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Are you a predator or prey?

A couple of months ago, I experienced one of those gorgeous Indian Summer days that helps carry me through the cold, nasty winters up here on the North Coast. I was visiting a course outside Dallas and playing a fun but mediocre round. I had my feet propped up on the dash of a golf car and was nursing a warm beer while killing time waiting for the group in front of us to clear a nasty little par 3. The moment didn't suck.

As our foursome chatted, I spotted a huge red-tailed hawk turning lazy circles in the azure Texas sky above us. It was an incredibly peaceful scene that made me feel slightly better about being forced to sit behind some boneheads who were convinced they each needed 10 minutes to line up their critical double-bogey putts.

Suddenly, the majestic bird broke its slow, smooth glide and rocketed straight down toward the native area to our right. At the last second, she spread her wings and slowed just enough to lower her talons and expertly snag something small, brown and furry that had – up to that moment – been minding its own business in the tall grass. She screamed that cool hawk victory cry and slowly flapped off into the distance to enjoy her snack.

It was a very bad day for that pitiful little varmint, but just another fast-food meal for one of Mother Nature's kick-ass predators.

That moment got me thinking: In the great outdoors, every day is life or death for that deadly killer hawk and for the cute little ground squirrel that had the misfortune of twitching a muscle at exactly the wrong moment and catching her attention. In the circle of life, you're either the predator or the prey.

Is our industry any different?

We have 16,300 golf courses each trying to get their share of a revenue pie that just doesn't seem to grow from the 500-million-round plateau it's been stuck at for a decade. Every course is different, but each has to hit a number that makes it economically viable to survive or even prosper. When it comes to hitting that number, are you the sharp-eyed, hungry hawk or the unsuspecting little fuzzy mammal? Are you the predator or the prey?

Take this quiz

Here's a quiz based on Jeff Foxworthy's "You know you're a redneck if ..." routine to help you gauge which category you fit in.

- You know you're a predator if you have a well-thought-out player development plan to attract and retain golfers at your facility.

- You know you're prey if you just assume people will show up and plop down money to play at your place.

- You know you're a predator if you're almost 100 percent focused on the golf course as your primary source of business.

- You know you're prey if you're spending all your time worried about choosing a new wallpaper design for the clubhouse or hiring a new pastry chef for the kitchen.

- You know you're a predator if you're aggressively finding ways to improve the golf course and keep up with modern club and ball technology and offer something new to players.

- You know you're prey if you think the course is just fine as it is and there's no need to consider any upgrades or improvements.

- You know you're a predator if you show up for work every day feeling like Conan the Barbarian, with a strong desire to crush your enemies, see them driven out before you and hear their women lament.

- You know you're prey if you think your competitors are pretty nice guys and you wish them the best of luck.

- You know you're a predator if you're driving around every Saturday morning to check how full the parking lots are at other courses in the area.

- You know you're prey if you're happy to fill half the tee sheet every Saturday.

- You know you're a predator if you've brought your management team together to do a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities) analysis of your facility.

- You know you're prey if you're just working off a bunch of unexamined assumptions about your course and your competition.

- You know you're a predator if you have a carefully developed marketing strategy that sets you apart from everyone else based on a unique selling proposition.

- You know you're prey if you think your course speaks for itself.

- You know you're a predator if you're investing in radio, print, TV and online advertising to bring new customers to your course.

- You know you're prey if you think word of mouth is all you need.

- You know you're a predator if you understand player retention programs, like coupons and frequent-player cards, are a cheap way to generate revenue.

- You know you're prey if you're not making attempts to keep players coming back for more.

- You know you're a predator if you're convinced a great superintendent is the most critical member of your staff and you're doing everything you can to find and keep a world-class professional for the job.

- You know you're prey if you think a new food-and-beverage manager will solve all your problems by lowering food cost or creating a new menu.

- You know you're a predator if you walk or ride your course at least once a week and critically analyze conditions based on how golfers perceive the course.

- You know you're prey if you think green is good enough and have fairways full of clover.

- You know you're a predator if you have an Internet site that compels Web-savvy golfers to give you a try and makes it easy to find directions to your facility.

- You know you're prey if you still believe Web sites are a silly waste of money.

So, how did you score? Is your facility a razor-clawed raptor or just another item on the appetizer menu? If you're a true predator, congratulations. You're likely to survive the tough business challenges during the next few years. If you're merely prey, you might as well go lie down and find a nice comfortable place to wait in the tall grass because that big red-tailed hawk is coming. GCN

EVERY COURSE IS DIFFERENT, BUT EACH HAS TO HIT A NUMBER THAT MAKES IT ECONOMICALLY VIABLE TO SURVIVE OR EVEN PROSPER.

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