



Engagement Tour Report

by Matt Allen, Executive Director, CurlON

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The Engagement Tour Report offers a comprehensive overview of Matt Allen's, Executive Director of CurlON, experiences engaging with member clubs, competitors, and stakeholders. It delves into the successes, challenges, and opportunities identified during the engagement sessions conducted from December through March.

curl-on.ca

Opening Remarks

At the time of this report, I will have been in the Executive Director position for seven and a half months. As I stressed early in my tenure here at CurlION, I will always lead this organization from 'the ground up.' In saying this, I mean my commitment is, and will continue to be, to deliver the services, programs, competitions, and support that are meaningful for our stakeholders. At the core of successful curling is a strong base of participation and vibrant clubs across the province. It is my responsibility to lead a team and operation focused on understanding the realities of those who experience our sport and business every day. We must align our efforts, resources, and time to the realities of what you need from us.

The engagement tour was designed to do just that - engage and listen to our member clubs, competitors, club curlers, and beyond. It was an opportunity to understand the successes, challenges, and opportunities at the community level as well as CurlION's role in the curling ecosystem in the province. From December through March, 60 club sessions and 41 one-on-one sessions were conducted. This equated to more than 200 hours of engagement and more than 300 participants engaged in this initiative. This tour was an opportunity to re-engage with our community. It provides myself and our team with a clear understanding into what the pulse of curling in CurlION jurisdiction is and where we can head moving forward.

The purpose of this report is not to be a solutions based document. That work has already begun and will continue to be a focus with our annual operational plan. This report is designed to be transparent to what I heard, to be forthcoming with the successes, issues, and challenges; and where appropriate, add additional commentary or possible actions. We will continue to update on progress in all areas and you will begin to see these themes captured both directly and indirectly through our operations and future efforts as an organization.

I am beyond appreciative for those who engaged in these sessions and hope this report provides you with the beginning of the increased transparency many of you are looking for.



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Matt Allen', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Matt Allen
Executive Director

Structure of Report

During each session, copious notes were taken to capture key points of emphasis. To provide full transparency of what is captured within this report, each individual topic (from all sessions) were then transcribed onto Post-It Notes and placed onto a whiteboard. The Post-It Notes were then grouped into common themes. Any topics that had 10 or more Post-Its Notes were deemed to be a consistent theme within this report.

It should be noted that the list of topics within this report are not an exhaustive list but are the consistent and major areas of focus from our stakeholders. There were nuanced or individual topics discussed throughout many conversations. This is not to say those are not important or will not be acted upon on an individual basis. For the simplicity of this report, I focused on the core issues, successes, and opportunities that were prevalent throughout the session. I want to ensure those clubs or individuals who may not see some of your feedback captured in this report, your feedback is not lost. I and the team will continue to refer back to these notes and address as many of the topics as possible.

Club Sessions

Website:

Although the remainder of these findings will be in no particular order, the CurlION website was far and above the most significant pain-point for our clubs and stakeholders. The website has proven to be difficult to navigate, lacks any search functions, and impacts the ability for individuals to engage with CurlION programs, services, and resources. A website for the magnitude we require is a major investment. We have released an RFP for a new website (with association management software incorporated) and will work towards a plan to introduce a new website.

Communication:

Communication from CurlION requires a full review. Many people struggle with how CurlION communicates with its member clubs, competitors, and stakeholders at large. We need to be more proactive in our communication and conscious of when/what/where and how we communicate. A challenge of this communication relates to our lack of CurlION data and demographics (to be discussed later) and will be a priority to address.

Although we have made positive strides with the development of the BackLine newsletter, 'who' is on this list and who we are communicating with is largely unknown. Many individuals were unaware of how to get on this list as well.

There were positive comments on a recent shift in our communication channels. Compliments have been made to the increase in communication, more engaging social media, and an improvement in the timing of communication. Our new Communications and Brand Coordinator has elevated our standards and will continue to be conscious of this feedback and sentiment from our community.

