

DON'T ADD, MULTIPLY

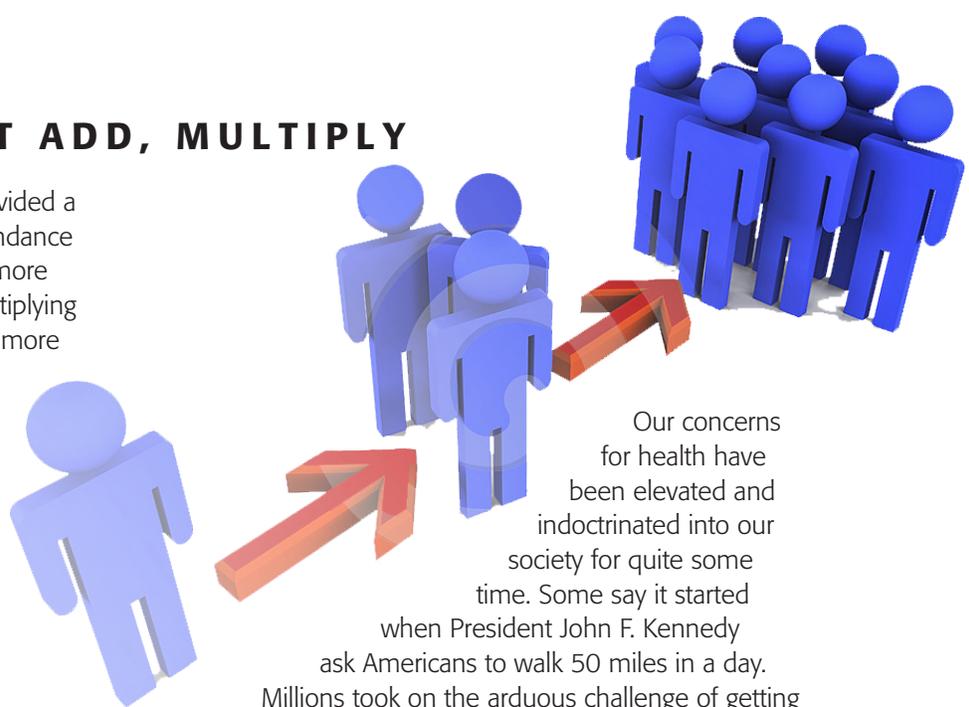
The recent growth in tennis's popularity has provided a great opportunity for organizers to increase attendance in events and activities. Now instead of adding more to a program, we can expand exponentially, multiplying participation. That's the nature of our sport—the more the merrier.

In the past, if you had a program with only a dozen juniors, it was difficult to organize good matchups in the level of play and age. With 50 juniors, it is much easier to create good matchups and, in turn, more enjoyment. It's a simple fact about the game; it takes at least two to tango.

This fact is highlighted every time a tournament comes to an end. In no other mainstream sport do both the winner and the runner-up jointly receive closing match awards. It sends the message of recognizing the appreciation of the opponent, a hallmark of our sport. In 2009 it was reported that over 30 million people enjoyed the sport, a record number since such a statistic has been kept. While participation had slipped a bit in following years, by the end of 2012, tennis participation was again approaching that 30 million mark. And importantly, research continues to show that tennis still is the fastest growing traditional sport in the country. The game seems to have had a rebirth.

This is the direct result of many organizations working together toward a common goal. The Tennis Industry Association, the USTA, USPTA, PTR, ITF, and others (including tennis media) have all collaborated to create this growth. In addition, the development of programs like Cardio Tennis, 10 and Under Tennis, Tennis on Campus, flex leagues and many more have all contributed to the recent tennis boom. This increase provides us with a great opportunity to increase the number of players and reap the benefits of this momentum.

To better understand this opportunity, we need to understand a little history about recreation, health and the tennis industry. Recreation has always, and will always, provide a wonderful escape from the demands and pressures of our day-to-day struggles. As our daily demands have become more emotionally challenging, the need for recreation has grown.



Our concerns for health have been elevated and indoctrinated into our society for quite some time. Some say it started when President John F. Kennedy

ask Americans to walk 50 miles in a day. Millions took on the arduous challenge of getting up by sunrise, taking to the road, and then hopefully getting home by sunset.

For the tennis industry, the launching moment was the Battle of the Sexes in 1973 between the older, but still crafty, Bobby Riggs and the challenging Billie Jean King. All of these events were successful because the timing was just right. This good timing is also applicable to the recent growth in tennis.

