

Marketing Idea of the Month

Client questionnaires, if handled properly, can help peg your market

By TIMOTHY GRAYSON

Since August I've been helping a client make the most of the summer deluge. Unless you were on the East coast, which had its own problems with water (i.e., not enough) you know only too well how Noah felt. The summer of 1993 left a spongy bog through

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most of the Midwest.

It's tough to take, and the cost of lost revenue and repairs could be enormous. But in instances such as my client's, Mother Nature simply provoked an overdue restoration. Take heart. Augusta National had the same problems a few years back.

When I first met with my client, he was beside himself. Three complete holes and one other green had been submerged for a month. Lucky for him, insurance would cover most of the repairs.

He talked for about an hour, detailing what had to be repaired and the changes he was going to make. At the end of his monologue, I asked what kind of changes his patrons would like.

It was a sensible question: the course required repair, and the construction provided an opportunity to upgrade or change the course. The only question remaining was what to



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change.

Our initial tack was to make the changes we wanted — primarily for reasons of vanity. By the end of our first hour together, however, we had begun to think about changes to suit the golfers instead.

Where to begin? The season was over, and like many courses the customer records were not particularly extensive. But season pass records for the previous few

years were available. So we created a simple questionnaire and sent it to everyone on the lists.

In our questionnaire, we asked for some personal information such as age, approximate income, occupation, frequency of golfing, etc., for a demographic reference point. That we followed with about 10 simple questions like:

- Name three things you like about the course.
- Name three things you don't like.
- If you could, how would you improve the golf course?
- At what other courses do you golf?
- What would make you golf more often at this course?

To ensure that we would get a reasonably fair response, we sent the questionnaire with a cover letter and coupon entitling the respondent to either a free round of golf for a friend or a sleeve of balls if they completed and returned the card.

The results were astounding. More than 70 percent of the cards came back full of valuable, decision-aiding information. We discovered how the regular golfers view and perceive the golf course. Their general comments led us to the changes best for the golfers.

We took all the comments and criticisms into account before my client chose what needed attention and how to repair the course. The responses were often contradictory. But we were looking beyond the narrowly specific suggestions for the broad messages were being sent.

"Make the course friendlier," we deduced from comment like "the greens are too small."

"Thin out the bush on the tenth hole," and "Remove some of the bunkers around the green," from statements such as "fix the tee boxes," "make the fairway markers more visible," and "keep the carts to the side of the fairways."

We assumed "Improve the grounds (maintenance)."

What we did not do was implement specific suggestions. The cover letter specified this so nobody would expect their particular changes to be made. Nor did we entertain the idea of a grandiose "rebirth."

Wholesale change is a dicey proposition. If it works, it really works. But if it doesn't work, you could be in for a bigger mess than you bargained for. (Can anybody say, "New Coke?") A few well placed and obvious "improvements" can make a significant change to the image or personality of a course.

The bottom line is, this disaster forced my client to make some repairs. But it also gave him the marketing opportunity to make the course better satisfy his market. Now, with little added effort or cost, he feels 100 percent more confident about his ability to compete with the upscale monster down the street.

Dick Stuntz
Superintendent
Alvamar Country Club
Lawrence, Kansas
"With the amount of flooding and heat we've had this season, most preemergence herbicides would have fizzled out by now — but not Barricade. It's still giving us excellent control."

John Freeman
Superintendent
Deerwood Country Club
Kingwood, Texas
"Our preemergence weed control program was too expensive. Rather than cut back we switched to Barricade. Now, for the same dollars, we not only get excellent control, but also more coverage. Plus, we have the advantage of using multiple applications and getting better control of a broader spectrum of weeds."

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