

Listening to your customers

Obtain feedback from golfers before
making changes at your facility

By T.R. Massey

Gary Wilkins asks customers at Eagle Creek Golf Club to fill out surveys so he can glean ideas from them. Photo: Eagle Creek Golf Club



Short will be the days of the man who doesn't know which way the wind blows. Successful golf course owners/operators know this and realize listening to customers is the way to give them the product they want.

It might come as a surprise to the average golfer, but what he thinks directly influences golf course owners, who know customers vote with their feet, especially at public venues, and pay the bills.

Owners have developed formal and informal ways of listening to their customers. Surveys, focus groups and suggestion cards are dovetailed with simply talking to golfers and employees and appreciating what they say.

ClubCorp has several devices to listen to golfers. Of the company's 160 properties, 95 are golf and country clubs, and the majority of them are private. It's much easier to hear what private club members are saying, says executive vice president of membership Frank Gore.

"Our members are more forthcoming about what they think because they feel ownership," Gore says. "It's part of our strategy to get the members to feel that way."

ClubCorp conducts an electronic member survey asking questions about the facilities and programming at each of the clubs. The survey provides an open response spot that allows members to write whatever they want. Gore says the company receives a high return from the survey.

Each private club ClubCorp operates has a board of governors that consists of members representing different categories – men, women and ethnic groups. They meet as often as once a month but no less than once a quarter. ClubCorp receives a lot of feedback from these groups. Each club also has a minimum of a membership and social committee, from which more ideas are generated.

"They give us the majority of the feedback on programming and amenities," Gore says.

When considering making physical changes to a property, ClubCorp puts together focus groups for ideas. The top request from members is for expanded athletic facilities.

"Thirty years ago, no one asked for that," Gore says. "Back then, the top request was for a men's-only area. Now we get very few requests for that."

The second most popular request is for a

larger, family-oriented casual dining space.

"The grill is too small, and the formal dining room is too big," Gore says. "Thirty years ago it was the opposite."

These member wishes have caused ClubCorp to systematically install athletic components and casual dining at many of its properties during the past four years. The third most requested item is a men's and women's adult area.

"We've been doing a wine bar and some dining," Gore says. "It's a casual space that's separate from the kids."

But not every request can be met quickly.

"Some of this must be done by evolution not revolution," Gore says. "The older members and younger members want different things, so you have to take care of both sides of the equation."

ClubCorp also is beefing up its activity offerings. Aside from golf, tennis and swimming lessons, people want cooking classes and other things they can do as a family because their time is precious, Gore says.

WHAT THEY WANT

At its eight public courses, ClubCorp collects e-mail addresses from customers and contacts a small sampling, asking about the experience and how can it improve.

"Daily fee is pay for play, so if your product isn't right, you find that out pretty quickly," Gore says. "You hope you have employees that are sensitive to the customer. You hear what people like and don't like. Observation is probably the best way to find out what's going on."

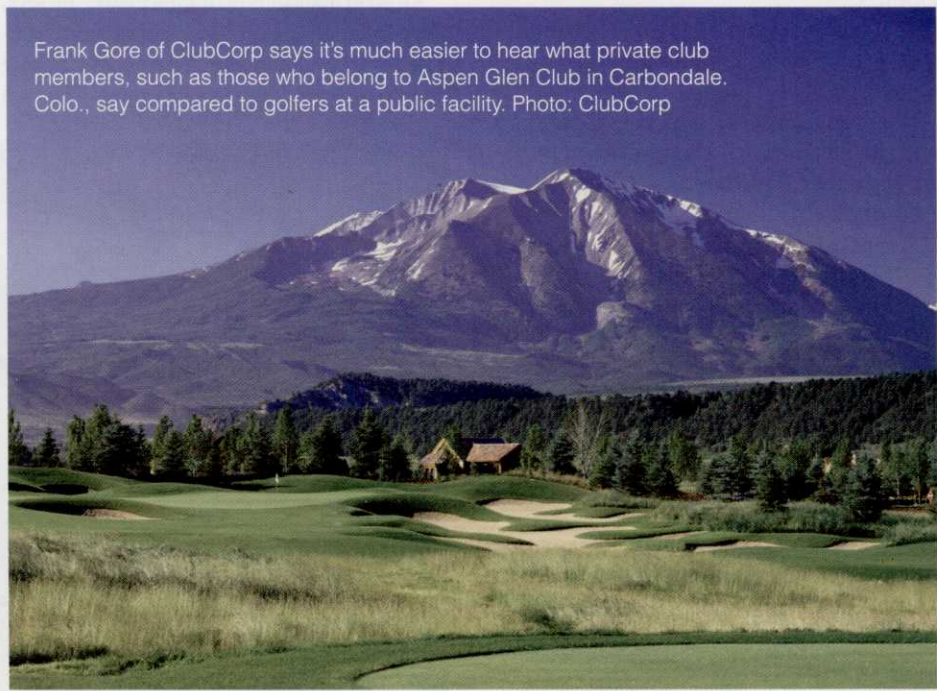
Dick Schulz knows exactly what Gore is talking about. The owner of The Oaks Course, a semiprivate facility in Covington, Ga., Schulz has had his ear to the ground since he bought the property in 1989.

