Daily-fee challenge: Upgrade or perish

In two years is typical of the trend of "upscaling" or "upgrading" a golf course; improving the quality of a golf course and thereby moving it into a higher price bracket for green fees and improving its value.

Whether it's major golf course management companies like AGC mid-size operations like LinksCorp, or even small "mom-and-pop" operations, many owners and operators are looking for ways to move their golf courses up to the next level.

From modest municipal to low-end daily-fee to high-daily fee, and so on. Further, buying a golf course, then upscaling it can still be less expensive than building a new course from scratch.

"The key to all of this is knowing where and how much to spend," said Larry Hirsh, a golf course appraising specialist based in Harrisburg, Pa., and past president of the Society of Golf Appraisers. Hirsh, who specializes in appraising and feasibility studies for golf courses, said a thorough market analysis is the place to start.

"You really need to do a market analysis, a cash-flow analysis, and a bottom line analysis," said Hirsh. "Sometimes these things are a slam dunk. But most of the time you need to get your facts in order.

Hirsh recently put together a list of the seven factors he considers most responsible for adding value to a golf course. They are:

1. Course Conditioning — Are players inclined to return because green are in great shape? Are fairways wide enough or too wide? Has the course's appearance been enhanced with mulched beds, ornamental grasses and flowers? Do amenities such as tee signs, ball washers, benches, hole liners, etc. add to the property's overall image?

2. Pace of Play — A brisk pace increases the enjoyment of most players, allows more people to play and improves the course's income-generating potential. Larger tees quicken the game, while providing adequate areas for all levels of players. Hazards should not penalize novice and average golfers too severely or constantly create bottle-necks. Rangers and yardage markers also help keep the game moving.

3. Location — Does your golf facility have good visibility from the highway? Use directional signs and a clearly marked entrance to make sure people know where you are and how to get there. If you are making improvements, put up a sign to inform the public.

4. Practice Range — Ranges are relatively low-cost, high-revenue facilities. If your golf property doesn't have one, consider building one with good tee areas, targets and floodlights. Are teaching facilities available?

5. Clubhouse — Don't overdo clubhouse services, especially at public facilities. Hot dogs and beer fit the bill at most daily-fee courses. However, an attractive pro shop, stocked with desirable clothing, club lines and logoed merchandise usually is a good investment.

6. Maintenance — Avoid difficult maintenance areas or outdated methods that add to operating costs. Practices to examine include manual vs. automatic irrigation, hand-mowed vs. triple-cut green, rough maintenance and bunker appearance/consistency.

7. Special Events — Depending on your market, hosting tour events, U.S. Golf Association qualifiers and amateur college competitions may have bottom-line benefits.

Roberts of AGC, which operates about 200 golf courses, 135 of them municipals, daily fees and resorts, said the increasing sophistication and expectations of the average golfer over the past 10 years have made
Brit speakers to spice Americans' plate

Well-known British turf experts and a panel of British golf architects will be featured speakers at the annual meeting of the American Society of Golf Course Architects, April 22-29, in Scotland.

R.J. Price, author and lecturer, will discuss "The Landscapes of Scotland's Golf Courses" and James Kild, director of turfgrass management at Glenelg, will review the famed course's "Integrated Ecological Management Plan" at Turnberry Hotel on April 22.

The British Institute of Golf Course Architects will meet with ASGCA counterparts at the Rusacks Hotel in St. Andrews April 26. President Joan Dudok van Heel, Chairman Cameron Sinclair, and Vice Chairman Martin Hawtree will head the British delegation, which also will include two committee chairmen, Simon Gidman and Howard Swan. ASGCA President Don Knott expects a record turnout for this Scottish meeting. "We first visited Scotland in 1980 as a group, and it turned out to be a critical point in the society's development," he said. "The visits to golf's historic courses had such an impact on our membership that we voted to have a meeting in the UK every five years, and since have benefited greatly from trips to Ireland and England."