

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 on-going 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 Topper 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 MarkeTee."

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 gen-

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.virginiational.com – can sign up free. I joined myself while I was checking it out. There's nothing to lose. And Boyd dangles tempting incentives to bring more folks on board.

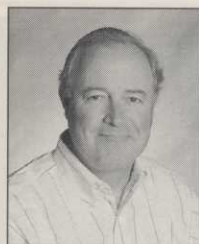
For example, all preferred players are entered in a drawing this September for a set of Titleist 990 golf clubs. Members also receive discounts. "Our rates are normally \$44 for a player on a weekday," Boyd says. "For a preferred player, it's \$40, and it scales down if you bring a foursome. Same thing on the weekend. You can go to the tee-time special 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 dodging advertising costs. "To advertise a

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Jay Finegan, editor



Cliff Boyd's Virginia National course, on banks of the Shenandoah river

erated 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

More support needed for new player development

On a trip back home to Atlanta this spring, I decided to drop in and see how things were going at my "home" course. My high school buddies and I used to walk to the nine-hole Candler Park Golf Course where, for \$3.75 a round, we learned how to play the game of golf.

Candler Park, the last municipal layout owned and operated by the city, has changed since I last played there in the mid-1990s. It is now a bit safer. The putting green and clubhouse are now protected from first tee shanks by a series of 20-foot-high nets. And to the best of my knowledge the locals have stopped calling the place Candler Park Golf *Corpse*, a moniker it earned in the summer of 1991 when two dead bodies were found on the course.

What hasn't changed, however, is the course's role in the community. It is still considered one of the top places in town to learn the game of golf because of its short yardage and affordability. This fact was confirmed as a friend and I waited to tee off on the 288-yard, par-4 first hole. The three groups ahead of us consisted of a foursome of middle-aged women, a father and his two eight-year-old kids, and a bunch of frat brothers, all of whom, by the looks of it were new to the game.

It now costs juniors an exceedingly affordable \$5.50 to play a round and a season-long pass for all the golf you can play can be had for \$275. During the summer, a local pro runs a kids' program. Candler Park, though it is just breaking even, according to golf pro Deborah Zandi, is still doing its part to bring new players to the game.

PROGRAMS FOR KIDS

Through The First Tee, the United States Golf Association's For the Good of the Game grants, the National Golf Course Owners

Association's Kids on Course program and other initiatives, the industry is already working to bring new players to the game.

The First Tee is slated to open 33 facilities this year and the Kids on Course program is currently underway at 66 NGCOA member courses.

While this is a good start, there is a clear need for more sponsorship and support of both the city-run programs like the one at Candler Park, and the other, more organized efforts going on across the country.

The Arnold Palmer-managed Spencer T. Olin Community Golf Course in Alton, Ill., is a perfect example. The facility has a nine-hole learning course attached to its 18-hole daily-fee layout that is aimed squarely at new player instruction. It costs juniors just \$5 to play the course and they can buy a summer long pass to the course and the two other city-run municipal courses for just \$79.



250 kids turned out for a week-long golf camp at the Spencer T. Olin Learning Center last year.

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Editorial Office

Golf Course News
106 Lafayette St., P.O. Box 997
Yarmouth, ME 04096
207-846-0600; Fax: 207-846-0657

jfinegan@golfcoursenews.com
aoverbeck@golfcoursenews.com

ADVERTISING OFFICES

Eastern U.S. & International Sales:

David Premo
106 Lafayette St., P.O. Box 997
Yarmouth, ME 04096
207-846-0600; Fax: 207-846-0657
dpremo@golfcoursenews.com

Western U.S. Sales:

Charles E. von Brecht
10 Forest Falls, P.O. Box 1055
Yarmouth, ME 04096
207-846-3193; Fax: 207-846-3207
cvonb@golfcoursenews.com

Marketplace Sales:

Jean Andrews
P.O. Box 51
Fryeburg, Maine 04037
Phone/FAX 207-925-1099
frogalley@landmarknet.net

Subscription Information

Golf Course News, P.O. Box 3047
Langhorne, PA 19047
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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."



Cliff Boyd

he's dropped the price of MarkeTee to \$3,500. "In less than a week, we can have a course up and running," he says. "It builds them a gigantic e-mail list for their course. It is very focused marketing."

"Where I've seen it most effective," Smith adds, "is for week-day play. Send out special offers at around 10:30 in the morning. That's when most people are sitting in their office thinking, 'You

know, I'd rather be playing golf.' If you e-mail a special offer, it gives them a reason to go."

In spreading the word about cyber-marketing, Boyd is a man with a mission. "I believe the e-mail method we use on our site is the future of golf course marketing," he says. "For the overall health of the industry, I hope more clubs embrace Internet marketing. Just don't do it near our golf course." ■

MAILBAG

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, GCSAA Affiliate
Director of operations, Overland Park GC

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. ■

GOLF COURSE NEWS

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