"I listen to customers regularly," he says. "Our staff constantly listens. The food-and-beverage manager, the head pro and the superintendent meet with me once a week to talk about what we heard that week, positive or negative. It doesn't matter what situation you're in – public, semiprivate or private – the man who turns a deaf ear to a customer has lost his mind. Leisure time is dissipating, and people are choosy about how they spend it."

Schulz renovated nine holes and added nine new ones at the request of customers. He installed all new greens in 2005, and now his customers want more putting speed.

"They see it on TV," he says. "Some of them are probably sad they asked."

Schulz has changed mowing patterns and converted a par-4 hole into a par-5 because that's



Frank Gore of ClubCorp says it's much easier to hear what private club members, such as those who belong to Aspen Glen Club in Carbondale, Colo., say compared to golfers at a public facility. Photo: ClubCorp



what his customers wanted.

"We surveyed the membership, and the No. 1 thing they wanted was to change that hole," he says.

Schulz started having members-only dinners on Tuesday nights, and he's considering spreading out his tee times to 12 minutes instead of 10 because of overcrowding complaints on Saturday mornings.

"That has an impact on the number of golfers we get out, but it improves the experience," he says.

Other amenities, such as complimentary towels for members and a bottle of water on the cart when they start, improve the experience as well.

"It's just listening, day in and day out," Schulz says. "Some of it's hard to listen to, some of it's easy."

LISTEN CAREFULLY

An owner or operator must listen to customers, says Jim Hinckley, c.e.o. of Century Golf Partners/Arnold Palmer Golf Management in Addison, Texas. The company has 23 private facilities and 25 public ones.

Owner Gary Wilkins believes it's easier to implement change at a public course compared to a private one. Photo: Eagle Creek Golf Club

"It's different for public and private facilities," he says. "With private facilities, you have a regular customer base, and it's much easier. We have active committees along with the board of governors. The members give us great input."

Many people in the industry track customer input at public golf courses differently, Hinckley says.

"All good managers do it informally," he says. "They listen to employees. We'll survey a sampling of our customers, check the e-mail database and find the issues important to them. Then we



Jan Holt of Atlantic Golf says it was risky to add forecaddies at a course in Queenstown Harbor, Md., but in a saturated market, a course needs to separate from the crowd. Photo: The Brick Cos.

do a forced ranking of top-10 factors that have meaning to the customers."

By polling customers, Hinckley can ascertain the factors that motivate customers to play again.

"We're able to arrange our programming around that," he says.

But not everyone agrees it's easier to obtain customer feedback at private clubs. At Eagle Creek Golf Club in Norwalk, Ohio, co-owner Gary Wilkins works at the daily-fee course every day. Wilkins asks his customers to fill out surveys and gleans ideas from them.

"It definitely affects what we do," he says.

Wilkins believes it's easier to implement change at a public course compared to a private one.

"I just decide it, and we do it," he says. "We don't have meetings with the green committee. There aren't the layers of red tape that come with a private golf course."

To indicate hole locations on greens, Wilkins used to have yellow flags for the front, white for the middle and yellow-black for the back.

"Some people couldn't see them and asked for red, white and blue, so we changed to those colors," he says. "Unfortunately, you can't see the

blue flags, so we'll need to tinker with that."

But while Wilkins listens carefully to his customers, not every request can be honored. "Sometimes they make a suggestion, and they don't understand what's going on," he says. "It doesn't make sense for the course. If we think it's going to be good for the majority, we'll definitely consider it, though."

RECURRING COMMENTS

The Canadian Golf & Country Club in Ashton, Ontario, hosts a bunch of corporate outings and regular public play. But owner and general manager Mark Seabrook doesn't poll the club's 175 annual members or players formally. A couple of years ago, the club ran a few focus groups.

"It was effective but very costly because we did it by third party," Seabrook says. "We received good comments but almost the same comments we've gotten on our own."

When Seabrook or his staff hear the same

comment from more than one golfer, it's put on his task bar.

