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Using a market analysis

As golf becomes more competitive, marketing your course becomes more important. In previous columns, I've suggested the need to compare your course to other courses in your area regularly. The goal of this is to keep your regular golfers coming back and to attract new players who have taken up the game recently, have relocated to your area or are unhappy with the course(s) they have been playing. Keeping core golfers and acquiring new ones also is the goal of the competitive courses in your area, so to "win," you need to make sure your course is at least as good as the other courses or ideally, superior to them.

This leads to the question: What makes a good or superior course experience? The answer is a combination of cost, course reputation, location, course condition, service quality and other factors. Given all these factors, comparing two or more golf courses might seem more complicated at first than it really is.

A simple and time-proven tool used by marketers to make practical comparisons is called a SWOT analysis, which stands for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. This marketing tool can be adapted to a superintendent's job even if his course doesn't have an overall marketing plan.

The first step of a SWOT analysis is to decide which courses you want to compare. My rule of thumb is that any course within a reasonable driving distance for a golfer is a direct competitor. Other considerations include similar greens fees, ease of access to the course, course conditions and playability. Simply put, a competitive golf course is any other one your regular golfers might consider playing.

Once you have identified your competition, the main challenge in a SWOT analysis is exercising the discipline and time necessary. A SWOT analysis takes time and is only as good as the individuals involved, so consider asking some of your employees and other managers on the course to join.

The process is simple: You take each aspect of the analysis and list the answers for your course and each of your competitors.

Strengths

List the strengths for your course and your competitors in separate columns. Key strengths from a golfer's perspective will include things like speed of play, de-

sign of the course and value, which is the what-you-get-for-what-you-paid equation. Turf conditions could be a strength depending on the turf, green speed, lack of weeds and insects, and the consistency in turf quality. Playability – another strength – could be the width of the fairways. Other possible strengths are signage, course location, staff expertise and service attitude.

Weaknesses

Next, follow the same process by listing weaknesses of your course and your competitors. Try thinking of things that are genuine negatives for golfers. The condition of the cart paths might be a strength, a weakness or neither. However, knowing a competitive superintendent is operating with three-quarters of the staff he had a year ago is a potential negative for that course and might factor into the equation.

Opportunities

When considering opportunities, the focus needs to be on your course. A number of your opportunities already will be listed in your weaknesses column. For example, if you listed a moisture problem on a green as a weakness, then correcting that situation is an opportunity.

But opportunities should go beyond correcting negatives by considering positive actions you can take to improve your course with your present crew and budget. This might include ideas that help attract new golfers or make your course more enjoyable for members or regular golfers. For example, Ron Garl, a Lakeland, Fla.-based golf course architect, says a significant number of golfers practice more than they play, even if that's just working on one aspect of their game that needs improvement. So, with many golf courses, improving the practice areas is a marketing opportunity.

I would consider your master plan if your course has one. Opportunities should include any steps you can take toward making that vision become a reality.

Finally, special events in your community or on your course create opportunities to make a great impression on visitors or first-time golfers.

Threats

Threats include things such as an outbreak

of turf disease, but the emphasis of a SWOT analysis is on outside situations or conditions that can affect play. An example is planned roadwork that makes it difficult to get to your course for weeks or months. New ownership of an area course is always a marketing threat because improvements on the course probably are planned. Similarly, a planned renovation of a course in your market area, or the announced construction of a new course, must be considered threats because they might attempt to take away some of your golfers.

Threats also can be unknowns such as the hiring of a new superintendent, consultant or management company.

Analysis

The most challenging aspect of a SWOT analysis is considering all four factors at once to get a big picture of your course's marketing position and actions you can take to improve your position.

When considering strengths, ask yourself if you're making golfers aware of them as often as you should. For weaknesses, decide if they can be remedied or improved easily or if you have to put up with them for a time. Opportunities need to be ranked and prioritized for action. Threats have to be evaluated by how likely they are to happen, their potential impact and what you can or must do to counter them.

When considering all aspects of a SWOT analysis at once, you might see some interactions between variables. For example, when anticipating and taking proactive steps to combat a threat, you might end up adding a new strength to your course.

When completed, a SWOT analysis provides a practical evaluation of your course relative to competitors and helps drive an action plan to improve your course and your marketing position.

The value of this four-step exercise comes from repeating it at least once a year. Your first SWOT analysis creates a benchmark of where your course stands versus the competition. Later comparisons allow you to measure your progress in overcoming deficiencies and improving in all factors you choose to consider. The goal is to produce a superior course for your golfers. GCN