

# Rumors

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Ted, sitting in the Club dining room, just ordered breakfast on a sunny Saturday morning when he sees his friend stroll in. "Mornin' Bill, what time are you on the tee?"

"Mornin' Ted - 9:02, I'm gonna hit the locker room and change."

"Well, make it fast 'cause they're closin' the locker rooms for remodeling. Gonna cost us another \$50 a month."

"Really, remodeling? Hi, Steve."

"Boys... what's this about another \$50 dues increase?"

That afternoon, General Manager Chris is in his office when Bob knocks on the door frame. Bob is a newer member with three young children and a lovely wife, Marie. Bob and Marie own a local business that has been doing well, enough so that they decided to take the plunge and join this well-respected club. "Chris, I'll need to sell my membership. Marie and I just can't see coming up with a \$50,000 assessment for a club remodel..."

Rumors are a traditional club activity, perhaps one of the most beloved and vibrant. This article pertains to concepts on how or why rumors get started and ideas on how to limit the impact of those rumors.

The facts, as Chris would explain to Bob, are that the club has retained a craftsman to refinish the near-vintage wooden lockers in the locker rooms for \$50,000, which is part of the operational budget and will not affect the current dues line.

Some rumors are fun; others not so much, but are exciting and thrilling and people enjoy believing them. Somebody, the propagator, starts the rumor for any number of reasons. In the case above it may have simply been a *dread rumor* started by Ted who has limited information on the plan, but fears that his monthly cost will be increasing. Ted takes his limited information and filters it through his own preconception - that the dues are already high enough.

Ted tells his friend Bill about the impending doom. Bill appears not to be in fear of rising dues, but because Ted is a friend, Bill is likely to believe what Ted tells him. Bill doesn't necessarily continue the rumor, but as Steve approaches and hears a piece of the conversation, the rumor expands and gains credibility. By the time poor old Bob gets the story, the rumor has expanded tremendously and, by Bob's sincere reaction to Chris, believably.

In the span of about 30 seconds, a rumor can take hold and then become something significant. There are many reasons that clubs are easy prey for starting rumors: members tend to believe their friends, and clubs are full of friends; there's a general lack of real information on the part of those hearing the rumor - the vast majority of members just like to enjoy the club and avoid the details of what's going on; members will tend to believe a rumor that affects their self interest and most everything about your club is based on self interest.

The club environment is thus ripe for rumors to spread and morph into something far removed from the original fact: during discussions, like-minded people tend to conjure up a more extreme version of what they thought prior to talking about it. People tend to agree with their group in order to maintain good standing, and the more a story is told the more truthful it appears.

So, the rumor has traction, what can be done? According to Cass Sunstein, Harvard Law Professor and author of *On Rumors*, steps should be taken to expose people to balanced information and to replace falsehoods with truth. The person balancing the information must be credible. In the face of correct data, people predisposed to believe false data will become further entrenched in their belief when the person doing the correcting is not someone in whom they have confidence.

In our case, Chris has an ally in Bob. Bob wants to be a member, he just has a limit to what he's willing to pay. Bob will have credibility within the group.

When a rumor is uncovered, it's important to find the source or as close to the source as possible. Once the source is located, leaders are able to determine the group(s) and who within that group would be the most likely candidate to understand the truth of the situation and do the correcting. If all else fails, try to respond to the rumor with a rebuttal as ridiculous as the rumor. Years ago there was a rumor that McDonald's used earth worm meat in their burgers. Having no success in squelching the rumor, then CEO Ray Croc made the statement "We can't afford to use earth worms, they're double the cost of beef. If someone's selling you an earthworm burger check to make sure they're not using some beef." This was a successful tactic and the rumor faded.

Preemptively, it would have been wise for Chris to post specific notice of the upcoming locker room work. The club leadership should honestly and openly explain the facts of any item that could potentially cause dissention or member concern before word gets out. When members have partial information they will quite often fill in the unknown with their own version.

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