Since these engagement sessions ended, we have introduced a new 'Club Development Newsletter.' This newsletter is focused on content specific for club boards, staff, volunteers, and other interested parties. The contact list began with our internal search from club websites but any interested individuals can be added at any time. This newsletter does NOT replace the BackLine newsletter.

Transparency:

CurlION has an opportunity to improve its transparency and accountability within the community. This required shift begins and ends with me, as the Executive Director and leader of CurlION. During the COVID-19 pandemic, I decided to go back to school to complete my Masters in Executive Leadership. Throughout this program, we were required to dig into our core values as a leader. One of my top core values was highlighted as accountability and transparency. Why I tell you this story is because my commitment to you is to always lead with transparency at all levels. I can also say with confidence that the board of directors and staff are committed to this same value and focused on gaining your trust back in CurlION and how we can support you. A specific example of transparency was focused on how clubs can host a CurlION provincial championship or qualifier. Some clubs are interested in this but are unaware of a bidding process, requirements, or how to initiate this interest.

Stronger Sense of Belonging:

There is power in knowledge and power in numbers. With approximately 180 clubs in CurlION, we can better capitalize on sharing knowledge and information amongst our membership. Clubs shared a desire for a better feeling of collaboration and belonging amongst each other. This can be done through a combination of in person events and conferences, virtual meetings, online forums and beyond. Clubs have a desire for learning from other clubs, sharing challenges and successes, and best practices. CurlION should be the platform for providing this sense of belonging and sharing of information within our membership in more effective ways.

Demographics:

Demographics and understanding 'who' our curlers and clubs are across the province was discussed at various levels. Several clubs were requesting information from CurlION about both clubs and curlers in the province. Questions such as how many 4, 5, 6 sheet clubs there are? How many youth curlers? How many stick curlers? The list can go on. CurlION does not have this information in a reliable format and there was a consensus to the importance for all clubs to support in a form of data collection.

Several clubs also discussed the importance for CurlION to take a stronger stance on lobbying provincial and municipal governments. While there is an opportunity for CurlION to play a role in this area, before we do so, we must collectively commit to sharing industry demographics, club demographics, and more for CurlION and curling in Ontario to make any positive movements in lobbying governments at any level.

Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI):

EDI is a theme that varies across the clubs. The majority of clubs see the importance of being a more equitable, diverse, and inclusive place to play, compete, and work in. The spectrum of readiness and understanding of EDI across clubs is extremely vast. Some clubs have or are taking positive strides in this area. Others are struggling or fear pushback on the topic. By and large, it is clear that clubs are looking for CurlION to be the leader in this area - provide the expertise, framework, and areas of focus for the sport and clubs in Ontario. A revised EDI strategy has been adopted by our board of directors and will be released in the coming weeks. This revised strategy builds on the first version but makes the strategy more clear, tangible, CurlION specific, and measurable to our success.

Aging Facilities & Equipment:

Facility and equipment management is the number one risk facing many clubs in Ontario. With so many clubs built in the 1960s and 70s, club leaders are left with an infrastructure in which capital funds and reserves were not a consideration for 50+ years. Now, they are tasked with equipment and or facilities that are aging and requiring major upgrades or capital purchases. CurlION will need to develop programs, auditing processes, and recommendations for clubs to implement to support these challenges. Where possible, CurlION will focus efforts on finding funding opportunities, grants, and partnerships with relevant providers as an additional layer of support for clubs.

Attracting Youth and New Curlers:

Bringing in new curlers (of all ages) and youth curlers are a priority for all. Although we do not know the trends of our aging population of curlers (note above), many clubs highlighted the need to address an aging membership. From youth curlers to young professionals (25-45 years old) to new Canadians or diverse populations, these are all major gaps for many clubs.

Understanding a pathway from floor curling to street curling to learn to curl to full membership is an area clubs need support with. Rather than each initiative being in isolation of each other, a pathway to developing an 'avid curler' from first touch point to full membership is important for growing the game.

