

Flying high: success amid the summer heat



Circling Raven director of golf David Christenson shows off some of the pro shop's wares. Photo: Circling Raven Golf Club

This year, summer weather has presented a challenge for golf course operators in many regions of the country. Rounds generally decline when temperatures rise close to triple digits. Circling Raven Golf Club in Worley, Idaho, was faced with this dilemma. During July, the temperature exceeded 100 degrees F for two weeks straight.

"Every day, play basically just cut off at noon," says David Christenson, director of golf at the 18-hole course, which is adjacent to the Coeur d'Alene Casino Resort Hotel. "We looked at all the cancelled reservations and said if we don't use these existing tee times, we won't come close to meeting budget."

Christenson found ways to make the course enticing, even in the sweltering heat. Those who still weren't buying it were drawn to deals in the clubhouse. At the end of July, the club was ahead of budget, making it 47 straight months the course's revenue has grown, and it was in

a good position for August.

"We're always exceeding the previous months' and year-to-date revenue numbers," Christenson says.

The club kept this streak alive during the heat wave by printing business cards with promotional opportunities to try to soothe the sting the heat caused. Deals included discounts in the pro shop and reduced green fees during certain days and times.

Christenson credits much of Circling Raven's success to its people. The staff, including starters and pro shop attendants, recently participated in a program to brush up on customer service skills. Due in part to some of these practices, the course exceeded its merchandising mark of last July, and by Aug. 1, the course had filled 85 percent of the month's tee times.

Christenson has been in the business since the early 1990s, when he worked at Indian Canyon Golf Course in Spokane, Wash., a 45-minute drive from Circling Raven. The golf industry was more robust at that time.

"There was no marketing," he says. "People just lined up and waited in the parking lot in the dark to play the course."

When he came to help open Circling Raven in 2003, the industry had taken a downward turn.

"Everything changed with recent events, especially Sept. 11," he says.

Those who continue to travel usually don't visit the same spot twice, Christenson says. Therefore, he focuses on attracting the customer base

that's closer to home. Even these golfers aren't coming out in the same numbers they used to, so courses have to be creative to boost the number of repeat visitors and golfers who are new to the game.

"We need to know our customers and tailor services to meet the needs of the people who are coming out," Christenson says. "People have less time, aren't spending as much money and don't want to commit to a five-hour game of golf. It seems like people are more family focused and have different recreational pursuits."

Because of this, golf course marketers have to be more innovative than before to increase the number of rounds. But before a course can cater to its customers, it has to be clear about its own identity.

"The first step is to figure out who you are and what makes you unique," Christenson says. "How are you different from the facility down the road?"

Christenson read dozens of library books about the course's owners, the Coeur d'Alene Tribe, before coming up with the Circling Raven name. He named it after one of the tribe's first leaders. His reasoning was that it reflected the tribe and course well and drew attention as well.

Once golfers are drawn to the amenity, the relationship must be maintained to keep a steady customer base, Christenson says.

"For us, the successful operators moving forward, we're beyond the days in which golfers walk through doors and you didn't collect any information," he says. "My approach is almost

like big box retailers such as Macy's and Nordstrom. These stores always stay in touch with their customers, either with a catalog, note or letter. We try to personalize our service the same way so we can stay fresh in the consumers' minds as often as possible."

The staff has different methods to obtain information from customers while they're making tee-time reservations or just before they tee off.

"We employ a starter, and one of his responsibilities during the normal course of talking about the course and the expectations of the course is asking the golfers where they're from and collecting zip codes

so we can employ marketing strategies throughout the year," Christenson says.

They keep the information in a database and organize it by demographics. They can then send personalized marketing items to each group.

Christenson suggests courses reward loyal golfers with special deals or with a tournament after the course closes for the season.

"Make the core group of players feel special," he says.

Christenson also finds Circling Raven's partnerships to be a valuable marketing tool. The club pooled some of its marketing dollars together with the nearby Coeur d'Alene Resort, home of the floating green, to promote

both courses. Benefits are offered to those who play both courses or stay at one of the resorts.

The fact the course has received several accolades also doesn't hinder business. It has earned best-of acclaim from Golf, Golfweek and Golf Digest magazines, and its operations, customer service and merchandising also have been recognized.

Still, Christenson believes it's up to the staff to make sure golfers return.

"Overall, we try to be creative and use target marketing so we can measure it," he says. "Otherwise, we're just spinning our wheels and hoping." — Heather Wood

Empire starts management services division

The timing was ideal for the creation of Empire Golf Management Services, a new division of Empire Golf Management, says Don Carpenter, the division's director. The division will focus on third-party management services, acquisitions and leasing, as well as selective consulting services.

"The reality is that there

continued on page 15



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