

DOWNTOWN PRO SHOP

Battling for business has become the biggest concern with the pro shop operator of today. Beat down by prices of discount outlets, a California pro has counterattacked in the retailers' own front yard, opening a pro shop right in their downtown business district.

It didn't happen overnight. Jimmy Powell started his Pro-Line Golf Center in Santa Ana, Calif., back in 1971, and the enterprise has prospered into a going concern.

Powell's radical concept, still relatively innovative for many parts of the country, has turned into a paying proposition for the Dallas native.

With golf a year-round thing on the warm west coast, Powell developed his downtown store into a transplanted course shop with a lot more to offer. "I've always felt that people should be able to walk into my store and get anything they need for golf right here.

"Too many pros do business out of a catalog. To me, that thinking is bad. When people come into your store, they aren't coming in to look at a catalog, they're coming in to take stuff off your shelves," Powell told GOLFDOM.

Looking around Powell's 3,000 square foot facility, it's easy to see that sticking with pro lines is the rule and not the exception. Besides attractive and functional club and soft-good displays, Powell's shop features a complete indoor driving range with television equipment and other aids that are beneficial in personally fitting customers with clubs.

Powell insists that the California pro has to have more to offer his customer, since they have a 12-month operation. "There is so much competition out here. A pro has to treat his people well and that's the way it should be, on the course or in the shop," Powell noted.

Continuing his thoughts on the status of the warm climate pro, Powell predicted the day soon when the PGA might divide into two separate organizations, one for the north and one for the south and west. Year-round selling is obviously a boon to pros in this area and attitudes toward merchandising are different than that of the pro spending his winter in the snowy north.

Golf is not a losing proposition for Powell, and his brother John, who assists Jim in the shop opera-



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tion. In view of the lagging economic picture in the nation, Powell remains optimistic that the market will remain stable. "Even if there is a down period in the economy, I think golf and recreation won't be affected. Leisure time activities seem like the last thing that people will give up," Powell said. Although the game itself might not suffer, Powell would not offer any prediction on where his own business might end up with a money crunch upon us.

Treating people well is the key to the Powell operation. Hoping to lure the right customers into his shop, the 39-year-old businessman has established a store that doesn't try to be all things to all people.

Product availability is one of the industry's biggest headaches. But, Powell keeps well stocked to avoid catalog orders whenever possible.

According to Powell, product knowledge is essential. He works hard to keep abreast of new mer-

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chandise and its worth. "The worst thing that can happen to a pro is for someone to come into the shop and ask about a product and get a blank stare," the PGA pro commented.

Knowing the trade and forgetting marketing tricks are two bywords of Powell's shop. In three short years, Pro-Line has increased its profit from five to seven percent a year, proving that a little knowledge can pay off at the cash register.

Getting away from "word of mouth" advertising, Powell uses ads in the area's largest newspapers and cultivates customers with sale merchandise at various times of the year.

Being a golf pro is a very important thing in the life of Jim Powell, who is also head professional at Via Verde Country Club in nearby San Dimas. Although Powell's love of the game is great, he still sees his downtown shop as a key to his financial future.

"It's really sad to see some pros work at one club for 30 or 40 years and when they retire, walk away with nothing. If you stay at a club that long your future is really limited. Investing in this business has answered a lot of the money questions for me," Powell said.

Even before Powell sold his first set of clubs downtown, a plan was needed for the venture. There are several areas that Powell looked into before starting his charge into the downtown dollar fight:

1. A large amount of capital is essential. A store of this type can't open up on a shoelace. A full stock of merchandise must be on the shelves the day the doors open.

2. Experienced personnel is a must. An employer must hire people that know golf and are willing to find out more about the business side of it.

3. Establishing an area mailing list of prospective customers is important. Even though the shop is downtown the same atmosphere of a club can be accomplished. Make the customer feel like he is a "member" of the store.

4. Location is critical. Establishing a business on a main traffic artery is important, although a spot in a major shopping complex would also be preferable.

5. Vow to give service before and after the sale. This point is essential in the downtown venture.

Looking at the future, Powell sees the day soon when club pros may turn into mere clerks, no longer in charge of pro shops, carts and bag storage. Obviously, with the profits to be made by the wise pro, club management might be inclined to take over the pro shop and its related interests, turning the pro into a salaried employee.

For this reason, Powell is channeling a lot of his efforts into his downtown store, although he still is cost conscious in his responsibilities at Via Verde.

Since Powell purchases for both operations, his added buying power cuts costs at both locations. In fact, he often buys needed merchandise for Via Verde from his downtown store.

An additional advantage to the arrangement, is that Powell really has two market places to sell in. "There have been times when I've had items sell at the club and not the store and vice versa," Powell related.

Watching his buying closely, Powell realizes that mistakes will be made, but knows that staying with the pro lines keep his business relatively stable.

Although not discouraged, golf pros in general, have not accepted the Powell type of enterprise. Some of the thinking stems from the adage that a pro should keep his business where it is supposed to be, at the club. Many pros look down on compatriots moving to the business districts. Powell insists that this wasn't true in his case and the proof lies in the fact that the Southern California section of the PGA voted him to its Board of Directors.

There has been very little backlash from the pros in the surrounding Orange County area, although Powell did comment that the retail community was somewhat surprised to see his move to the city.

A more competitive retail market might force the pro into the city more. The benefits are obvious. Not only will his appearance in the business district enhance his financial picture, but a store downtown might get more people interested in the game.

Seeing the day soon when the pro might forfeit his shop, cart and bag storage concessions, Powell views the downtown shop as the savior for the merchandising pro. □