



Rethinking Our Niche

I've always thought that one of the best things about being a golf course superintendent is the fact that customer relations isn't really part of the gig. Sure, you need to be around, chat it up with the regulars, communicate effectively with boards and greens committees, etc., but when push comes to shove and you're having one of those days when you don't even want your dog around, you can get out and be "on the course."

Late-night board meetings, 350 bosses, "expert" advice and television expectations notwithstanding, "I'm going out to tag some trees."

I have even said, "This would be a great job if it wasn't for the golfers."

Har de har har.

Last year my place of employment took a revenue hit that caught all of us a little by surprise; after five straight years of ever-increasing revenues, we were unable to meet our budgetary expectations. Some people (myself included) thought these expectations were a little optimistic, but I came in under budget by \$200 (within 0.025% for those of you keeping score—I was actually pretty smug about that). Anyway, when the dust had cleared, we needed to assess what happened . . .

Thirty-plus days without carts is a good place to start. Yeah, that was it, the weather was terrible. Shoot, every decent day foursomes were backed up three-deep at the first tee. We just didn't have enough nice days, and we don't charge enough too. Yeah, that's right, resident rates are too low. Heck, every time one of our senior residents tees it up, we lose money because we charge them less than it costs us to produce a round. We don't have enough times for big-money nonresidents. Right, when those people play, they pay top dollar, buy balls, lunch at the turn and keep the beverage cart rolling. We need to make more space for them. Not to mention September 11 . . .

We had it totally covered. By the time the litany of reasons (excuses) was over, we deserved a bonus for doing as well as we did.

Then came the bombshell,

"Okay, so what did **you** do to enhance the golf experience when it became apparent that our revenue numbers would fall short of expectations?"

"Uh, me?" (Long, uncomfortable silence.)

"Well, that's not really my job." (*Oh God, don't say that!*)

"I've never worried about the revenue end before." (*Are you sure you want to admit that?*)

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“Isn’t my team’s extraordinary effort in providing exemplary playing conditions in spite of nearly insurmountable weather obstacles enough?” (Better, but too argumentative and doesn’t your “team” include the pro shop staff, grill personnel and anyone else the customer contacts while visiting the golf course?)

(You’re in a trick bag now, Fred. This is that thinking-outside-the-box stuff you’ve been able to avoid up till now . . . paradigm shifts and all that . . . think fast!)

(D-o-b-e-d-o-b-e-d-o—STOP THAT—now concentrate.)

“Uh, well, to be honest, I hadn’t considered that my role could be more proactive, in a direct sense, past the point of my traditional job guidelines.” (In other words—I didn’t know you wanted me to do that—honest, but like cotton candy, full of air, and in the end leaving you hungry for more.)

I’ll spare you the rest of this postmortem; suffice it to say that by the time I crawled back to my hole, it was with some schooling:

- 1) I had a newfound sense of being a part of a greater whole (the most important part, of course—my vanity is still intact at least).
- 2) I was added to the distribution list for a motivational periodical extolling the virtues of proactive customer relations.

Number two was received with a certain sense of disdain. The first issue reached my hands well after the initial shock of the “paradigm conversation” had worn off. Well past when the usual “I should’ve told them . . .” (you know, those post-crisis pearls of wisdom that surface a day late and a dollar short) had come and gone. Anyway, the fear of being quizzed about some obscure reference in the booklet and not having read it led me to grudgingly read every stinkin’ page. It was actually pretty interesting. Here are some anecdotes I found memorable.

Years ago, a 10-year-old boy approached the counter of a soda shop and climbed on a stool. “What does an ice cream sundae cost?” he asked the waitress.

“Fifty cents,” she answered.

The youngster reached deep in his pockets and pulled out an assortment of change, counting it carefully as the waitress grew impatient. She had “bigger” customers to wait on.

“Well, how much would just plain ice cream be?” the boy asked.

The waitress responded with noticeable irritation in her voice, “Thirty-five cents.”

Again, the boy slowly counted his money. “May I have some plain ice cream in a dish then, please?” He gave the waitress the correct amount, and she brought him the ice cream.

Later, the waitress returned to clear the boy’s dish and when she picked it up she felt a lump in her throat. There on the counter the boy had left two nickels and five pennies. She realized that he had had enough money for the sundae, but sacrificed it so he could leave her a tip.

The moral: Everyone in this world is important. We should always treat others with courtesy, dignity and respect.

Adapted from A Lifetime of Success
Pat Williams
Fleming H. Revell

Okay, so how does this little homily relate to golf course management, if at all, that’s up to you to decide, but I am reminded that, in many cases, the players we see chopping up our tracks have set aside their troubles for a brief period of time and may be experiencing one of the high points of their week.

Plato said, “Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.”

It might be useful to remember that when you’re in a hurry to fix some crisis or just get home after a

long, hot day and you have to wait endlessly for some high-handicapper to go through his/her five-minute pre-shot routine before you can proceed. Give them a smile and a nod, make them feel welcome at your course.

Finally, (I promise):

Charles Steinmetz (1865-1923) was a pioneering genius in harnessing electricity. After he retired, Steinmetz’s former employers at General Electric occasionally relied on his brilliance.

Such was the case when an intricate set of machines broke down. In-house experts could not find the cause of this malfunction so GE leaders called Steinmetz.

After testing various parts, Steinmetz finally pinpointed the problem and marked the defective part with a piece of chalk. Steinmetz then submitted a bill for \$10,000.

Surprised at this unexpected high price, GE honchos asked Steinmetz to resubmit an itemized statement. He complied with a new invoice that read as follows:

INVOICE	
Making one chalk mark:	\$1.00
Knowing where to place it:	\$9,999.00
Total	\$10,000.00

Adapted from The Little, Brown Book of Anecdotes
Clifton Fadiman
Little, Brown and Co.

When it comes to managing conditions on your golf course, YOU are holding the chalk; don’t sell yourself short. 