Timeshare ownership or vacation club membership is not just about heading to a luxurious beachfront condo and drinking margaritas on the patio. Customer engagement experts have long touted that member experience does not begin and end with getting on the plane or loading up the SUV with kids, beach chairs, sand pails and a fully stocked cooler. Membership is about belonging to a group.

A recent study published in the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* revealed that when social relationships provide an all-important sense of belonging, people feel like life has more meaning. This is a primary reason the vacation ownership arena continues to be successful in today’s travel environment.

Successful developers, HOAs, vacation clubs, and management companies get the concept. This sense of belonging is at the heart of this industry because it touches on deep emotional chords. A quality customer experience strategy boosts customer satisfaction, which in turn produces higher referral rates, drives customer loyalty, and improves retention rates. Plus, it makes for a pretty darn good time for vacationers themselves.

Timeshares and vacation clubs set themselves apart from the transient side of the hospitality industry with specific owner engagement strategies, techniques, and processes which benefit their owner/member base—as well as the financial health of the organization.

Outside of the vacation stay itself, three distinct customer encounters contribute to the totality of the membership experience:

- Prior to arrival contact and service;
- Post-vacation consumer feedback; and
- Ongoing customer engagement.

ResortCom is one example of a company that offers servicing solutions such as management software, financial services, and call center solutions to the hospitality industry. CEO Scott Bahr says: “Satisfied customers who consistently use their membership are much more likely to stay current on their financial obligations.”
To this end, an increasing number of ResortCom’s clients work with them to deliver pre-arrival services for their customers, proactively reaching out to each customer in advance of their arrival to confirm the details of their vacation, arrange airport transfers and local activities, and book meals and all-inclusive packages. The company uses well-planned strategies—including personalized emails and expertly trained call center agents with deep knowledge of the resort and local area—to ensure that the customer experience begins long before arrival at the resort.

As a client partner, says Bahr, ResortCom prides itself on “proprietary technologies and databases and we are able to consistently speak with insight and confidence to the members and work with each to deliver the best personalized vacation experience to fit their unique needs and vacation expectations.”

The pre-arrival strategy equates to embracing a family member as they plan to arrive home. The familiarity and professional expertise helps establish visitors’ expectations and paves the way for a smooth start to the vacation experience.

At Global Connections (GCI), a resort developer, travel club fulfillment and service provider of Global Discovery Vacations (GDV), 20 years of expertise have evolved into a philosophy that embraces members’ needs for travel as well as leisure benefits. The sense of belonging is enhanced because members can turn to GDV as a resource for planning trips and finding tremendous travel deals, shopping opportunities, and other lifestyle solutions.

GCI’s business model does not include mandatory annual fees. Membership is only activated when a member opts to travel or use any program benefit and pays that year’s activity fee. So, to ensure future travel business, and to keep members involved in the Club even at home, the company uses well-honed techniques of regular outbound email communications and pre-arrival calls. GDV is extremely active on Instagram and Facebook promoting member participation contests, using social media platforms to push out special notices of flash sales on travel opportunities such as themed cruises and travel excursions.

Keeping members informed and involved doesn’t happen by just setting high standards. To maintain the important thread of connection to GDV whether on vacation or not, agents are trained and re-trained to keep standards and knowledge high. Outside of their normal job training, agents are offered a variety of separate Global Certification training classes throughout the year by the HR department to ensure a well-rounded employee.

GDV members may contact Club agents in numerous ways. Of course, online booking is available. But, for the member who wants a more personalized approach, agents are on duty during regular business hours and in the evening and Saturdays for those who want the comfort of interacting with a live, friendly and knowledgeable travel professional.

Robert Kobek, president and CEO of CustomerCountTM, says: “Allowing owners and guests the opportunity to engage with you creates a greater loyalty. Anytime the opportunity to have another conversation with a guest presents itself, the loyalty scores (NPS) should improve.”

CustomerCount’s cloud-based feedback system created specifically for the shared ownership/hospitality industry is designed to drive greater profitability through improvements to customer engagement and loyalty. Monitoring feedback data and drilling down into practical analytical interpretation reveals issues that need to be fixed to improve the processes and offer the guest a stress-free vacation.

The CustomerCount post-stay survey includes a TripAdvisor widget to encourage members and owners to “rate” the resort without logging into the TripAdvisor site thereby increasing the number of resort reviews. This helps members to feel they are participating in their resort’s traveler acquisition, as well as speak their mind with kudos, comments, and even complaints.

These ARDA members focus on three crucial aspects which are significant in nurturing a members’ sense of belonging. The member experience when not at the resort is nearly as important as those precious days of rest and relaxation travelers expect on vacation.

The days leading up to the trip are key to nurturing anticipation and offering assurance that the resort and/or club prioritizes member’s individual requirements. Information about the arrival process, arranging for essential needs and amenities, and offering out of the ordinary service (booking excursions, stocking refrigerators) expand the psychological feeling of well-being and relaxation that vacations are all about.

Ongoing communication during the time members are only dreaming of a vacation boosts involvement creating an environment where members are part of a whole, reflecting on the confidence that heightens a sense of belonging. Follow up surveys not only measure customer satisfaction scores, but also allow members and owners to have a say about property operations, maintenance and service.

Fundamental strategies are central to attaining successful relationships with our members. After all, it is all about the member and their experience.