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The CEO Magazine
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Join the CLUB

As other entertainment options threaten the licensed club industry, Blacktown Workers Club Group is diversifying and remaining relevant to the community.

Images courtesy of Blacktown Workers Club Group

Blacktown Workers Club Group has grown from what was originally an old tin shed established in 1955 to a five-floor mega club that boasts four restaurants, function rooms, sport and health facilities, a showroom, and a number of lounges and bars. In 2015, it encompasses three sites: Blacktown Workers, Workers Sports, and Workers Hubertus Country Club. The 'entertainment and leisure capital of Western Sydney', according to the club's website, is run by a team of professional managers, owned by the community, and aims to provide a number of services for locals.

Morgan Stewart is the club's group operations manager and has extensive experience in the industry, although it wasn't where he started his career. "I broadly describe myself as a 46-year-old Gen Y," Morgan remarks. "I have had a career of roles that last around the three-year mark, so I tend to move from field to field."

"I started off originally in banking, of all places. That was in New Zealand. I came to Australia in

1990 on the first leg of a world tour that actually started and ended in Sydney. I ended up in the banking scene here and was headhunted into hospitality in the early 1990s, and that was how I finished up in the hospitality space. I went back to New Zealand in 1999 and worked for Christchurch Casino in the VIP space, and then came back to Sydney and found work at The Star. I was a VIP services coordinator dealing with high-value locals, domestic players, international players, royalty, superstars, and the like."

After moving into licensed clubs, Morgan started working in HR, which was where his focus on people shone. "I ended up as an operational person sitting in the HR space only. I used that time to make HR about people, behaviours, and customer service culture as opposed to policy and process. I was probably one of the first two club managers in the industry to make it publicly all about people strategy. That began my emotional intelligence journey and helping people understand what service culture and interfacing with people was really all about."

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- Morgan Stewart

Morgan took on the role at Blacktown Workers in 2013, which he describes as a 'sleeping giant' in the club industry. The club is well known for its financial stability, stable board leadership, pioneering sustainability commitments as a Silver Partner in the Sustainability Advantage Program, and through the EP&T Global utilities monitoring partnership, which has saved the club in excess of \$1.8 million in the past four years. The role was perfect for him as not only was it less than 10 kilometres from his home, but it allowed him to run the clubs as he saw appropriate. "We are a three-club group," Morgan explains. "We've got our main site here in Blacktown; we have our Workers Sports Club on Reservoir Road sitting on 54 acres of club, sporting facilities, and industrial land; and then we have the Hubertus Country Club directly adjacent to the new Badgerys Creek International Airport."

"We have a board of directors who are quite progressive and a general manager who has great latitude and foresight to be able to see what's going on around us in the club >



industry. So I am very empowered to make change and increase our business in terms of sustainability for the future—not just financial but also products on offer. We generate more than \$45 million in revenue each year, and our EBITDARD in the 2014 FY increased to 26.9 per cent, so this makes us strong financial contributors back into our community not only in terms of wages making their way into the Blacktown economy but in community support and contributions.”

Morgan also enjoys being a part of a community club, which Blacktown Workers is. The club’s entire purpose is to give back to the community in terms of services at the club itself, but also by giving out grants to local organisations.

“Essentially, we are a community club with a business heart,” Morgan says. “For example, in the club grants space, we give back to the community well over \$1.3 million a year. We are a significant contributor to the community in terms of our presence as a club and as a longstanding business in the area.

“We support over 100 local charities and community groups. We are White Ribbon advocates here at the Workers group with the GM and I both being White Ribbon Ambassadors. Our ability to influence the discussion about this important cause in our industry is particularly important to us. We are going to be the first club in Australia to be a White Ribbon-accredited workplace. That gives you an idea of what we do in the community, other than the 35 rugby league teams and 40 soccer teams that we support, just to speak a little of our sporting footprint.”

The club is also giving back a lot more this year in particular as part

of its sixtieth anniversary celebrations. “The club’s birthday is in November, and from January to November we are giving away a car each month. So it’s about a quarter of a million dollars worth of cars, Hyundai vehicles all the way from i20s through to a Santa Fe. We are looking at lots of ways of rewarding the many people who come into our club, thank them for their journey with us, and making sure that they understand that without them we don’t have a club. So it’s an exciting time for us.”

In time for the anniversary, Morgan says, they are also renovating the Sports Club, extending the facilities and giving it a facelift. “It’s about \$12 million worth of renovations altogether. That’s including a complete overhaul internally of the club, from the lounge area, to the bars, to gaming, to the food area; in the future, plans for function spaces and extended lounge areas for the members to come and enjoy

the facilities of the club. We are about halfway through the Sports Club renovation.”

Despite these great innovations, there are challenges in the club industry. Morgan says clubs these days are fighting for their members’ discretionary spend against an increasing number of alternatives. “The challenges are multifaceted. We see the level of discretionary spend available and the fight for that discretionary spend as our major challenge. Getting people away from their mobile devices, out of their lounge rooms, and into our venues is challenging.

“The entertainment space is an emerging challenge for us as well because we used to own that artist spectrum, from local artists and battle of the bands all the way through to featured artists. And one of the biggest competitors for us now is actually the cruise liners. Headline artists that people in the club space normally go to see are

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- Morgan Stewart

on cruise ships now and being paid very well.”

The future of Blacktown Workers will be about combating these challenges and finding new sources of income for the clubs. “We know that our challenge now is about sustainability,” Morgan says. “We see the big clubs getting bigger and the smaller clubs dropping off and amalgamating. For us, the challenge is to make sure that we have an offer that is on par with what the community requires and what people are asking us for.

Security and making the club a safe environment for members is a top priority. “Part of our obligation to our members is to ensure that we have a high level of front-line management of risk mitigation and assurance which is actioned and delivered in partnership with Allied Risk Solutions. We also have a long-standing relationship with our security providers Gold Crest

Security, whose staff partner with us to deliver quality customer service first and foremost, so that our members and visitors have a consistent experience when they’re with us.

“We are always looking at ways to diversify away from a reliance on gaming revenue, and in our space that is childcare or independent living units or commercial real estate.” Diversification is essential, Morgan says, because the club needs to remain sustainable to ensure it can continue to provide the services the community relies on.

This is, in the end, the purpose of Blacktown Workers Club. “We are obliged to make sure that we are sustainable as a community asset because, after all the conversations we have in the world, this club is still owned by the membership. Our sole aim is to be sustainable and then reinvest our money back into the facilities of the club so that the members are happy.”

“BWC is on a journey for strategic, operational compliance and assurance change. Improving standards for organisational performance and investing in staff has allowed the club to redefine best practice principles. Constantly measuring outcomes ensures the club remains risk averse and financial while expanding their corporate footprint.” - Sam Ekinci, CEO, Allied Risk Solutions



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