

A BALANCING ACT

Owners wrestle with operational wants and needs. By Doug Saunders

We all know prioritizing wants and needs can be difficult. Every business owner strives to meet the wants and needs of his customers while meeting the wants and needs of his operations. But as many golf course owners know, this balancing act can be tricky.

It has been said getting what you want makes you happy but getting what you need will help you get what you want. Defining what you truly need is the hardest part of the equation.

While all golf course operators might agree the easiest answer to this operational dilemma is to increase rounds at higher green fees while reducing expenditures, they also know that such a simplistic approach to an operation can be foolish. The best operators in the golf industry have learned how to define their wants and needs and use them as guidelines in their operational strategies.

CONDITIONING FIRST

John Shields, owner and operator of Glenn Dale (Md.) Golf Course, an 18-hole public facility, believes the first step of determining his wants and needs is to define his facility.

"I want to place myself as best as I can within my immediate market," Shields says. "I would call my course a 'gray-collar facility' with \$55 greens fees. I'm a notch above the lower-end courses, and I'm below the private courses and newer daily-fee courses that have opened in our region. I've put a lot of effort into understanding who comes to play at my course and why they come. By constantly monitoring my market, it's easier to determine where I need to direct my resources."



Shields' primary concern is the condition of the golf course. Maintenance expenditures take top priority because he believes the golf course conditions will be more memorable to his customers than anything else.

"I know what it takes to keep my course in good condition, and that need is always funded," he says. "I don't make long-term budget plans because our budget is determined by what kind of year we have. If I have a good year, then I can fund things on my want list. This year, we've been able to address one of those wants: We're making improvements around our bunkers by cleaning up the collars and improving the sand quality."

Defining who you are and how you fit in your market is a concept that has guided Lane Lewis, owner and operator of Old Brockway Golf Course in Lake Tahoe, Calif. Lewis' nine-hole course was built in 1927 and now competes with eight 18-hole championship courses within a 30-minute drive.

"We have a seven-month season, and in this a resort area, golf is just one choice of activity for vacationers," Lewis says. "I want to make my course known as a quality golf experience that can be enjoyed in two and a half hours. Addressing the time crunch people feel these days opens a door of opportunity for me as a nine-hole course."

To achieve that, Lewis sees course conditions as a priority. Located in a pristine alpine environment, Lewis has made a long-term commitment to an organic course maintenance approach and has seen the added benefit of golfers returning to his course because they appreciate his "green" methods.

Uncontrollable factors such as weather can bring a facility's short-term goals into focus more clearly. Photo: Glenn Dale Golf Course



"I make all of my decisions based on long-term goals," he says. "My primary want is to make my operation sustainable. To do this, I need to commit to our organic programs. I also need to focus on proper staff who know how to make our players feel welcome."

MAKING TOUGH CHOICES

The definition of wants and needs for long-term planning is important, but it also must be addressed for the short term as well. Uncontrollable factors such as weather still affect a tee sheet and can bring short-term goals into focus.

Joe Hills, co-owner of Waverly Woods Country Club in Marriotsville, Md., and Blue Mash Golf Course in Gaithersburg, Md., says the two daily-fee courses have been well received in the local competitive market. Hills knows that course conditions are his primary priority. During the summer months, he wants players to be able to use the carts on the fairways. But a serious drought and severely high temperatures this past summer forced him to make a difficult choice.

"The weather had taken such a toll we felt we needed to protect the turf, so we made it mandatory to keep the carts on the paths during our busy month," he says. "Our rounds declined because of this decision, but we felt this was the right choice in the long run. Our wants and needs changed places."

Another variable that can drive the direction of wants and needs is liability. For Garry Setting, owner of Sea Pines Golf Resort on the central California coast near Morro Bay, property upkeep is an important concern because the eight-building facility consists of a nine-hole course as well as a 43-room hotel and restaurant.

"Our lodging income is my main focus," he says. "I would like to replace the roof and add a new entry to our conference room. But recently, my insurance carrier brought to my attention some potential liability problems that drove other projects from the wants category,

such as fixing walkways and sealing our parking area, into projects that needed to be addressed. We try to look at our needs three times a year, and this gives us the flexibility to deal with issues like this more easily."

Jeff Hogue, owner of Scott Lake Country Club, a 27-hole public facility near Grand Rapids, Mich., also knows the importance of being flexible.

"We spend a fair amount of time establishing long-term plans for Scott Lake, but reality is a big factor when determining what we can or can't do," Hogue says.

One of Hogue's long-term goals has been to find ways to balance his tee sheet with 75 percent of his play during the week and 25 percent of play on the weekends. This want has directed him to find ways to use his layout to bring in mid-week golf league play and create ways to make it easy for players to fit golf into their busy schedules.

"There has been a shift in the golfing public," he says. "Ten years ago, the regular golfer worked all week, and the Saturday or Sunday round was played in the morning. The regulars had to call by Thursday to guarantee a time. Today, the new regulars have more time constraints because they attend family programs, such as soccer and tee ball, on weekends. Now I have more

play in the afternoons and more players interested in just playing nine holes. Today, 60 percent of our rounds are nine-hole rounds. I've seen this trend and have taken it as a signal to make adjustments in my operation."

Hogue had wanted to improve his driving range for several years, and after seeing how time constraints were changing golfers' habits, he embarked on an ambitious expansion of his range, which required moving three golf holes that played around the existing range.

"We put together a plan to do the work without closing the range or the course," he says. "I opened the range this spring and have seen



Lewis



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OPERATIONS MANAGEMENT

Lodging income is the main focus for Gary Setting, owner of Sea Pines Golf Resort, an eight-building, nine-hole facility in Los Osos, Calif. Photo: Sea Pines Golf Resort



a phenomenal increase of activity. It also helped that I surveyed my market and knew that with other ranges closing I would be the only range available within a 20-mile radius."

Ron West of R.H. West Management oversees the operations of five courses in the Indianapolis area, which multiplies the challenge of determining wants and needs. His portfolio runs the gamut of operations, from overseeing the private Royal Oak Golf Club to leasing two municipal courses to owning two more daily-fee facilities.

"I let the department managers of each facility, such as the superintendent, the head pro and the food-and-beverage manager, list their own wants and needs," West says. "We also hold a two-day fall meeting in which we bring all of the managers together to develop our plan for the next operational year. This meeting lets us determine overlapping needs."

West found a few advantages to defining wants and needs while operating multiple facilities. He bundles the needs for all of his courses to get the best price possible for supplies. He shares equipment, such a core harvester and an aerifier, through his operations so the investment can benefit all operations. He also gleans ideas from his different managers so that information can be shared.

"It's interesting how the managers at the public courses, who have learned to do more

with less, can provide helpful suggestions toward our operation at our private facility," West says. "Sharing knowledge is invaluable."

KNOW YOURSELF

It's clear one of the most important steps in determining a golf facility's wants and needs is to define the facility's identity. An honest assessment of how one's course fits into a specific market can help determine where to spend. Whether an owner has just one course or several, the bottom line is that in a competitive environ-



Setting

ment, there's little room for budget mistakes.

"There was a rather misdirected effort during the past decade as courses bought into the concept of the 'country club for a day' approach," Hills says. "Increased spending on pro shop upgrades, expansive clubhouses, increased

staffing and improved entrances went from the want list as more operators saw them as a true need. This has led to some misdirected expenditures that have gotten some courses into financial trouble."

Shields concurs.

"The most important thing is to determine who you are, and then do what you can to be the best you can," he says. "If you want to jump your facility to the next level, make sure you have the resources to make that jump a success." **GCI**