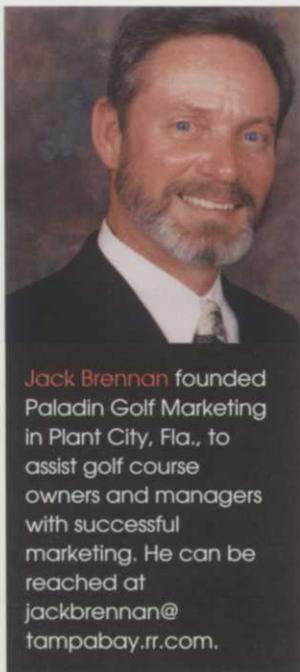


Player development



Jack Brennan founded Paladin Golf Marketing in Plant City, Fla., to assist golf course owners and managers with successful marketing. He can be reached at jackbrennan@tampabay.rr.com.

I e-mailed a player development marketing suggestion to clients, former clients and industry insiders. The first response I received made me rethink what priorities should be placed on player development from a golf course marketing standpoint and my marketing position on the topic.

My marketing position is simple: Create a section for every client marketing plan that includes player development and provides the detail for beginning a program from scratch and continuing it. As I rethink my position, it's not my marketing section that's flawed, it's the time it takes to implement a successful player development program and the costs associated with it. Nowadays, everyone wants beginners to play but doesn't want to provide the time, instruction and personal encouragement. Beginner instruction is done on a timeline. Real player development has taken a back seat to other marketing initiatives that provide immediate revenue to the cash register.

The e-mail response seemed like a riddle: "We need a thousand more courses or get rid of 3,000. This business can't go on like this! Michael Kahn." I called Mike Kahn, principal of GolfMAK, and asked him what he meant. His response was sure:

"If I suggested there was room for a thousand more golf courses in the United States, you'd think I was nuts given the economic state of the industry. This business has gone so highbrow it has forgotten an entire segment of society: the group of Americans age 25 to 75 who haven't yet played golf. Most will never take up the game because there's really no place for them to start. Golf needs hundreds more low-cost, player-friendly courses if the industry wants a healthy economic future. This is where municipally owned golf facilities can make a contribution to citizens and the game.

"We need a thousand new player-friendly golf courses in the United States to save many of the other 15,000-plus golf facilities from going broke. We need threshold recreation courses people can learn to play and enjoy. The types of courses we need are the ones that caused the golf-participation boom in the '50s, '60s and '70s. These are golf courses people can afford to play. Golf courses they can walk. We need push-up greens, push-up tee boxes and centerline irrigation systems. No course needs to be longer than 6,300 yards. We need greens

with speeds of eight feet, fairways that roll and shallow bunkers. We need courses where people who can't, and never will, break 90 can play and enjoy. These golf courses will feed and rescue the industry.

"There are millions of Americans who don't play golf, and never have played, but would try the game if it was easier to get involved. There are millions of families that could afford to take an interest in golf, but have no way to get started. Golf associations such as the National Golf Foundation, U.S. Golf Association and Professional Golfers Association of America don't pay the sufficient attention to the millions of Americans in the 25- to 75-year age bracket who have yet to try the game. However, these potential golf participants need a starter golf course, much like an old starter set of golf clubs. Some U.S. markets still have them but most don't.

"I started in golf when a walking round was about \$1.25 in the 1950s. A membership to the course was about \$65 a year. The course was a dusty, 5,400 yard, par-70 that was packed every day. The tee sheet was set at five minutes. We had more than 100 sets of rentals clubs that often went out twice a day. I was the starter in the morning. I cleaned the 100 sets every evening. That era is long gone, and we need it back.

"Most professionals really don't want to teach beginners because they hate teaching them. Every golf school ad says, 'Improve your game.' I don't see many that say, 'Come and learn to play golf.' What's this got to do with adding another thousand golf courses? It's where a properly planned and implemented, municipal, recreational golf course program can serve the community and the golf course industry. These golf courses can be created on redundant land and should be designed to walk or ride, and have a construction budget that computes to low green and membership fees. These facilities need a decent practice range, plus a continual and ongoing program to teach and encourage people to enjoy playing golf. It must be a walking golf course with rental sets, rental pull carts and forward tees for women and junior golfers. If space allows, a nine-hole par-3 golf course opens the door for older men and women and handicapped people to enjoy golf.

"The recreational golf course I recommend needs only a small clubhouse with a pro shop and a simple grillroom no more

than 3,000 square feet. It's important to plan the clubhouse to be functional and easy to operate and manage. The entire project shouldn't cost the community a dime because it can be financed by bonding issues and leased back to a golf course operator for more than debt coverage.

"I've discussed this type of municipal golf course plan to several architects, golf construction companies and financial sources. There are thousands of acres available for this kind of project. If well planned, recreational golf courses might be built for less than \$2 million. The finished product would include infrastructures and a clubhouse and be fully equipped to operate.

"The current high-priced set of golf courses won't bring in enough new golf players to replace natural attrition. We need new adult golfers. In my experience, every new middle-age golfer will cause other nongolfers to take up the game. They'll encourage family members, co-workers and friends to take up golf.

"I brought thousands of new golfers into the game from 1963 to 1988 while operating an annual learn-to-play-golf program. The single qualifier to be eligible to join our golf school: Students must never have played golf. We supplied all the clubs, balls, tees, teaching, etc., and saw they played the course. On many occasions, I watched mom, dad or an employee from a local business take up golf in our classes. Next thing you know, they're bringing out more people to learn. Many of those new golfers graduated to the higher priced country clubs or played the higher-priced public golf courses.

"All that happened regularly back in the '50s through the '80s. It's not happening now, and it's not going to happen as long as the industry keeps building courses that are out of reach financially.

"Golf will get back to positive economic health in one of two ways: abandon 3,000 golf courses or build the game with affordable, player-friendly golf courses. That's where municipally owned golf courses can serve the community and the golf industry."

Thanks Mike. Maybe we all should rethink our industry's past successes and means to those successes. They could be the key to our future as a successful, thriving industry again. GCN