
 FOR PRODUCT, DISPLAY, SALES EXPERTISE

Take advantage of the salesmen who call on your pro shop

by Nick Romano, managing editor

Working the road is not a fun job. But traveling from club to club, course to course, mile after mile is something you live with if you are a golf product salesman in the field.

There are hundreds of them out there. Most work for manufacturers as part of their staffs, but many operate on their own, as independent representatives. Often these reps and salesmen see the industry more clearly than many club professionals and can get an overview that is unique in the business.

Golf salesmen are viewed by the pro as either allies or enemies, depending on the experience the pro has had over the years. There is little doubt that the experience salesmen bring to their jobs can be a valuable asset to the golf professional. The problem is, many pros never take or ask for the advice of the rep, even though it is there for the asking.

Ideas on display, use of lighting, salesmanship, promotions, and a variety of other sales techniques are available from the golf rep. If the professional is wise, he will utilize the free information. As one rep told GOLF BUSINESS, "The pros think they know it all. When I walk into a shop, I look at myself as going into a partnership with the pro. I supply suggestions that are going to help move more product, my product."

In a random sampling of golf salesmen and reps all over the country, GOLF BUSINESS found many of the field people felt they did not get enough of their accounts' time. Pete Knezevich, Acushnet's salesman in central Ohio, says the pro has missed the boat when it comes to merchandising.

"There is so much disorganization in pro shops today. Many pros just aren't interested in display. Maybe it's the time element involved," Knezevich said. With over 200 accounts in a region revolving around Columbus, Knezevich attempts to look at each



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operation separately, determining the problems or pluses.

Knezevich thinks the pro has failed in utilizing his edge in market knowledge against the competition that has sprung up from the sporting goods dealers and golf speciality shops that have acquired pro line equipment. The Acushnet salesman insists the professional must have a gimmick to get people to look at his equipment. That gimmick can be his golf ball line. The ball can be offered as a loss leader to stimulate interest in the shop.

Besides the golf professionals in

his area, Knezevich also covers the daily fee, public operations with an assortment of owner-operators in the shop. He contends this group is not interested in moving equipment for the most part. Such operators are caught up in the revenue supplied by green fees and car rentals and are leery of being tied to an equipment inventory.

In the final analysis, Knezevich considers many owner-operators to be really unqualified to talk about the subtleties of equipment and to not have adequate product knowledge, necessary to get more of their customers to buy.

Reps offer experience

The independent representative is an active part of the marketplace today. Many of these men got started with the old-line companies and then decided to try it on their own, repping several lines. Such is the case with Dan Barbaro in metropolitan New York City. Barbaro spent 9 years with PGA/Victor, became disenchnated

with the product line, and decided to try it on his own. He handles Browning golf equipment and Munsingwear apparel in over 350 pro shops in the metro New York area along with suburban Orange and Fairfax counties, and Fairfield county in Connecticut.

"Golf professionals are funny creatures. There are many that don't want to accept your ideas. The younger pros coming in and the older, smart ones do listen. They are the ones with profitable shops," Barbaro noted.

Unlike Knezevich, Barbaro's accounts are primarily at the private county clubs and are PGA pros. In his 10 years as a salesman in the area, Barbaro feels his customers are more knowledgeable about product than ever, mostly due to the concerted effort made by the Metropolitan PGA section. The section puts out one of the most comprehensive newsletters in the country, keeping its pros abreast of the business activity of the section and of the salesmen within it.

Progressive thinking is important to Barbaro and he attempts to convey this to his accounts, especially the new ones. When he talks to a new professional at a club, he will try to get him around to thinking about merchandising, but builds the individual relationship between salesman and buyer first. "Establishing trust is very important in this business," Barbaro added.

Salesmen and reps must be selective in the items they will try to sell to various shops. For example, there are many courses that do not have the type of customers interested in buying high-priced sweaters and slacks. The rep can caution the new pro against this decision, if he knows the club's buying habits. This is just another way to build the relationship.

Southern view

In the south, the 12-month season is prevalent and the golf salesman works the year round. Such is the case with a pair of AMF Ben Hogan fieldmen: Bill Awalt, who covers the Miami and southern Florida markets, and Ray Coleman, who works out of Birmingham, Ala., but whose territory crosses parts of Georgia and Tennessee. Coleman has more than 225 accounts, while Awalt handles 120. Both work with private and semi-private clubs as the bulk of their accounts.

