

Course accessories: New product is paramount

By MICHAEL LEVANS

The increasing competition among daily-fee courses has cultivated a heated battle among manufacturers of course accessories.

Now more than ever, daily-fee courses are dressing themselves up via accessories, differentiating themselves en route to landing new players and maintaining the interest of existing players.

This has, however, placed more pressure on the development of new products, a fact that is consistently leading accessory manufacturers back to the drawing board in search of new twists to staid industry standards and faster, more efficient ways of distributing to a hungry customer base.

"There's no doubt that competition has become stronger," said John Kelly, president of Cedar Falls, Iowa-based Standard Golf. "So now, by being aggressive with new products, that's the best way to protect our position in the industry."

There's little mystery to new product development. A company must first understand the super's needs and then react in a timely manner — or at least before its competition. However, according to accessory manufacturers, those needs are as varied as the courses themselves, which makes the choice of which product to improve upon, and not to improve upon, all the more difficult.

"We're seeing an upgrading trend," said Steve Garske, president of St. Paul, Minn.-based Par Aide. "With the advent of a more professional superintendent and competition between courses, I think we're seeing a nicer presentation of accessories. And of course, that affects how we go about our product development."

According to Garske, the superintendent is no longer looking at accessories as a necessary evil, but something that's an amenity to the player. "These days, superintendents are making sure there's water in the ball washers and ranges are using ball pyramids."

"Ten years ago, the way a course accessorized really wasn't a point of differentiation," said Jeff Mack, vice president of equipment at Rocky River, Ohio-based Lesco Inc. "Now, flags are brighter, signs are better positioned."

"New ideas, new looks, something different from the course down the street. That's what today's superintendent is looking for in accessories," said Steve Burrell, president of Peachtree

City, Ga.-based Southern Corporate Promotions. "Now, it's our job to deliver that product."

John Kelly's tact is to go straight to the superintendents for product development ideas via Standard's product catalog. "We're always looking for tips from superintendents to publish," said Kelly. "We actually have several products in our line that were inspired by superintendents, like our drag brush and depth guide for our hole cutter."

Orange, Calif.-based Eagle One Golf Products, one of the newer direct sellers to enter the market, has found that its recycled products are catching on with supers who are aiming at an environmentally friendly approach to marketing a course.

"We use recycled plastics and lumber," said Tim Heard, spokesman for Eagle One. "We're finding that superintendents are using the recycled products and letting players know that those products are, in fact, recycled. It lends to a more positive attitude toward the course."

While Eagle One has chosen to go direct to courses via independent representatives and Lesco utilizes an innovative fleet of 69 mobile sales units backed by an in-house sales effort, the traditional distribution channel is by no means a thing of the past.

Standard, Par Aide and Fore Par, three industry veterans, are rock solid in their belief that for accessories, the distributor is the most effective way to move their new ideas.

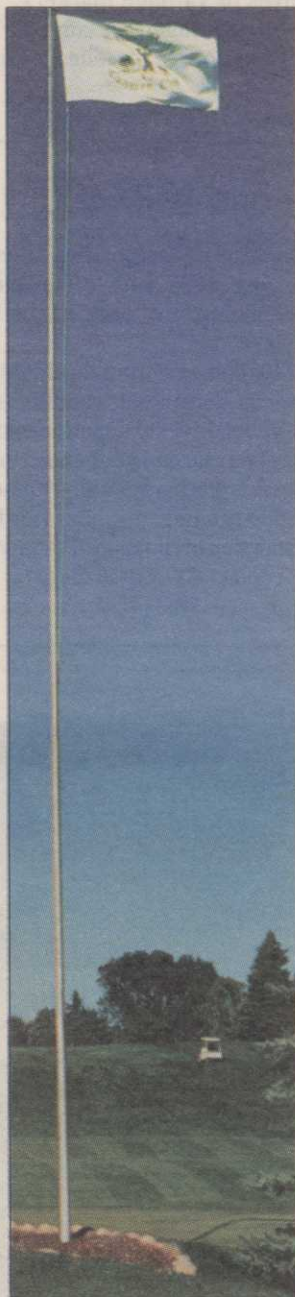
"There's no doubt that the direct sellers are having an effect," said Mike Neil, president of Huntington Beach Calif.-based Fore Par Inc. "That means we have to compete the best way we can. We empower the distributor by utilizing buying programs so that the distributor gets where he needs to be, so the cost disparity is minimized, so the value of the service is less costly."

"We have about 140 distributors," said Standard's Kelly, "which means 140 accounts. If we went direct we'd have over 16,000 accounts. It's a monumental shift in marketing."

Par Aide's Garske agrees. "I don't see it happening for us," he said. "Having dealers is something that's very important to us. We're more concerned with having the service aspect so we can solve problems."

According to Eagle One's Heard, direct sales can reach out with similar service, but it's all in what the superintendent is used to. "The superintendent rings up and we can tell him whether a flag stick is in stock or not. We then match his needs immediately, over the phone. It's quite effective with new courses."

"Historically, the golf course market has sold through distribution," said Southern's Burrell. "You have difficulty switching from a distributor set-up to a direct set-up without having a gap. Not that it can't be done, it's just going to take a very organized company to do that."

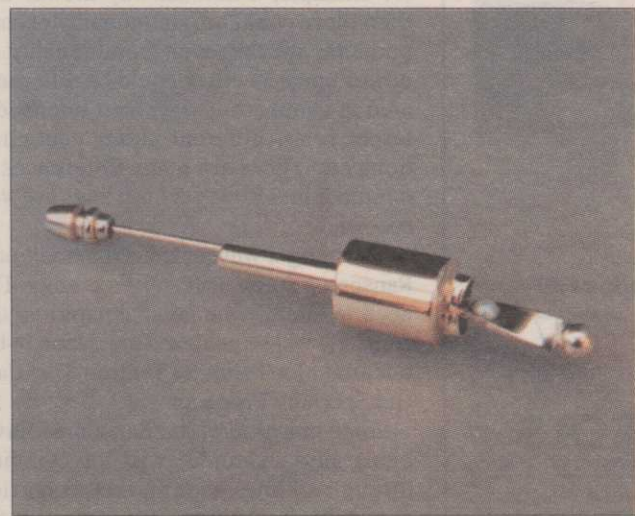


Par Aide's new flag pole.



One of Standard Golf's checkered marker flags.

ACCESSORIZE WITH ACCESSORIES



Winslow J. Furbur Jewelers has taken the course accessories product design craze and placed it on a label. Furbur has added a 14-karat gold ball washer to his line of sports jewelry. The ball washer is available as a brooch or a tie tack and has a working plunger which pulls up to reveal a south sea pearl. A great idea for the pro shop or as sales staff awards. For more information, contact 207-780-8501.

CIRCLE #201

New course to honor Standard Golf founder

CEDAR FALLS, Iowa — Construction is nearly complete on the new \$675,000, par-3, nine-hole links located next to the existing 18-hole Pheasant Ridge Golf Club here.

The new track is named Walter's Ridge in memory of Walter Voorhees, an early Cedar Falls park planner and founder of Standard Golf, a Cedar Falls Industrial Park company that manufactures golf-related products.

Standard Golf will donate \$200,000 to the new track. The irrigated course will comprise 32 playable acres, nine bunkers and 125 trees. An existing wetlands area will be maintained.

The general contractor, The Bruce Co. of Middleton, Wis., expects to wrap up construction by June 30. The architect is Williams, Gill & Associates of River Falls, Wis.

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