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# Grand openings

**Y**ou get to be new only once, so the grand opening of a new or renovated course is a marketing opportunity that can't be passed up. A new course is an exciting event for area golfers, the community and the golf course employees. The excitement can be used to get a course off to a great start with plenty of media coverage and a lot of golfers playing on the new course.

My advice for a grand opening is to create activities that last most of a week. The critically important thing is to begin a grand opening with a media day. You want to generate enough excitement and media coverage to let area golfers know about the week's events. The second important goal is to finish the week by getting as many area golfers as possible to play your new course. With these two goals in mind, how you plan the week depends on your market, your course and your budget.

If your new course is in a major market, then you could start the grand opening on a Monday or Tuesday. If you're in a small market, then you can start on a Tuesday or Wednesday. You want to finish on Friday, Saturday and Sunday when you'll host a good turnout of golfers. Again, if you start the grand opening week with excitement, then serious golfers will want to play the new course on the opening weekend.

Making a grand opening a full week also provides you with a rain day. Except for the opening media day, usually you can work around a rain day by rescheduling and combining events scheduled for later in the week.

Here's how a typical grand opening could be planned for a golf course in a major market:

Monday is media day. Invite all print and broadcast journalists.

Tuesday is VIP day. Invite the mayor, city council, chamber of commerce crowd and area semipro and pro golfers. Also invite the course architect, builder and others involved in the design, permitting and construction.

Wednesday is hospitality day. Invite owners and managers of area hotels, conference centers, motels and even bed-and-breakfasts — anyone that could refer traveling guests to your golf course. On this day, consider announcing a trade-out partnership program to encourage hospitality sites to refer guests to your course. For their guests, this

could be a special rate or free use of clubs. For hospitality managers and employees, it could be special rates based on the number of referrals and golfers they provide.

Thursday is the day for major fun activities geared to create excitement and generate maximum media coverage.

The grand opening ends on Friday, Saturday and Sunday when you want to get the golfer participation needed to get your new or renovated course off to a great start. It's not necessary to have the course be in perfect playing condition — it's opening week, after all — but make sure conditions are good enough so that no major flaws are obvious. You don't want to generate complaints or negative coverage of the opening week. One thing that can help is to hire extra help before and after the week to keep the course looking good despite all the traffic and wear-and-tear.

If you're in a small market, condense the grand opening by starting on a Tuesday or Wednesday. For example, make Wednesday the media and VIP day. Then Thursday becomes a hospitality day in the morning and major fun activities in the afternoon. Again, Friday, Saturday and Sunday are golf days.

## Generating excitement

The great part about a successful grand opening is all the fun you can generate. A popular approach is to offer a \$1-million hole in one prize. You cover this event by purchasing hole-in-one insurance. The rate depends on the distance and how many people will be taking the shot. This insurance typically costs between \$400 to \$500 per golfer/shot.

Here's an idea to hold your costs down and generate more excitement in the process: host a number of smaller contests that qualify the winners for a chance to take the hole-in-one shot. For example, you can put four flags on a green and hold a driving contest in which the winner or winners — depending on how many you want to qualify for the hole-in-one contest — hit one of the flags or come closest to one.

Another great qualifying contest is to hold a putting contest from 20 feet. Have everyone that tries pay \$1 per put. Then,

all that qualify at that distance get to try for free from 40 feet, and the winners qualify for the hole-in-one shot. Again, limit the number of winners based on the number you want to qualify for the hole-in-one contest. Other qualifying events can include a chipping contest and a longest drive contest.

To generate more interest, offer prizes for all the qualifying events. Trips can be a surprisingly inexpensive prize if bought from a wholesaler, but tangible prizes such as TVs and new golf clubs work great as well. If products by area manufacturers are possible prizes, invite them to participate by donating their products in return for the publicity. Add more excitement by locating tangible prizes at the site of the contest.

Make sure media are invited to watch the contests. Better yet, have one or more contests for media only.

Here are some other opening day events to create excitement:

- Have a contest to set the course record on opening weekend with a prize for the winners. The records can include the longest put, the lowest score and the longest drive (records can be set for seniors, juniors, women and men using the different tees). Individuals setting the initial course records on opening day are excellent subjects for media coverage.

- Fill a gas grille, a boat, a convertible or any other prize with golf tees and offer it to anyone who correctly guesses how many tees are in it.

- Auction off the first tee shot. Some golf courses get hundreds or even thousands of dollars for the honor of being the first golfer on the course.

- Offer a minitournament for local high school or college teams, or teams consisting of dignitaries, teams consisting of hospitality managers and employees or senior citizens, or teams of area superintendents.

The excitement you build into the grand opening is up to you, but make it fun for everyone. Golf should be fun, and the opening of a new or renovated course can leave everyone involved with a good feeling. One final thought: You can't host a grand opening every year, but one course I worked with had so much fun that they repeated the concept every year and called it the annual Golf Day. GCN

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