

# Hundreds laugh, learn and buy at Public Golf Forum

By HAL PHILLIPS

**C**HICAGO — During November's Public Golf Forum, held here at the Lincolnshire Marriott Resort, more than 200 owners, managers, developers and superintendents gathered for an interactive session on perhaps the industry's most pressing issue: customer service. After two hours of presentations, lively discussion and debate, individual tables of 10 "reported out" to the group.

The results: A veritable gold mine of suggestions on how to improve customer relations. The best ideas appear below:

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**THE PUBLIC GOLF FORUM'S TOP 10 WAYS OWNERSHIP CAN IMPROVE CUSTOMER SERVICE**

**10. Hire good people.** Call potential employees at home and see how they answer the phone; their message machine will give a good indication of their unguarded phone manner. Once hired, this employee should know, with specificity, what your expectations are for treating the customer. Then lead by example. This aspect of "training" is the most underutilized weapon in the owner/manager's arsenal. Continually conduct follow-up programs to reinforce initial training.

**9. Use role-playing techniques** to familiarize employees with situations that commonly lead to friction between customers and golf course personnel. Also use role playing to show employees how to deal with this friction in a consistent but courteous way.

**8. Personal thank-you notes,** from owners to employees, go a long way towards reinforcing all customer service tenets. Anytime an employee handles a situation correctly or goes out of his/her way, personally thank them. Birthday and anniversary notes are a nice touch. Also, when an employee comes out to play the course, treat them as a guest but require them to fill out a survey evaluating all aspects of the facility's service.

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## PUBLIC GOLF FORUM

A NATIONAL BUSINESS CONFERENCE AND EXPO FOR SUPERINTENDENTS, OWNERS, MANAGERS, AND DEVELOPERS OF PUBLIC-ACCESS GOLF FACILITIES

Keynote speaker Peter Jacobsen (top) addresses a crowd of 200 (top right) during the Golf Course News-sponsored Public Golf Forum held at the Lincolnshire (Ill.) Marriott in late October. At right, attendee Gene Burriss from Brevard County, Fla. (at left) talks business with John Burns of Burns Golf Design. Above, Sabrina Tate of Cape Girardeau, Mo., listens intently during one of the Forum's 25 education seminars.

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## Customer service

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7. Develop a "Truth in Golf" code whereby employees are routinely candid about course work/maintenance. If there is sizable ground under repair, temporary greens or cored fairways, golfers should be told before they pay their green fees. Along the same lines, organize a regional "Truth in Golf" code to which competing courses subscribe. (For example, area facilities could agree to rotate aeration schedules so as not to overlap; schedules would be publicized so golfers know what to expect). Also, post and adhere to "all-in-one" pricing. Don't post a green fee that doesn't include tax, cart fees, etc., as patrons don't like to be "nickled and dimed." Make sure your marketing emphasizes this all-inclusive pricing.

6. Stop using the term "ranger" and start using "course ambassador." Equip these ambassadors with cellular phones and allow players (perhaps those waiting on a tee behind a slow foursome) to make local calls. Arm ambassadors with free "lake" balls to pass out to players who are searching for lost balls. Also, for outings, make sure ambassadors, starters, all employees know exactly who the group coordinator is. Make sure he or she experiences as little stress as possible. Make him or her look good to their colleagues.

5. On busy days, choose a pace-setter group — a foursome teeing off with open space in front and several groups behind — and offer it rewards for playing in less than four hours. Maybe a complimentary cart the next time they play. Or a sleeve of balls. Make the offer publicly — i.e., in front of other foursomes — so customers know you're acting selflessly, in their best interest.

4. Hold free clinics for women and juniors — ladies one week, kids the next. In July and August, start women and juniors (perhaps veterans of your clinics) on the back nine at 8 a.m., so they can play nine holes at their own pace. Also, for a nominal fee, open the course to beginners for late-day play.

3. On cold days, send out complimentary hot beverages on the beverage cart — or offer them on the first and ninth tees. After all, these are your die hards. Show your appreciation. Further, rather than raising prices on poor weather days, put rain gear and umbrellas on sale. Find out who your regular customers are. During the off season, write them thank you notes and offer them a free round the next year.

2. Don't ask a player whether he had a good round; ask whether he had a good time. The experience is what counts, and it's the little things that add up to a pleasant (or unpleasant) experience. So, bag boys should meet and greet customers in the parking lot or bag drop; they should determine each customer's name and use it in conversation. Insist on smiling faces, introductions to playing partners, clean carts, pin sheets, courteous starters and rangers, post-round club cleaners. Provide a consistently high level of service from the parking lot to the pro shop to the 19th hole.

1. The Universal Check: On top of the rain check, adopt The Universal Check, whereby anyone unhappy with their experience — for any reason — receives a free round of golf. The loyalty and good will generated by this policy will far outweigh those customers determined to take advantage. It will set the tone for your facility.

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