"As they gain momentum with more people talking about these items, we take a handful of items and show them to our regular members and others and see what they think," he says. "If there's a topic that gets thrown out, say a fairway widened in a certain spot, the reality is there are quite a few groups you can focus on quickly. People like tournament organizers, league golfers, regular members – it doesn't take long to get a cross section of individuals."

For instance, Seabrook has received requests for faster greens, so next year, one of his budget items will be devoted to greens rollers.

Seabrook believes a key to worthwhile customer feedback is in the way questions are asked.

"We try to phrase questions so we don't lead them to a certain answer," he says. "We would say, 'If there were any widening to do, where would you do it?'"

Seabrook also relies heavily on feedback from his staff.

"It's a clientele that you really didn't think about," he says. "But if they're happy, that's good. After a few weeks of hard work, I find it's good to buy a few drinks for a staff member and ask them what they'd change. You get some really good comments quickly. And when those start to copy what we're hearing from the golfers, then that's when something starts to happen."

CUSTOMER-DRIVEN DECISIONS

It's not so easy for all owners to obtain customer or member feedback. Those with more than one course will usually find it easier to cut through red tape. It goes hand in hand with the structure of a corporation. For instance, Edgewater, Md.-based The Brick Companies has a golf division, Atlantic Golf, which is finely layered. It owns and operates three different properties.

"Our owners are directly involved," says Jan

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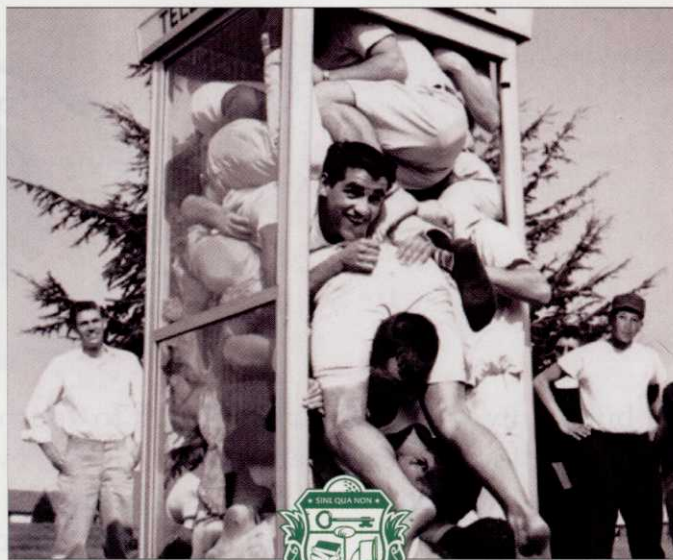
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Holt, chief marketing officer. "We have a leadership team, and we all do everything together in the same building and meet biweekly. We talk about these things. Then we make a decision."

Holt depends on general managers and superintendents as part of the information gathering process.

"I run it past all of them," she says. "If they aren't on board, it's not going to work."

The company constantly is defining market demands.

"We feel strongly to give people what they want, not what we want," Holt says. "They wanted Nike apparel, we got Nike apparel. We added forecaddies at our course in Queenstown, Md. It was a risk, but in a saturated market, you have to separate yourself."

Atlantic Golf surveys golfers daily as they leave the course. If there's a problem, the general manager should handle it on the spot. It also conducts an annual survey of customers who are Players

Card (a loyalty program) holders and receives about 1,500 responses.

"We try to capture every bit of information we can," Holt says.

Players asked for better practice facilities, so Atlantic Golf built them. Customers wanted the golf course maintenance practices to be more green, so they use chicken scat as fertilizer. Atlantic Golf also recycles and uses rain barrels and testing wells.

"Environmentally, we started before the green movement came, and now everyone's on board," Holt says. "We listen. Our Web site has a million places for customers to give their suggestions. We collect them. They don't get dumped."

THE REAL BOSS

Ralph Stading, owner of the Lewis River Golf Course in Woodland, Wash., has a fine ear for customers' ideas, too.

"After you've been around the business for

a substantial time, you realize golfers are your real boss," says Stading, a second-generation golf course owner. "Some poll their customers as a fine art, and others listen to the cash register. We try not to wait until someone decided to leave before we change what's happening."

Simply talking to customers is Stading's best chance to learn, he says, and he knows a trick of the trade.

"I ask if they heard of someone with a problem," he says. "They'll respond to that in a more neutral way than if you ask them directly if they have the problem."

Like many other owners, Stading knows which way the wind blows.

"The customers pay the bills, ultimately," he says. **GCI**

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