



Jack Brennan founded Paladin Golf Marketing, Plant City, Fla., in 1989 to help golf course owners and managers market their courses more effectively. He can be reached at jackbrennan@ij.net.

## Improve your brand

**W**hat's your favorite car? Soft drink? Golf clubs?

Whatever came to mind as you considered these questions is not there by accident. Part of your response depends upon your personal likes and dislikes, the opinions of others similar to you and your experience. Part of your response was put there by marketing folks who invested a lot of time and money to get to know you and your wants, before crafting their products, packaging, pricing and advertising messages to help you make your decision about your favorite brands.

Branding is something the major companies all do, but what about branding for the golf course?

The answer to that question is that some golf courses are brands among golf enthusiasts just like major branded consumer products. Pebble Beach, Cypress Point and Augusta National are brands that golfers and even many non-golfers recognize. Now, while your club might not have attained a national public brand status, nonetheless, it does have a brand. The reason I can say that is something fundamental to a brand – it is often measured as “share of mind.” For example, Coke or Pepsi could be your favorite soft drink, or some other brand, but something pops up on your mind when asked, “What's your favorite soft drink?” No, the answer can't be Budweiser!

Marketers measure this share of mind to see where they stand in comparison to the competition, to measure if they are making progress, and even to determine who out there makes up their best customers.

So, back to your course. When your course's name is mentioned, peoples' responses can either be that they have never heard of it, or they have some opinion about it – expensive, can't get in, excellent course, great third hole, or whatever. Their opinion might be limited to just driving by it everyday, but that means they are aware of it and probably have some kind of opinion, too. They might like the fact that it looks like a park. Or, that they always have to wait for carts to cross. Or, that they wonder what it would be like to play it.

Now, what all this has to do with the superintendent is that you, more than anyone else, are in a position to shape your course's brand among golfers and potential golfers. Marketing is not theoretical. It's intensely related to what you and your crews

do every day. One of the objectives I have in working with superintendents as a consultant is to show them how their work impacts the course's marketing efforts.

Golfers pay the bills, so anything that affects their experience in a positive way contributes to the marketing program and ultimately to the financial success of the course. What I try to stress to superintendents is the golfer's experience, since that ultimately shapes their brand perception.

Following are five areas where the superintendent can improve the perception of his or her course. These ideas work on public or private courses:

1. Landscaping around the clubhouse. The clubhouse is the first thing the golfer sees. It's the curb appeal of the course, but often it is poorly landscaped. Some superintendents don't want to take responsibility for anything beyond the greens, fairways and tees. They don't see landscaping around the clubhouse as their responsibility. But who is more qualified to improve and maintain the landscaping than the superintendent?

2. Attention to details. Anything that golfers will come into contact with needs special attention. Not all golfers will notice a little *poa annua* in the roughs, but they will notice the condition of the golf cart paths, signs, overflowing trash bins and

about the hole or green they're on. Most golfers would love to meet the superintendent in person, and when they do they will tell other golfers about it the rest of the day. Be sure to ask them questions and probe any answers that involve likes or dislikes.

4. The condition of the maintenance buildings. It's a rare golf course that has maintenance buildings that look nicely maintained, yet what a great impression professional-looking buildings make.

5. Communicate maintenance and problems proactively. You know and understand what you are doing on the course and why, but do your golfers? Do they understand your technical terminology? Do they have any concept of why you have to overseed or aerate? Communicating what you are doing can be critical to the experience of golfers. I knew of one superintendent who damaged his greens one year with a pre-emergence application. He put signs up near the practice greens explaining the nature of the problem, what he was doing and that the greens would fully recover. He updated the signs and used photos to show progress. Golfers on the course commented how much they liked to be informed of what was going on. If something goes wrong don't try to hide it. People are curious creatures. Tell them what's happening to the course.

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empty water coolers – nothing says “we care about you” like cold water on a hot day. Superintendents and assistant superintendents should visit their own course to experience it as a golfer would, and pay special attention to the details. Start by parking in the parking lot. Then visit the clubhouse and pro shop. Then play the course. Better still, invite some superintendent friends to come play and tell you what they think of the course from a player's perspective, and also as a professional superintendent.

3. Greeting golfers. Go out on the course and greet two or three foursomes and talk

If you do they're likely to overlook problems when they encounter them as opposed to complaining among themselves about the poor conditions.

Now, the superintendent is not solely responsible for the brand perception of the course. The pro shop, golf instructors, quality of food in the clubhouse and even the parking lot condition all impact a golfer's total experience. For this reason, all managers and employees need to see the role they play in building a successful brand. GCN