

# Negative to positive

**W**hen something good happens, research shows that the average person will tell three others about his or her experience. But if something negative happens, he or she will complain about it to 29 others.

This is more than an observation about peoples' behavior. From a marketing perspective, this fact shows you that one of the best things you can get from a customer is a complaint. You want complaints because you want to stop the person complaining and prevent him or her from telling 29 people. Even better, one of the best things you can do to impact word of mouth is to turn the person complaining into a fan. You do that – whenever possible – by addressing the issue and making the person complaining happy.

One of the interesting things about a golf course is that the experience is multidimensional for the customer – what a golfer thinks about the course is affected by: the parking lot, the clubhouse, the pro shop, each hole played, the views, the speed of play, the condition of the golf carts, the attitudes of the employees, food and drinks, and more. With all this going on, it's hardly surprising that a golfer might find something he or she didn't like, but also some things that exceeded his or her expectations. Golf courses that identify the disappointment factors and do something about them raise the overall perception of the course.

A key to making this happen is to empower the superintendent and assistant superintendent to be able to respond to complaints on the spot and do whatever is practical to correct a problem or make the complainer happy. For example, if some customers are having a problem with their golf cart on the course, the superintendent can be notified by workers and order them a replacement cart right away, then give the golfers a free round or a free lunch in the clubhouse. This can be as simple as empowering the superintendent to jot a note on his or her business card, sign and date it, and then accept it in the pro shop or clubhouse.

The goal is to turn a negative into a positive as quickly as possible. Referring to our mathematical example, this means that the person now no longer complains to 29 friends, family members and employees where he or she works. The per-

son now praises you to at least three other people – and possibly more. Not a bad turnaround.

The key to this is to get complaints. One way to find out what people think is to give golfers an evaluation form that invites complaints. An example of what a card could look like is below.

## A "did you notice" card

Notice that the sample card below does several things. First, it tells golfers about some improvements that have been made. Second, it tells them that you take their recreation and your job seriously. Third, it asks them, in a nonthreatening manner, to tell you what they didn't like.

Most superintendents will do the first two

### Did you notice ...

Hope you notice the improvements to the bunkers on the 12th hole. We've (state some improvement here). We're constantly working to improve the course and your golfing experience, so we're very interested in your comments about the course conditions and things that could be improved.

**How would you rate your golfing experience today, with one being poor and five being excellent?**

1      2      3      4      5

**Did your golfing experience meet or exceed your expectations?**

1      2      3      4      5

**What could we do to improve the course?**

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Did anything about the course disappoint you?**

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for your comments.  
If you would like to talk to me  
please call me at XXX-XXX-XXXX.

Jack Smith  
Golf Course Superintendent

Your Golf Course

steps, but the third step is the critical one. No matter how busy you are, do you really want to let people's complaints go unnoticed and not be addressed?

Certainly, you cannot take care of every complaint or concern of which you're told. But even if something cannot be done to correct a complaint because of budget constraints or the like, you can listen, explain the situation and tell the person that you will pass his or her comment on to the green committee or the course owner or manager.

It all starts by asking for the negatives. To do this, print the "did you notice" cards every three months for a 10-day period (two weekends and one week in between to make sure you get a good sample of all golfers). If possible, include the most recent maintenance steps or course improvements. Print each survey on a different colored paper to help golfers recognize a new survey.

Place the cards in the pro shop, in the clubhouse and on golf carts. Have your starters hand them out and have someone ask for them when they come in off the course. As an incentive, offer golfers a free drink for completing one or put them in a daily drawing for a free round of golf or a \$25 gift certificate in the pro shop. You might be surprised at the information you get.

Can you take care of every complaint? Unfortunately, the answer is "no," but even in an extreme case, you can take some of the sting out of the person who is complaining.

One course that I worked with had a golfer who nicked up a new set of Big Bertha clubs. The soil on the course was rocky and the golfer's deep divots created speed grooves in the club heads. The golfer wrote a scathing letter to the course and complained to other golfers. The owner sent the golfer a nice shirt from the pro shop along with a note saying they were sorry about the damage to the clubs and that they hoped he would continue to golf there. The note and gift didn't resolve the golfer's problem, but even so, the gesture shows concern for his complaint.

Making the effort to do something at least shows you're listening, and that step alone can help reduce the tension and possibly get a dialog started. GCN



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