

# U.S. Masters Swimming Strategic Plan

## I. Introduction

U.S. Masters Swimming (USMS) has been operating under its current strategic plan since 2007. When that plan was developed, USMS had approximately 42,000 members and an annual budget of \$1,000,000. USMS had just hired its first executive director and had three full-time employees and a few independent contractors. The business of USMS was primarily volunteer-driven. The 2007 plan resulted in a re-alignment of USMS committees, a re-branding initiative, an LMSC Development Task Force, minimum standards for LMSCs, and a Club Development Task Force that led to the development of a club support structure now managed by the National Office.

Today, USMS has eight full-time employees and an executive director who has been in place for 3 years. The corporation has established a permanent headquarters in Sarasota, Florida. Membership has grown to 58,000. Sponsorship and advertising revenue have doubled to more than \$350,000. The annual budget is approximately \$2,200,000 and USMS has \$2,000,000 in investments and reserve. Clearly, many aspects of USMS have changed in the past four years.

To position USMS for success in the future, the Board of Directors undertook an update of the strategic plan by appointing a task force consisting of a subset of the Board and other contributors. That task force used several methods to evaluate USMS's present and future needs. They assessed USMS's status against the 2007 plan and examined the results of a membership survey that had previously been commissioned by USMS. They surveyed USMS committee leaders and LMSC Chairs, asking both types of leaders to involve their committees and boards, respectively, to learn what those groups consider to be USMS's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (a "SWOT" analysis). They met with the Board of Directors and led the Board through planning exercises.

This process has resulted in the key strategies set forth in this document. The strategies are long term (3-5 years) and high level. They are not action plans, performance targets or policies. The strategies answer the question: "how do we get from where we are to where we want to be?" Because that question requires awareness of where we are now and where we want to be, this document also sets forth the mission of USMS, a vision statement, and values that describe what we believe as an organization and what guides our decision-making.

## **II. Mission**

To promote health, wellness, fitness and competition for adults through swimming

## **III. Vision Statement**

USMS will be the premier resource for adult aquatic fitness in the United States and will make fitness through swimming available for as many adults as possible

## **IV. Values**

- We value HEALTH AND FITNESS, constantly challenging ourselves to achieve, in competition and in accomplishing our own goals.
- We value RESPECT for our teammates, competitors, coaches, employees, and volunteers.
- We value FUN, enjoying camaraderie with our fellow swimmers and embracing swimming as a joyful and satisfying avocation.
- We value LEARNING through coaching, programs, and communication.
- We value EXCELLENCE in safety, education, innovation, performance, leadership, and the provision of services and programs.

## **V. Strategies**

- Enhance the volunteer experience and improve volunteer performance through role clarity, training, recognition, and recruitment.
- Create and enhance membership value through expanded and improved USMS products, services and delivery infrastructure.
- Increase awareness of and strengthen the U.S. Masters Swimming brand and image in targeted markets.
- Engage and activate partnerships with organizations that align with the USMS mission, vision and values, for the purpose of increasing benefits to our members, enhancing and expanding the USMS brand, building USMS membership and improving access to swimming facilities.

## **VI. Explanation of Strategies and Measures for Success**

**Enhance the volunteer experience and improve volunteer performance through role clarity, training, recognition, and recruitment.**

This strategy is intended to allow USMS to leverage its volunteer strength while addressing weaknesses. Results from the SWOT analysis among USMS leaders showed that while volunteers are an oft-cited strength of USMS, lack of volunteers, insufficient volunteer recognition, and inadequate development of new volunteers are cited as weaknesses. During the strategic planning process, several key elements for effective volunteerism were identified: the need to define meaningful work for volunteers, to set volunteer expectations that can lead to satisfying and successful contributions, to structure the provision of services to USMS members in a manner that allows for optimal contributions from volunteers and staff, and to better train and recognize volunteers.

The strategic purpose is two-fold: to make the experience better for volunteers while also improving performance. One area of focus in the strategy is role clarity, the goal of which is to better define volunteer roles at the local and national level and in relationship to professional staff. This clarity not only alleviates frustrations that arise from differing expectations, it also makes it easier to serve when volunteers know what is expected in their role. Training serves a similar purpose to role clarity in helping the volunteer – or potential volunteer – know what is required in a given position.

The strategy is also intended to encourage effective volunteer involvement by providing recognition of such service, including recognition in one's home area, not just at an annual convention that is attended by a small proportion of USMS participants. The final key part of the strategy is recruitment of volunteers so that the pool of those who commit their time to USMS is diverse and ever-developing.

As a whole, the strategy is intended to develop and encourage volunteers who know what is expected of them, have the training to perform effectively, have structure within which to operate that is designed for optimal delivery of USMS services, and contribute among a diverse group of talented volunteers who will build USMS into the future.

Measures for success:

- Written materials for role definition and training program
- Funding allocated to support training
- Training rolled out to volunteers and LMSCs
- Key LMSC positions identified and filled by different volunteers in each LMSC
- Volunteer satisfaction survey
- Increased programs for recognition of volunteers

**Create and enhance membership value through expanded and improved USMS products, services and delivery infrastructure.**

This strategy focuses on improving existing products and services, creating and introducing new products and services, and improving and expanding how those products and services are delivered to enhance membership value.

USMS has the premier adult swimming training and competition product line. This is its core product around which it is building a full complement of health and fitness through swimming products. This strategy calls for an organizational commitment to allocate resources to developing new and better products for the target markets that USMS has identified previously as strategically important to the organization (see 2007 marketing survey): fitness and health conscious swimmers, triathletes, high school and college students not competing on varsity swim teams, corporate wellness programs, and strategic partnerships. USMS needs distinct product offerings that complement members' needs in each targeted market. This creates membership value and in turn will drive both growth and membership retention.

