards seeing the sport grow and thrive. Operating tennis facilities can also be a great way to support the local community by running community focused events such as fundraisers, delivering programs for the disadvantaged and getting behind charities and causes that matter.

We also see it as our responsibility to operate in a way that protects our environment and choose suppliers that are environmentally friendly as well as offsetting carbon emissions by purchasing our own credits.

CONCLUSION

During the pandemic, tennis was deemed to be a relatively safe sport in many parts of the world which created an influx of new and returning players. This has provided a great opportunity to increase participation globally and it is our hope that every tennis venue will play their part in bringing new players to the sport and contribute toward growing the game of tennis.

FINANCING AND CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that he has not received funding for the research and has no conflict of interest in relation to it.



Figure 4. Voyager Tennis fundraiser for a local cause in Sydney.

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