In the '70s, many took to individual sports and recreation such as, walking, running, swimming and biking—activities that one could do by themselves at relatively any time of day. There was still time in the day for a person to go their job, home to their family, interact with co-workers and friends, and in general, enjoy a social atmosphere.

When our lives changed to the computer world, so did our social world. Children have to make play dates; adults need to join local community organizations in order to meet others. The family structure is being challenged by the need for both parents to work. Schools have dropped athletic programs and families are trying to fill that void with local programs. Team sports provided a social atmosphere, but are hard to organize and find proper venues. These conditions have made it perfect for a sport like tennis that is recreational, healthy and social. With this in mind, the opportunity is there to capitalize on this recent momentum, taking advantage that an increase in numbers is perfect for the continuing growth of the social aspect of the game. Here are a few steps to consider as we make this move in our industry.

Match People, Not Players. If you are in position at a tennis facility that allows you to match up tennis players, you need to think much more like a dating service. It's not enough to put two 3.5 players together. You have to match their character and personalities as well.

This is especially true for those just getting into the game. An experienced player will realize that a bad match, or an uncomfortable opposing player, is a passing thing, but for someone just getting into the game, a run-in with the wrong person can be disastrous. As an example, you match up two players who are just getting into the game at a 2.5 level. One person is very competitive and the other is not. The competitive player will wonder why you did not provide a greater challenge, and the less competitive player will be intimidated to the point of not wanting to try another of your recommendations.

On the flip side, if you match two people together and they really hit it off, you have created a bond that will not only help them pursue their tennis endeavors, but will also create a greater attachment to your facility. Remember that matching the level of play, along with the personalities of the players, will require you to become more acquainted with your customers.

Don't Be a Match-Maker, Be a Group-Gatherer. We have at our disposal many new leagues and programs that are already populated with many tennis enthusiasts. This provides a perfect opportunity to get large groups together that can produce a greater variety of competition. In this day and age of rapid change and instant gratification, players are always seeking out new games and new challenges. The more the merrier should be the theme for many of your events. In retrospect, contracting court time for indoor courts, along with ratings, inadvertently segregated players. This narrowed the number of people tennis players could interact with and the results were negative for the sport, and the natural growth of the game was stymied. Organizing group events, whether they are for recreational tennis or competitive play, is the wave of the future.

Recognize the Personality of Your Facility. Although it often is the habit of those who are involved in planning events and activities to copy the programs other facilities use, you need to know what will work for you. Every facility has its own characteristics that can be used as the gateway for getting new players into the game.

Most of these characteristics are the result of the makeup of the community. A facility in the suburbs would be very different than one located in a city. You might focus on family activities and events. Some communities are geared to retired folk; this could mean programs that cater to the 60-plus crowd are more likely to succeed. On a more specific criterion, there are clubs located in areas where the population is very busy from 9 to 5, so you may need programs that attract players on the weekends and evenings. With communities that are just getting started, hooking up with the real estate market to capture these newcomers may be the ticket. It's the nature of people in every community to want to socialize; you just need to know which buttons to push.

Capitalize on Success. There is seldom too much of a good thing for your members or customers. You will be surprised how much you can provide that will continue to grow participation and interest. When you score big with any event, don't look just to add, look to multiply. Many times very successful events require a tremendous amount of work in preparation and managing. The staff, and you for that matter, may feel the need to take a break for a while. It's understandable, but not good timing. Call for backups or recruit who you need, do whatever it takes, but don't lose the momentum you have built.

Tech It Up. Take advantage of all the new technology that is available to help you to accomplish the task of getting players together. In recent years the industry has introduced a number of great tools that are available to you to help build your attendance and, in turn, membership. Websites such as the consumer tennis portal PlayTennis.com, online tennis software such as TennisConnect, and online tennis fitness programs like Cardio Tennis Interactive are just a few of the newly established industry offerings. Even the internet can be your ally. Use mass e-mails for passing on information. Twitter or Facebook can help get the word out about any event. Publicizing the success of events and promoting the events through photos of who will, or did, attend.

With so many people flocking to the game, the sheer numbers can work in our favor to build the social aspect tennis provides. After all, who wants to go to a party with only a handful of people? It's much more fun when more people attend; all we are doing is substituting a handshake with the hit of a tennis ball.