Business Models and Membership:

Largely connected to attracting new curlers, finding new business and membership models is an important topic. Understanding consumer trends inside and outside of curling will help aid clubs understand the need for innovation in this space. Clubs are struggling with attracting the 25-45 year old young professional. Exposing club leadership to experts in this field and case studies of success are important services clubs are looking for from CurlION.

ACTION: we hosted an interactive [virtual] town hall specific to business models and membership with 79 registered participants.

Off-Season Revenue:

There are some clubs who shut their doors after the ice is removed and are content with no off-season events. Conversely, there are other clubs who are looking at new ways to attract business in the off-season through various means. Sharing best practices and exposing clubs to opportunities in this space would be of value.

Change Management:

“The riskiest thing we can do is just maintain the status quo.” Change is required amongst many clubs in this province. However, boards and staff struggle with implementing change while keeping their core membership satisfied, who are often the most vocal opposition to innovation. Clubs would like to see CurlION support them with change management strategies, practical models, and expertise who can help manage this demographic of their membership who resist change. Coming from my previous role as the Chief Innovation Officer for the PGA, I am excited to personally support our sport in this area.

Grant Writing:

Club boards are struggling with their grant writing efforts. This was discussed across several sessions. It should however be noted that some clubs have seen great success in their grant applications. There is an opportunity for CurlION to provide a deeper level of service and support in this area. We can expand the communication of grants available (beyond the Trillium grants) and provide as much individualized support for clubs as possible. We can better highlight those clubs and share their best practices from their previous applications.

Insurance Support:

There is a struggle with clubs and with their insurance policies. Many clubs are struggling with a lack of internal expertise around insurance and what they should be looking for and what is necessary for coverage. Several of these clubs are also struggling with major budgetary increases in the last 6-12 months. Two requests coming from this topic have stemmed around education on insurance programs (what to look for, what to ask for, what is necessary for their policy) and secondarily to find a partnership with a provider who understands the curling club structure and offers competitive pricing and policies for member clubs.

ACTION: We have focused significant efforts in this space and will be launching a new program for clubs early this spring.

Value Proposition:

From a big picture perspective, CurlION can improve on developing a clear value proposition to membership. During these sessions, I spoke to a mix of active member clubs and non-member clubs. Although there are plenty of services and value to membership, we can do a better job at articulating this in a more effective way to support boards in communicating this value with their membership and also support clubs in understanding what services are available to them. I was surprised with the amount of questions or requests during these sessions that CurlION already offers to clubs. We own a level of this responsibility as the services and benefits to membership are not articulated in a clear way for our stakeholders.

Resources, Policies, and Best Practices:

There is a strong desire from clubs for CurlION to develop policies, standard operating procedures, hiring guidelines (including compensation standards), templates (similar to that of the ONCA bylaw template), data and research collection, creating sponsorship models, and best practices/education programming are important. Many clubs would like CurlION to be the body that supplies them with leading edge information and is the 'go to' when they are looking for solutions, ideas, innovation, and beyond.

ACTION: we have hosted four webinars this winter focused on areas of youth participation, business models, safe sport, and adult learn to curl. All are recorded and available on our website.

Buying Packages and Partnerships:

CurlION can develop more partnerships that benefit not only CurlION as an organization, but also its member clubs through implementing buying packages and leveraging the potential for 180+ clubs to opt-in to programs that would minimize their expenses. Partnerships in the spaces of (but not limited to) POS, insurance, food and beverage, equipment, cleaning supplies, and more are some of the opportunities shared.

Intermediate Level Competition:

Clubs feel CurlION puts an over-emphasis on high performance competition. They feel disengaged from our competitive offerings since the transition of events like Kolts/Trophies/Intermediates to the Trillium Championship. There is a clear desire for some form of mid-level competition to return and re-engage this part of our membership.

ACTION: We have since released a survey through social media as well as a templated email and graphics clubs can use to send to their membership. We will be reviewing the results of this survey and assembling an advisory group to support us in this review.

