

Southworth Focuses on Being Multi-Generational, Authentic, and Creative

Tommy Southworth, President of Southworth, discusses how the company's portfolio of clubs are breaking barriers by focusing on core values.

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The club development company, Southworth, has been challenging the status quo of clubs since its inception in 1991, and it doesn't plan on stopping anytime soon.

With seven unique and private clubs from Cape Cod to the Bahamas to Scotland, the development company is always looking for ways to enhance member experience and draw on the authenticity of the location it serves.

Tommy Southworth, President of Southworth, breaks down what makes Southworth clubs special and how the company plans to lead the next generation of private clubs.

Club + Resort Business (C+RB): Growing up in a family-owned company, did you always know you would work at Southworth?

Tommy Southworth (TS): My dad started the company in 1991 with his partner, Paul Fireman. I grew up in the business. I had every job under the sun, from dishwashing to banquet setup, and I learned a lot of the higher-level stuff through conversations with my dad.

In college, I was determined to forge my own path, so I spent 9 years in investment banking. Then the gravitational pull of family won me over, and I came back to Southworth as the chief financial officer in 2019. In 2020, I worked my way up to president of the company.

C+RB: You talk about Southworth wanting to lead the next generation of private clubs. What does that mean to you?

TS: The club world has earned a reputation for being sleepy and uninnovative. When our company was founded, we made sure that race and religion weren't a part of our application process. We did away with having A and B members and we relaxed the dress code. So, we have always been trying to be at the forefront of changes.

When I think of what the next generation of clubs is trying to do, it's really a combination of incredible golf, racquets, wellness, pool, and restaurant experiences paired with intense focus on full-family programming. We are laser-focused on being multi-generational.

C+RB: How do you shift your focus to being multi-generational?

TS: We hired our director of member experience, who was a cruise ship director for Carnival, and they reimagined our approach to family programming. That means investing in kids' programming with kids' camps and family-oriented activities. We do cardboard boat regattas and the yearly family Olympics.

But we also focus on parallel programming, giving parents events they can attend without their kids. We will have wine dinners upstairs for the parents and a kids' party downstairs. Everybody's happy, and you are taking care of the family in separate places.

C+RB: Why do you think this multi-generational approach is important?

TS: I think the world needs more social interaction, especially as the world moves more digitally focused. Country clubs are an old-school feature of modern society that allow people to connect face-to-face, meet new people, and socialize.

We are focused on what it means to be great at connection. One of the unique features of our business is that our average member lifespan is 28 years. We get to have a member and their family for a generation, so we get to play this incredible role of bringing generations together in new and innovative ways.

C+RB: How is this role impacting the way Southworth designs its social and amenity mix?

TS: From a programming perspective, we focus on the trends around community and connection. Amenity-wise, we have added some that are definitely in response to market demand. For example, cold plunges or adult-only spaces where adults can relax in an environment without kids, and finally, leaning into family-friendly activities.

My favorite example of those amenities was designing a wiffle ball field at our Abaco Club (Abaco, Bahamas) called Wake Field.

We are listening to members, adding the cold plunges, solving for certain opportunities, and being innovative.

C+RB: Switching gears, how are developer-owned clubs different from member-owned clubs?

TS: Developer-owned clubs, develop the land and recoup investments through real-estate, initiation fees, and then we hold onto the club for the long-term.

I think the blessing and the curse with member-owned clubs is that they're member-run, so it requires a lot of people to step into leadership roles and turn their happy place into more of a business. Some of the pitfalls of that are that there seem to be a lot more rules and regulations—different leadership comes in every couple of years, and everyone has a different agenda.

Another difference is the form of member assessments. At most member-owned clubs, members get assessed if they want to make an improvement. There's no assessment at developer-owned clubs. You just have someone looking out for the members and harnessing their feedback to make a decision.

C+RB: Where would you say member-owned clubs get stuck?

TS: There are so many successful member-owned clubs, so I don't want to be critical of them. But these clubs are ruled by a committee, so it becomes political. You have to generate support across the membership and vote on a lot of issues, and then it hits people right in their wallets. To get something like an assessment for a renovation, sometimes it can be seamless, but we've seen a lot of member-owned clubs get sideways because there are different factions that are trying to take control and do something different.

C+RB: You talked about highly amenitized programming. Can you break that down?

TS: We love to try fun, creative things in all our spaces. My favorite example of this is we have a stadium tennis court at Willowbend (Mashpee, Mass.), and over the last couple of years, we've used it for concert series.

Randy Houser, the country singer, did a concert for us last year and it brought around 600 people out. We had food trucks, bars and a great concert with a great afterparty. It was a fantastic concert in a space that gets used for tennis.

During COVID, we had a game of human foosball where everyone was socially distanced, and we attached people's hands with duct tape to a string and made them play a game of soccer. One of our core values is to dare to be different and we are always trying to push that boundary.

C+RB: Southworth spans across various regions. How does the local culture of each location shape programming, food, and amenities?

TS: Authenticity is another one of our core values. We want to bring Southworth's service and culture to all our locations, while keeping the experience authentic to each location's geography.

In Creighton Farms in Northern Virginia, the amenities and the clubhouse aesthetics are modeled after an old Middleburg barn. The pub we opened there leans into the local woods from the property that we milled and used for the actual bar.

Whether it's the menus or the aesthetics of the building itself, we want them to feel and look authentic to the local surroundings.

C+RB: How do Southworth clubs challenge the legacy model?

TS: Today, more than anything, it means focus on member happiness, and that's twofold. First, we need to deliver an easy environment for all of our folks to seamlessly relax. This is where people come to spend their precious time off. We need to make sure their experience is relaxed and comfortable. We can't do that with barriers and rules and bad service.

Secondly, we always have to think about how we can make members happier. To a certain extent, it's a series of small choices that make us different. It's adventurous programming, it's the focus on family, it's not being afraid to upset the apple cart and try new things.

I think the status quo in the club space can be a little sleepy and a little comfortable, and that's what we're trying to break more than anything.