

Be a Curve Ball Hitter

The key to surviving an economic slowdown will be the extent to which you emphasize playability in your management program . . . and educate your golfers on its importance.

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The 1990s were a decade of tremendous prosperity for golf and the economy in general. Thousands of new courses were built and the rate of growth in maintenance budgets far outpaced the rate of inflation.

Unfortunately, signs are pointing to a serious economic slowdown and perhaps even a recession. Some superintendents are going to have fewer budget dollars with no change in expectations for the golf course. This article will offer a strategy for dealing with an economic downturn that will enhance a superintendent's value to their course.

As USGA agronomists during the golf boom of the 1990's period, we learned a few lessons that will prove to be invaluable in dealing with an economic slowdown.

1) No matter how large your maintenance budget is, the condition of the course is never going to be good enough for everyone.

2) Job security is not correlated with the size of the budget. An unlimited budget does not guarantee job security.

Superintendents who subscribe to the school of thought that all will be right with the world if the maintenance budget is 10 or 20 percent higher are due for a reality check. This theory does not work. Just ask the superintendents at the top of the ladder. Instead, now is the time to break out of the cycle of chasing expectations and shift the emphasis on playability.

Why Playability

Much of the extra money that has flowed into course maintenance budgets over the last decade has been allocated to improving the *presentation* of the golf course and not the *playability* of the course.

Roughs are not rough any more. Maintenance has spread from fence line to fence line and brushing off the cart paths every day is more important than brushing the greens. Immaculate presentation and excellent playability can be accomplished by the courses with the biggest budgets.

When mid- to low-budget clubs try to compete with this mentality, they promote mediocrity in many categories at the expense of excellence in a few. The game of golf is designed to be played up the middle of the course, yet we see clubs failing to commit the resources necessary to have excellent green, tees, and fairways.

Shifting the focus on the playability of the course takes attention away from the labor-intensive, expensive pursuit of things such as the search for the perfect bunker sand, overseeding, course landscaping, string trimming creek banks, and on and on. Focus is shifted onto the primary playing surfaces: greens, tees, and fairways.

There is no reason why even a low-budget club can not commit the resources necessary to have excellent putting greens. After all, with more than 60% of

all shots during a round involving the putting greens, doesn't it make sense to make the putting greens the highest priority on the course?

You would think so, but in our travels it is shocking how many courses do not have the equipment package and maintenance program in place to maximize the performance of the putting greens.

Playability Education

It is easy to spot the flowering dogwoods on the 12th hole or the shaved pond banks along the 7th fairway. However, it takes an effort to communicate the importance of regular putting green topdressing or the need to have extra help maintaining the mowing reels.

Start a playability education program and assume course officials know nothing about what it takes to provide excellent playing conditions. Teach them what it takes to create excellence on the tees, fairways, and greens.

The USGA Green Section Turfgrass Advisory Service is an excellent tool to assist in playability education. The Southeast Region Green Section staff has developed a three-hour seminar on improving playability as well as a fun report card designed to illustrate ways to improve playability.

Ten clubs have already requested visits with playability being the main topic on the agenda. We plan to study playability issues at these courses and conduct evening presentations with course officials specifically tailored to the course we are visiting. Call us now (800-296-9398) to schedule a visit.

Be Proactive, Not Reactive

No one knows more than the superintendent about the costs associated with the management and preparation of the golf course. Most golfers and course officials have no knowledge about maintenance.

Create manhour and cost studies that you can use to educate course officials. If faced with a budget reduction, these studies are an invaluable tool to show where expenses can be trimmed without seriously impacting playability.

Remember that even though budgets



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can be decreased with the stroke of the pen, it takes work to alter golfer expectations. With a manhour study, course officials can be the ones to advise which tasks should be reduced or eliminated to meet the new budget. Show them how playability of tees, greens, and fairways

can be maintained or improved at a reduced budget level.

Have a Plan in Place

If you owned the golf course and had to reduce the budget by 10 - 20 percent, where would you cut costs? Develop this plan now and have it ready in case the budget is cut.

At many private clubs, course officials are volunteers and they derive a sense of satisfaction from representing their club. Imagine how valuable you will be if you implement a program on a reduced budget that actually improves the quality of the tees, fairways, and greens.

It can be done, but you must teach them to focus on playability issues and encourage them to decrease expenses in areas that have little or nothing to do with the playability of the course. You can make these course officials look like heroes during tough times and this will only benefit you in the long run.

Results

The playability of the golf course is a mindset for golfers just like the presentation of the course is a mindset. Maybe it is time to stop the endless pursuit of perfection and focus on how the course plays instead of how it looks. We have seen too many cases of million-dollar budgets with members grumbling in the 19th hole that "it still isn't good enough." Stop playing a game you cannot win and start changing the expectations of the players. It can be done. We have seen it done and we can teach you how to do it.

Life throws everybody a curveball from time to time, but isn't it easier to hit that curveball out of the park if you know it is coming? Developing a plan that maximizes the playability of the course while cutting costs will increase your worth to the club dramatically. Great curve ball hitters are hard to find. Go ahead and get to work.

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