Streamlining of Organizations in Ontario:

There remains confusion on who does what for curling in Ontario. It was noted throughout the sessions of the positive strides forward with the Curling in Ontario strategic plan and the increased collaboration amongst the three organizations. Some stakeholders are still confused about where to find content, who is responsible for what in the sport, and who to contact for their questions. It will be important to build upon the increased collaboration over recent years while being mindful of the 'customer journey' and clearly lay out the proper channels and levels of jurisdiction/responsibility in Ontario.

Energized:

It should not be understated the high level of energy that came from these sessions. There is major support for the vision and future of CurlION and where we are headed. Although many of these common themes are focused on future opportunities, there was a significant amount of praise for the work CurlION has done in all areas - including programs like Street Curl, the benefits of clinics program, the support provided during the pandemic, quality of provincial championships, and more. The vast majority appreciate the hard work of staff and board and the support CurlION has

provided. Never during these sessions did I feel it was an onslaught of negativity or frustrations. The feedback provided throughout all sessions and key themes outlined here came from a space of passion and providing their input for the future of the organization.

Individual Session

Individual sessions were open to anyone not already affiliated with a club board and engaged already through a club session. This was an opportunity to speak with competitors within CurlION events, club curlers at large, clinic instructors, coaches, and more.

Intermediate Level Competition

Building off what we heard during club sessions, the return of a mid-level/intermediate competition is a major demand from our stakeholders. People resonate strongly with previous competitions like Intermediate/Kolts/Trophy and question why they were removed. It is clear this group of competitors struggle with the current Trillium Championship. They are looking for a clear, low-commitment (in relative terms), level of competition.

Communication & Website

Communication is at the core of any organization, specifically one who is based upon membership engagement. Navigating the CurlION website is a large issue with individuals who want to engage with us. No search function, scattered content, and lack of flow within the site are all areas of concerns.

Additionally, these individuals would like to see improved communication coming from CurlION. Feedback in this area ranged from timing of communication relative to competitions, more transparent communication via news releases/major announcements, and a more engaging social media presence.

Consistency

Our stakeholders would like to see an increased level of consistency from CurlION. Conversations highlighted a feeling of CurlION being reactionary to programs, services, and events, but not following through long term. There is a feeling from stakeholders that CurlION previously would put a large emphasis on a new program, launch the program, and have no sustainability plan to it. Services and benefits to individuals and clubs also change so often, it is difficult to keep track of what CurlION offers vs what no longer exists.

Youth Curling

I spoke to many individuals who have a passion for youth curling. Expanding on the club sessions, who are looking at ways to attract more youth to the game, there is an opportunity for growth in our youth programming services.

Conclusions

This was a daunting task, there is no question about that. I reflect on these notes and in developing this report with a great amount of energy and optimism. The engagement from clubs and individuals far surpassed my expectations. In my opening months in the role, the level of engagement highlighted to me the utmost passion our clubs and members have for this great game.

I was expecting there to be a laundry list of issues and requests from these sessions. Although the list you see in this report is not exhaustive, I am reinforced by the major concerns being consistent across many of the sessions I had. These topics are not unrealistic or out of the scope of what CurlION can and perhaps should be offering.

I am thankful for the hundreds of individuals who took time during the busy curling season to connect with me. I am appreciative of their candidness, their love of curling, the respect they gave to these conversations, and the opportunity to be part of the future.

On a particularly positive note, I am proud to say we attracted four new clubs into membership with CurlION. This comes from the hard work of staff and board in building this vision and clubs seeing the value in the new direction we have.

And does the future ever look bright. I am confident we are at the onset of a positive shift forward for CurlION and our collective stakeholders. Our staff and board are committed to positive change. To elevate our services. To align our resources to what you need. To be a bigger, better CurlION for our community.

And now the work begins. My hope is this engagement tour was only the beginning to building trust and meaningful relationships with all in our game. We will be working hard behind the scenes. BUT, we need to continue to hear from you. We need to know when we are meeting your expectations. When we are falling short. And how we can continue to develop and grow. So please, keep the lines of communication open. You have our word that we will.



Matt Allen
Executive Director