"Product knowledge and the willingness to share it with his customer is the biggest thing a salesman has going for him," Coleman said. Now in his third year in the region, Coleman has worked for Hogan since 1967, when he started in the Fort Worth factory. Eventually he was put in charge of quality control. He probably knows the inner workings of his company's equipment line better than anyone in the firm.

Awalt also worked for Hogan, before his assignment to Miami. He was in the public relations business in the Dallas area and worked some of the PGA tour events. Like Coleman, Awalt is a firm believer in establishing rapport with the pro first. "If the account knows I will work for him, the personal basis of the relationship is established," Awalt said.

Emphasizing the service aspect of the business is the key for Coleman. If he can convince his accounts that service is the edge they have over the golf speciality shops and retailers, Coleman has achieved his mission.

Most salesmen realize the day of the 40 percent markup is over. "I know some people in my area," says Coleman, "that are working on 20 to 25 percent, and it's tough to get that." It has not been a good year for hardgoods in the south, but Coleman points to the fact his sales are up over last year.

In the Miami area, Awalt stresses the softgoods market, which he contends has taken over in his region. At this time, 70 percent of the space in shops in southern Florida is allocated for softgoods. "The stiff discount competition the pros get in the area from golf retailers has forced them to look at the apparel possibilities at their club," Awalt commented.

Going a step beyond the norm is the key for Awalt. With his public relations background he is a good speaker and readily volunteers to speak for the pros at their clubs. Most presentations are made to the men's or women's associations. Hogan has a strong film presentation underscoring its product line, and Awalt works off this to answer any questions golfers may have on club making.

Some see both sides

With 11 years under his belt in the northern New Jersey area, Pat Manturi has been one of the top salesmen

for Wilson. A former club professional with experience in both New Jersey and Colorado, Manturi knows both sides of the counter. This insight has guided him well in knowing what his customers want and need.

Most of the courses Manturi calls on are daily fee operations. Like his counterparts in other areas, he has seen a significant slowdown in hardgoods. "Most of these people want to deal with the firms that will be around tomorrow," Manturi pointed out. A good part of his market is made up of farm families who had some land and decided to develop a golf facility.

"Owner-operators tend to be more limited in their product knowledge of the various clubs around. They prefer to stay with the more known brands and shy away from the deals that creep up from newer companies on the scene," said Manturi.

Another former pro turned salesman is Dennis Metzler, handling the Philadelphia territory for MacGregor. With more than 3 years under his belt, Metzler services 165 accounts in eastern Pennsylvania, southern New Jersey, and Delaware.

"People in my area are concerned with the growing retail competition. It has been hard over the last 2 years to get accounts to look at the big ticket items like clubs and bags," Metzler said. Although Metzler thinks the emphasis of lighting and display is important in a shop, he doesn't make suggestions to the club professional unless he feels the pro is asking for assistance.

No substitute for experience

Probably one of the biggest territories in size and geographic scope belongs to Ted Horvath in St. Paul, Minn. For 28 years, Horvath has worked the area of Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota and northern Iowa for Spalding. He works with more than 500 accounts.

Weather over the last 2 years has played havoc with the golf market in the upper midwest. A crippling drought that devastated courses in that region last summer hurt rounds and, indirectly, sales.

"Last August had to have been the worst month I ever saw for golf. Ball sales were the lowest I can remember," Horvath said. Stiff retail competition from Minneapolis

speciality shops has also hurt sales in the territory.

When he works with new accounts, Horvath attempts to use the knowledge he has accumulated in over a quarter century in the market. He cautions the new professional to watch his buying habits, especially in hardgoods. Softgoods activity has helped ease the stress a little, as pros are looking to the low ticket items to generate additional income in the shop.

South of the Twin Cities in Chicago, a pair of fieldmen work the northern Illinois circuit, Tom Vehring for Hogan and Doug Millar, an independent rep for Lynx.

Vehring has logged seven years with Hogan, but worked for the old Arnold Palmer Co. in 1964. Between those assignments, he was an assistant professional at Chicago's Olympia Fields Country Club. Millar has been in the sporting goods business for the past 11 years. He has represented Lynx for the past three years, but also had jobs with MagGregor and Burke-Worthington. Both handle about 200 accounts.

