



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.

Superintendent as marketer

Successful courses today require agronomic, management and marketing functions. Some courses still do not understand the need for marketing, but an increasing number of public and even some private courses are putting more emphasis on marketing for several reasons. Competition has increased among courses in any given locality. Golfers, like any other consumer group, have become much more demanding. And more courses now depend on revenue streams beyond the game itself.

Having said that, the essential product is still having a course that can command the necessary club and greens fees. To produce a quality course — agronomics and management — the superintendent and general manager must negotiate a happy medium between “I need this” and “We can’t afford that.” Once they arrive at a happy medium, then the marketing plan determines how to drive new and incremental business. Reaching the next level of success takes more than a written plan — the owner, general manager, superintendent, pro and sales team have to execute the marketing plan together.

In my consulting work, the owner hires me. Typically, the next meeting will be with the general manager. Then I meet with sales. Lastly, I meet the superintendent. Sometimes meetings with the superintendents must be delayed because they have to release crews before they can take time, but about 50 percent of superintendents do not care to take part in the meetings at all.

Even though about half of all superintendents want to pigeonhole themselves in their department, I still request that they participate in the discussions and planning. Superintendent participation is important because he or she is responsible for producing the end product that is central to the marketing plan. Put another way, a superintendent’s job is to produce the right product, and having the right product is essential if the marketing effort is to be effective.

This connection between the product and marketing strategy can be overlooked. To many people, marketing is little more than advertising and promotion. But this view ignores the fact that

golfers will shop until they find what they want. Many golf course owners, managers and superintendents could take a lesson from foreign car manufacturers like Honda and Toyota. These companies make quality and customer satisfaction the center of their marketing efforts by making sure that engineering and manufacturing communicate with target customers about the design and performance of different vehicle models.

My experience in working with superintendents shows that most have, or can quickly gain, a working knowledge of the advertising, sales and business side of the business. True, superintendents weren’t hired to market or sell, but in today’s competitive market, especially on public courses, a superintendent that sees how he or she can contribute to the course’s overall success is a major competitive advantage for that course in that marketplace. The smart superintendent also realizes that he or she has a vested interest in marketing, because the course’s revenue and profitability determine the maintenance budget, funding of improvements, and salary increases and bonuses.

Like it or not, the superintendent

will result in dissatisfied customers who will leave. Conversely, over-investment in terms of client expectations means lost profitability. The superintendent is uniquely positioned to match course conditions to customer expectations most efficiently — given sufficient budget, of course.

Superintendents who work in synch with the general manager, pro and sales staff will improve customer satisfaction. For example, I’m surprised at how many courses lack a master calendar. Without a master calendar sales may be selling an outing in late October when the course is going to be overseeded, which simply means you are going to have unhappy customers. If the customers know the course is being overseeded, then they can decide whether to play or not, and if they do, their expectations will be adjusted to the course conditions.

Better still, overseeding might be a good time for sales to schedule a charity marathon on the course. The course might discount their day rate for a charity, and thereby make a few thousand dollars when they might have made a few hundred. And the charity wins by getting a deep discount for

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should be a member of the marketing team for a very practical reason. Marketing begins with the customer, and the superintendent can make sure the product matches the their expectations. I consulted with one course that only could get players to pay \$45 for a round, but the course was so beautiful the fee should have been \$90. In this situation, the maintenance costs were too high, but the situation can more easily be the reverse — who is willing to pay \$90 to play a \$45 course?

Effective marketing requires matching the product and price with the customer. On a premier course, a substandard prod-

uct will result in dissatisfied customers who will leave.

The master calendar should be created jointly by the superintendent, general manager and sales staff, and updated frequently. It should include weddings, social outings, special events, tours, aeration and all major, non-emergency maintenance. The superintendent should train sales on their work and why it is done so they can explain this to golfers.

The key to marketing is to plan, set business goals, coordinate efforts and cooperate. With all this in mind, it’s easy to see why effective marketing requires the active participation of the superintendent. GCN