

Medinah Country Club, Medinah, Ill. has a USDA-certified chicken coop and organic garden.



5 MYTHS ABOUT PRIVATE CLUBS

By Henry Wallmeyer, President & CEO of the National Club Association

Many people misunderstand the purpose of private clubs; it is not to keep people out, but to create a community built on shared values. As President and CEO of the association representing some of the most well-known clubs nationwide, I've educated officials on Capitol Hill, members of the media and many folks from outside our industry about private clubs and why they, like any small business, are important to the economy and their communities.

As the primary advocate and ultimate source of information for private clubs, I will debunk 5 common myths surrounding clubs. I hope this series challenges preconceptions about our industry and offers insight as to the true value of clubs.

MYTH 1: CLUBS DISCRIMINATE

Private club membership is no different from any other part of life: we tend to befriend and spend time with people who share similar values and interests. There are many different types of private clubs, including golf clubs, athletic clubs, social clubs, racquet clubs, yacht clubs, beach clubs and hunting clubs. There are even private clubs for magicians, comedians, writers and thespians. They all share one common denominator: they provide an opportunity for people with a shared interest to pursue that interest. That's why clubs rely on referral programs for membership to ensure that new members mesh with the current culture.

In the past, people didn't use technology to do these things; they actually got together and had in-person relationships, and private clubs were one of the earliest and most important way they did so.

Over the past century private clubs have evolved—and, frankly—improved, just like America has. Today, clubs don't discriminate but they are selective in admitting members. They have established bylaws or policies that require new members to be nominated and sponsored by existing members. Private clubs are exclusive and value the privacy of their club and members.

We live in a time when tens of millions of Americans use social media to keep in touch and socialize with friends and loved ones. In the past, people didn't use technology to do these things; they actually got together and had in-person relationships, and private clubs were one of the earliest and most important way they did so.

Americans' Constitutionally-guaranteed right of freedom of association allows club to establish a variety of different criteria as a basis for membership. For instance, there are women-only clubs, men-only clubs, and clubs that build their membership around religious affiliation, political leanings or family heritage. But, more often than not many clubs are simply a place for community, recreation and engagement among neighbors, classmates, friends and colleagues. *A true, home away from home.*

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MYTH 2: CLUBS ARE JUST ABOUT GOLF

Sure, most private clubs (85%) offer golf as a primary draw for members. But private clubs are so much more: from tennis and swimming to dining and fitness, there are a wide array of experiences and types of clubs to suit all interests. The only limit on clubs' focus is the limits of members' interests and imagination.



Ultimately, the private club experience is primarily about friendship.

In urban areas, city and athletic clubs reign, offering social programming for “clubs within a club” for literature, politics, bridge and wine as well as myriad athletic facilities and sports leagues. Dining experiences run the gamut too, from upscale formal dining to casual pubs in a plethora of facilities that offer spectacular rooftop views, sunsets over the golf course, and fun gathering places for families and friends.

Ultimately, the private club experience is primarily about friendship. Clubs are safe, welcoming places where people come together to connect, play, and dine with people whose company they enjoy and whose interests they share.

MYTH 3: CLUBS ONLY BENEFIT THEIR MEMBERS

Private clubs are small businesses, and like other small businesses they benefit the community in many ways. The most obvious benefits are economic. It's estimated that private clubs provide more than half a million jobs across the United States, contribute more than \$3.75 billion in taxes, and add \$21.5 billion to the economy each year.

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Many private clubs are also very philanthropic and community-oriented, much like their members. Clubs rally behind their members who host charity events, golf tournaments, food drives, toy donations and other initiatives in support of good causes that impact the community. Many clubs also have foundations and offer scholarships, particularly through caddie scholarship programs.

For instance, The Union League of Chicago has a culture that values members' engagement in public life. The club's programs, committees and policies reveal a commitment to understanding and advancing public policy issues and community life. For more than 95 years, the [Union League Club](#) has served as an affiliate member of the Boys & Girls Clubs of America, serving the after-school development needs of at-risk youth in Chicago.

Clubs also provide a great place to work. According to Club Benchmarking, the average club spends between 52 and 60 percent of total operating revenue on labor. Salaries at private clubs tend to be much higher than comparable positions at area businesses and employee turnover is much lower, with about half of private clubs reporting less than 15 percent rate of turnover according to a recent National Club Association/McMahon Group survey. As a result, jobs at private clubs tend to be highly sought after. For instance, the Detroit Athletic Club is one of only three organizations to be recognized every year for the last 18 years as one of [Metro Detroit's Best and Brightest Companies to Work For](#).

MYTH 4: CLUBS ARE NOT ENVIRONMENTALLY FRIENDLY

The environment is central to the mission and success of private clubs, particularly those that offer golf. As such, private clubs tend to be very proactive when it comes to sustainability and, in fact, clubs are much more environmentally-friendly than the typical homeowner.

Clubs with golf courses have hundreds of acres of land. This sounds like a lot of watering, fertilizing and mowing, and it's precisely why many clubs work with certified agronomists, plant and soil scientists who develop innovative practices and technologies to improve sustainability and protect the environment.

A recent National Club Association/McMahon Group survey of private clubs found that 74 percent pursue sustainable practices, and the typical club spends nearly \$50,000 each year to promote sustainability. Like many environmentally-friendly businesses, private clubs use a variety of traditionally sustainable practices and environmentally safe products and recycled materials in their operations. In an integrated and far-reaching approach to resource management, Army Navy Country Club in Arlington, Va., constructed a LEED Silver Certification clubhouse.

Many clubs also practice hyper-local food sourcing, such as the Jonathan Club's rooftop garden in Los Angeles, which produces \$100,000 worth of ingredients each year, and Medinah Country Club's USDA-certified chicken coop and organic garden and maple syrup program, which taps trees on the Illinois property. Clubs also participate in advanced environmental programs like Audubon International's Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program for Golf. Pine Valley Golf Club (#1 rated golf club in America according to [Platinum Clubs](#)) was certified in 1999 and Congressional Country Club (#1 rated country club) was certified in 2011.

MYTH 5: CLUBS ARE RELICS OF THE PAST

The majestic architecture and storied pasts of many clubs belie the modern nature of today's private club. But it's that modern nature that is attracting so many Gen Xers, Millennials and junior members. And inside the doors, today's private club is more reflective than ever of the values and interests of most active Americans. It's more family-oriented and focused on fun, health and wellness.

Clubs are helping members balance fun and family by offering more social activities for families, children and guests. The entire family can enjoy a wide range of offerings, includ-

ing pool-based activities, game nights, themed parties and other family events. Many clubs offer junior sports camps for children to play golf, tennis or swim. Coffee-shop cafes, youth rec rooms and spa amenities also make clubs a destination to serve all members of the family.

Examples of clubs' focus on family abound. Denver Country Club has a family focus on youth training for team sports and Palo Alto Hills Golf & Country Club provides families with fitness and kids yoga classes, cooking lessons, magic shows and a "tween" dance social. At the Country Club of Fairfax (Va.), its Wine and Golf program has increased women's play by providing a low-stress introduction to golf that includes on-course instruction and coaching, fun and a focus on meeting other members. These are just a few examples from thousands of clubs across the United States.

Clubs have always provided recreational outlets for active members through golf, tennis, sailing, swimming, and other activities. However, today's private club is more committed to promoting members' health and wellness as well. That may include exercise studios, spas, physical therapy, private trainers and nutrition programs, and it extends to the clubhouse menu, with many clubs offering healthier food choices. In short, many private clubs have expanded their offerings to better reflect Americans' modern lifestyles.



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