"There are so many things the salesman can do to help the pro," said Vehring. "I can walk into a shop and see where the man is not selling product. If the pro trusts your opinion, you can work with him and get him to move more merchandise."

Subtle suggestions are sometimes the hardest to make, but Vehring noted that often when a salesman enters a shop, he can observe objectively the way new employees may greet him or offer him service, not knowing his position.

Speaking about the competition in the Chicago area from golf retailers, Vehring says if the pros are losing money they have no one to blame but themselves. "You have to kill your members with kindness. Anyone can sit behind a counter and sell balls. A service attitude is the only way to get those people back."

Not quite as old and established as its competition, Lynx' sales staff has had to establish its line in many shops. Often when Millar hits a new account he moves for the bag room, where he surveys the bags and tries to find a set of his firm's clubs. "If there is a set in the bag room, it's pretty easy to convince the pro his member or customer

has gone outside to get that equipment."

Downtown shops in the west

Another veteran of the pro shop wars over many seasons has been Spalding's man in Los Angeles, Red Walters. With 27 years in the Los Angeles and Ventura counties area, Walters has seen first-hand the trouble the downtown pro shop operators such as Walter Keller and Jimmy Powell have brought their colleagues.

"Those places are just mass display at the lowest price. There is no merchandising there," Walters stressed. In his mind, the professional has his customer at an advantage if he utilizes his capabilities as an expert with the products he sells. "Professionals must look at themselves as sellers. The speciality shops offer mass sales and no service."

One program Walters has attempted in the Los Angeles area, though with little success, is Spalding's custom cresting program. Individual clubs are set up for the facility with the club crest on the head. This approach has not stemmed the tide, though, from the downtown pro shops and the retailers.

Sell shoes and softgoods

Operating to the north near San Jose is Dave Bistic, one of Ernie Sabayrac's top salesmen. With more than 10 years in the Bay area, Bistic operates on some 200 golf accounts in an area of approximately 250 square miles.

With a plan for each specific operation, Bistic will go into a new or existing account and completely tailor a program for the pro. "I believe the golf shoe is the foundation of the apparel business. A golfer can't go out and play in tennis shoes."

For example, at a private club with what Bistic calls a "locked-in" membership of 300, the professional has to stock his shop with no less than 350 to 400 pairs of shoes. That assortment will have four to six different styles in four varying widths. Bistic thinks size runs should go about 12 dozen each in the "C" and "E" widths and 24 in the "D."

A broad price range will work well also, with some top line shoes falling in the \$48-and-up range, but 60 percent of the stock will fall in the \$28 to \$35 area. Some lower priced, but still quality, waterproof pairs can be in-

cluded in the \$20 to \$24 range.

Coordinate sales are essential and the proper buying has to be employed in slacks and shirts. Using the private, 300-member facility as the example again, Bistic thinks a collection of between 10 and 12 dozen slacks is the proper stock. At least 65 to 70 percent of that should be in solids.

"I've been in many shops that offer pattern slacks but have no matching solid shirts to go with them. So you've lost a sale," Bistic says. Keeping odd sizes in stock is also important. Based on the fit you might get from particular companies, some 34-inch-waist pants may not always fit the standard 34 size.

In shirt selection, pros should carry twice as many shirts as slacks. Bistic's sample club handles 20 to 25 dozen with half solids and half patterns. Sweaters are also a big factor in the Bay area. Seventy percent of the sweaters are sold in the last 3 months of the year. Carrying 10 to 12 dozen in different materials and textures is the key.

Proper employees in your store is another Bistic objective. "I think every pro must have a woman in the shop, if there is ladies' golf at the club. A knowledgeable, sophisticated woman, who knows the business and can relate to your female customers, can add another profit dimension to your store."

Bistic insists pros don't take advantage of simple merchandising effects such as display and lighting. He believes the pro should look into adding mannequins, half busts, and freestanding fixtures to his shop. A glass tabletop that can be used to display simply is also essential.

"Pros are afraid of sales, but I think they should have at least two a year. There are many innovative ideas available to stimulate activity," Bistic noted. For example, Bistic has come up with the idea of a "Balloon Sale." The club professional and his staff paint a variety of dollar values on brightly colored balloons, blow them up, and head them for the shop ceiling. Customers will then come in and, by the use of a ladder, get the balloons down, check the dollar value, and subtract that from a purchase in the shop. Such sales have generated more than \$6,000 in one night. □