Cliff Boyd’s excellent Internet adventure

Public golf courses, listen up. If you want to build up your rounds and revenues, Cliff Boyd has something to tell you.

"I now believe in Internet e-mail marketing," declares Boyd, operating partner and director of golf at Virginia National Golf Club, 40 miles west of the Washington beltway. The two-year-old championship layout, right on the banks of the Shenandoah River, has turned an $8,500 investment into an ongoing cash machine.

At first, Boyd wasn’t sure about all this technology talk he was hearing in the spring of 2000. "Everyone in the golf industry seemed to be racing to get some sort of Internet presence," he says. "Having absolutely no idea how to go about getting a Web site built, I started by looking at existing golf course Web sites."

"What I discovered," he says, "was confusion. One company wanted $27,000 to build a site, and another one wanted $14,000. The wide range in quality and development costs left me wondering if it was worth it. I needed something that increased revenue and reduced operating costs."

12-PERCENT JUMP IN REVENUE

Boyd wonders no more. He made contact with Tapper Smith, whose Virginia-based Solator Systems designed a Web site for $8,500. "It took a lot of trial and error to come up with the perfect formula," says Smith. "It was our first golf site. It worked out so well at Virginia National that my company turned it into a product. We call it MarkTeC." Aware that many golf course operators are scared of technology, Smith made the system quite user-friendly. "If Cliff wants to change something on his site, he just does it himself. That’s the beauty of the Internet," Smith says. "We built online tools for him."

Boyd himself couldn’t be more pleased. "These guys [Solator] created a site that generated a 12 percent increase in green fee revenue in the first year and knocked $20,000 off my advertising budget," he says. "I get to send e-mail messages to my members anytime, free of charge, and post special offers on my Web site. I’ve finally figured out how to use my computer, and I’m having fun doing it."

Rounding up preferred players

The basic workings of the system are simple. Boyd collects e-mail addresses of what he calls "preferred players" — his online members. He rounds them up through golf shows, word of mouth, or at his course.

Anyone visiting his Web site — www.virginianational.com — can sign up free. I joined while I was checking it out. There’s nothing to lose. And Boyd dangles tempting incentives to bring more folks on board.

For example, all preferred players are entered in a drawing this September for a set of Titleist 990 golf clubs. Members also receive discounts. "Our rates are normally $44 for a player on a weekday," Boyd says. "For a preferred player, it’s $40, and it scales down if you bring a foursome. Same thing on the weekend. You can go to the tee-time spécial and click on that. We’re now approaching 2,500 preferred players who have given us their e-mail addresses. They tell their friends, and it grows on itself."

Turning down tee times

When Boyd first went live with the program, in April 2000, he had 1,900 members. "We had just opened with no advertising," he says. "I sent out a mass e-mail on a Tuesday, and on Wednesday the phone started ringing off the hook. We were turning down tee times."

Boyd seems particularly gratified about the advertising costs. "To advertise a..."
golf course in the Washington area, you’re probably looking at a minimum of $100,000 to do it right,” he says. “A small ad in The Washington Post sports section costs $800 to $900, and one ad doesn’t do anything for you. The key is to keep your name in front of people. So with the Post, you can spend $4,000 a week in a heartbeat.”

Boyd’s $20,000 advertising savings go to the bottom line, and he keeps his name in front of customers free of charge. “We have thousands of online members, plenty of repeat business and Internet profitability,” he notes. “How many dot-coms can say that?”

MARKETEE PRICE COMING DOWN
Topper Smith, at Solator Systems, has signed up a second course in Virginia, and with development costs behind him, New players
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“We want to provide a place for beginners and juniors to play, because on an 18-hole course, it can be intimidating to learn the game,” said general manager Sally Cadmus.

Through a USGA grant, the course ran a week-long camp last year for 250 disadvantaged youth and allowed participants to have free access to the course for the rest of the year. Not many turned up to play again, though, according to Cadmus, because of transportation problems. To solve this problem, the course is working with local Boys and Girls Clubs to get more kids involved this year.

“Building a junior program is a lot harder than I thought it would be,” she said. “We took baby steps last year and we are looking to take it to the next level this summer.”

Grant money and fundraisers are key to the success of the program. “Otherwise, the 18-hole course basically has to support the learning center. If it was the nine-hole course on its own, it would be difficult to manage,” Cadmus said.

Grant money and municipal subsidies aside, the industry should be doing more to back these new player initiatives. While player development programs continue to blossom all over the country, more involvement and support will be necessary to keep them going after the summer camps and “free access” days end. Contact programs like The First Tee and Kids On Course and get involved. Or better yet, start a program at your “home” course.

Dear editor:
It came as a surprise that my company was no longer managing the Overland Park Golf Club in Overland Park, Kan. The announcement by Kemper that AllGolf has added my club to its portfolio is incorrect. AllGolf has picked up the Family Golf Center in Overland Park, which is a driving range and putt-putt facility.

The management of the Overland Park GC is contracted to Golf Operations Management LLC, of which I am principal.

Steven A. Jablonowski, PGA, GCSCA Affiliate Director of operations, Overland Park GC