

Cooperative efforts

Golf course superintendents are known for sharing information freely and providing hands-on help sometimes. It's one of the great things about the profession. My contention is the vast majority of superintendents – and golf course owners and managers – fail to think creatively enough about ways to work together. The common denominator when brainstorming about how you might be able to work with your neighbors is to ask the question: "What's good for us – not just you or me?"

One of the strongest examples of cooperation took place in the mid-1990s in the Orlando area. Four courses, all located on what's called The Ridge area, shared a common problem. They are located near Disney World, but on the wrong side of Disney, in an area that, in 1993, was relatively undeveloped.

The four courses are Ridgewood Lakes, Southern Dunes, Diamondback and the Grenelefe Resort (which has three courses). The facilities are within a 15-mile distance of each other in an area, which then, was part of a new development. They were head-to-head competitors in the middle of nowhere, as perceived by the metropolitan Orlando market and the eastern New Tampa, Plant City and Lakeland markets.

Despite being relatively close together, their main competition was the more established areas in and around Orlando, and to a degree, the eastern part of Tampa. I wrote a plan for the four to work together and attract players. My analysis was that The Ridge courses were prime for discovery by golfers. In fact, we were able to use the reputation of Grenelefe Resort (PGA Tour qualifying held annually at the West Course) as a means to elevate the desirability of the other new courses. As a golfer, it was easy to get on the courses because they weren't crowded.

The four courses agreed to work together to promote golf on The Ridge. The target market was golfers in the metropolitan Orlando area.

The first suggestion of cooperative marketing came from the v.p. of operations or c.e.o., but it easily could have come from superintendents thinking outside the box. They know their products and their competitive strengths. In marketing, the first major competitive advantage is

location. So, what happens when a course fails to have a location advantage? You create your own competitive advantage. In this case, we were able to use a portion of the four facilities' advertising budgets to generate awareness of the area's created competitive advantage.

Create you own advantage

In Al Reis' and Jack Trout's book, "The 22 Immutable Laws of Marketing," the first immutable law is leadership. Be a leader. Create a category of business in which you can be first. Their book states: "It's better to be first than it is to be better. It's much easier to get into the mind first than to try to convince someone you have a better product than the one that got there first." The question they ask to illustrate this point is: Who was first to fly over the Atlantic Ocean solo? Answer: Charles Lindbergh. Now, who was second? I'll bet there are few people reading this column that thought of the name Bert Hinkler. And did you know that Hinkler was considered the better pilot?

With Lindbergh holding the title of leader or first in this category, how does someone compete? According to Reis and Trout, if you can't be first in a category, then create a category in which you can be first (the law of category, immutable law No. 2). Example: What's the name of the third person to fly solo over the Atlantic Ocean? If you didn't know that Hinkler was the second person to fly over the Atlantic you might think you had no chance to know the name of the third person. But you do. It was Amelia Earhart. Now, was Earhart known as the third person to fly solo over the Atlantic Ocean, or as the first woman to do so? She created her own category in which to be first.

We took this approach for The Ridge courses. During the winter, the in-season in Florida, every day in Central Florida is a Saturday as it relates to play levels. Courses are at or near capacity, even on The Ridge. The troubling season is summer. And part of that trouble was caused by the sometimes torrential rains in Florida. They might last a relatively short while, but they can flood a course with

poor drainage and make it unplayable even though the sun is shining. That was a rare occurrence on The Ridge because it enjoyed a higher elevation and faster drainage. We took advantage of this fact in the joint marketing effort. We created a new category in which the courses could be leaders – "When it rains, play The Ridge. We're open." As a result, the four courses enjoyed stronger summer play in 1993, 1994 and 1995.

Come together

Golf courses compete for players, and one part of that competition is attracting core players to your course and earning their steady business. Another part is to get new people to play.

Alliances are one marketing approach to consider, but the marketing concept has to make sense, and it has to stand out from the competition. Doing what everyone else is doing can create a lose-lose situation. The Orlando market fees of \$25 to \$29 per round common in the area mean no one is making money. Some courses worked with hotel employees to pass out discount coupons to attract more golfers during the off-season. It worked for a while, but now coupons and rebates are common, and they're passed out year-round. In short, everyone's losing.

Still, opportunities abound in golf for alliances. Superintendents can work with other superintendents. General managers can work with other general managers. The common areas for an alliance include maintenance, attracting employees, buying products, training and increasing play by attracting new players. And you don't have to align yourself with only your competitive counterparts. By thinking creatively, it's possible to generate ideas that help your course as part of a cooperative effort.

This works. Four years ago, I helped found Golf Course Business Consultants. It's an incorporated affiliation of 15 industry consultants and service providers who work cooperatively to provide owners and general managers with expert advice. It's a situation in which everyone gains ... and that's smart marketing. GCN



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