In the SWOT survey that the Strategic Task Force administered, many respondents cited USMS's national organizational structure and programs and services as strengths. However, they also cited LMSC inconsistency and inadequate services and support for coaches as weaknesses. To the extent that aspects of the USMS product are to be delivered at the local level by LMSCs, clubs and coaches, that product will not meet members' needs if it is delivered insufficiently or inconsistently.

This strategy incorporates the coach, club and LMSC development programs that are ultimately designed to improve quantity, quality and consistency of USMS products and services. It also recognizes that USMS needs distinct product offerings that complement members' needs in the target markets it has identified as strategically important to the organization.

Improving value to our members will position USMS as the premier source for adult fitness and health through swimming and ensure strong and steady membership growth.

**Measures for success:**

- Improved membership retention rate
- Increased rate of membership growth
- Accelerated growth of non-competitive members
- Increased utilization of USMS services by members
- Increased utilization of non-competitive products
- Number of new products and services delivered
- Accelerated growth of USMS coach certifications
- Accelerated growth of Clubs and Chapters

## **Increase awareness of and strengthen the U.S. Masters Swimming brand and image in targeted markets.**

To bring the benefits of swimming to as many adults as possible, USMS needs to disseminate its message and ensure that the message being sent is the intended one. The USMS message should also be focused on specific targeted markets with the highest return for recruiting new members or for benefiting existing members.

This brand and marketing strategy evolved from the SWOT analysis and Board input sessions. Through those processes, perceived “threats” to USMS from competing organizations and lack of access to pools were linked to the often incorrect perception of the term "Masters", failure to clearly differentiate the USMS product, and the apparent ease of entry for other organizations into the adult swimming market. The USMS brand is often associated with elite level competition by non-members. This brand image discourages novice, fitness and triathlete swimmers from trial and adoption and impedes our growth. USMS needs to focus on a stronger message of inclusiveness that avoids potential members believing they are not good enough to be a Masters swimmer. The brand must focus on the message that USMS is for EVERYONE, not just former competitive swimmers. The message must also emphasize that the goal of USMS is to help members improve quality of life through fun, health, fitness and personal growth.

By delivering a clear message about our mission, values, and product, we will be better able to communicate to current and potential members the value and benefits of membership. With multiple coaches and more than 1,000 local clubs and workout groups offering USMS programs and thereby delivering the Masters swimming message, it can be difficult to project a clear brand image and provide a consistent and expected product for the swimming consumer. The USMS message needs to be clarified, encouraged and integrated throughout the organization, including the local level, at every point of public contact (personal communication, electronic communications, printed material and publications, social media, etc.). It is incumbent upon USMS to proactively provide promotional tools and consistent messaging. The organization must then deliver on that brand promise by proper execution of the other organizational strategies.

Based on a 2007 market survey, USMS is under-represented in certain market segments, including former high school and college swimmers not competing, triathletes, and fitness/lap swimmers. Expanding and improving the USMS message in these markets will have the most payback for membership recruitment and growth.

Finally many pool managers/owners and communities need to be educated on the benefits and value Masters swimming programs can bring to their facilities. Expanding the base of facilities offering USMS programs is a long term benefit to our members and the organization's growth.

### Measures for success:

- Accelerated growth in new (first time) members
- Accelerated growth in new (first time) facilities offering Masters programs
- Accelerated growth in non-competitive members
- Accelerated use of USMS non-competitive products, like the USMS Fitness Logs (FLOGS)
- Improved survey results of Masters image from non-competitive members

**Engage and activate partnerships with organizations that align with the USMS mission, vision and values, for the purpose of increasing benefits to our members, enhancing and expanding the USMS brand, building USMS membership and improving access to swimming facilities.**

The topic listed most as an opportunity for USMS in the leadership SWOT was partnerships with other organizations. The partnership opportunities suggested were with organizations that have similar interests to USMS or that could be leveraged to help USMS service its members, grow, or achieve other goals. Interestingly, some of these same organizations were also identified as threats to USMS in the SWOT survey.

Another frequently-cited threat to USMS is inadequate access to swimming facilities. The strategic planning process determined that it would be beneficial to team with other organizations to address and alleviate the pool access issue.

This strategy is based on the belief that partnerships can occur on both the national and local level, depending upon the types of partnerships. The following are the types of partnerships that are encompassed by this strategy:

- Aquatic Partnerships: we have similar or shared business goals such as interest in facility programming, education, or event enhancements.
- Commercial Partnerships: collaborating with for-profit businesses, USMS can promote fitness and health through swimming.
- Strategic Partnerships: USMS may provide value and gain value in advancing our respective missions and business models.
- Sponsor Partnerships: companies recognize value in advertising and/or becoming a sponsor of USMS. Additionally, sponsor partners may provide value in kind product and services that can be used to enhance the member, club and event experience.
- Regional/Local/Community Partnerships: Zones, LMSCs and clubs build relationships locally with, for example, universities/colleges, municipalities, and YMCAs to help USMS achieve its mission and vision.
- Media Partnerships: provide publicity opportunities for USMS to share stories and extend the USMS brand.
- International Partnerships: build political relationships for fostering and exchanging goodwill.

Measures of success:

- Increase the number of facilities offering a USMS program
- Increase the number and percentage of Masters coaches certified
- Document and promote media stories featuring USMS
- Secure international committee appointments when available
- Establish formal joint membership arrangements with other sports organizations
- Establish USMS programs with both non-profit organizations and for-profit businesses