

BY JOHN TORSIELLO

Define your niche

Facilities should determine what they do best, set themselves apart from the competition and market themselves for success

The owners of what would become Bloomingdale Golfer's Club in Tampa, Fla., knew they needed to differentiate their fledgling facility from the dozens of golf courses in the Tampa area in the early 1980s. Simply put, they needed to find their niche the marketplace.

"We needed to position ourselves apart from the other clubs in the area," says John Reeger, owner of golf consulting firm Briefcasegolf and a Class A PGA pro who became the director of golf at Bloomingdale. "Bobby Stricklin, who was one of the partners in the project after it was taken over from the initial developer, determined it was going to be a golfer's club. There were a lot of good, young players in the Tampa area at the time, and we wanted to be the place where they all played."



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FACILITY OPERATIONS

The owners of Bloomingdale, which has since been sold several times, structured their membership fees in creative ways to accommodate skilled golfers who had to travel significant distances to play the course.

They also offered special memberships to young players, such as future PGA Tour member Brian Kamm, allowing accomplished players and pros to pay \$200 a month, play all they wanted and hit balls on the practice range until their hands hurt.

"We had 200 players with single digit handicaps, 100 players who were a 5 and under and 50 players who were scratch," Reeger says. "Lee Janzen and Colleen Walker were members. We had a plethora of good golfers, whether they were milkmen or c.e.o.s of companies. We catered to the better players. That was our niche, and it worked."



Reeger

TARGET CUSTOMERS

This "golfer's club" concept has been attempted in other areas of the country with mixed results, Reeger says. It all comes down to knowing who you are, who your customers are and, most importantly, knowing what your customers want

and what you can provide. Sometimes those variables are area specific.

"The golf business is so fragmented and decentralized," Reeger says. "Some golf companies try to employ the same concept everywhere. The problem with that is once you've seen one club, you've seen them all. Where's that unique quality that sets you apart?"

The trick is to find out what 2,500 people in your market want and then give it to them, Reeger says. Sounds easy, right?

"You have to know who you are before you can create your business plan and marketing program," says Allan Irwin, c.o.o. of Empire Golf Management. "It's imperative you know who your customers or members are to be able to develop membership and golf marketing plans properly."

And just how does a developer or owner reach out to those 2,500 potential customers Reeger mentions?

"You have to do your market research on other courses in the market that are comparable to yours," says Jack Brennan, president of Plant City, Fla.-based Paladin Golf Marketing. "When I'm called in to look at a golf course, the owner usually wants me to play the course first. I play the other courses in the area first and see what my client is up against, and then we determine a game plan."

An Arthur Hills and Ed Shearon designed golf course was the final piece in the Renault Winery's overall development plan. The course is approaching 25,000 rounds a year. Photo: Renault Winery



PLACE IN THE MARKET

Brennan believes being a leader in a marketplace is essential to running a profitable golf facility.

"I say there are 22 immutable laws of marketing, and the first law is leadership," he says. "You have to put yourself in a position of leadership in your marketplace because the leader always wins. It's like Coca-Cola versus Pepsi."

A facility can be a leader in a number of categories, such as course conditions, slope rating, staff friendliness, the ability to host quality outings, and partnerships with other businesses in the area, such as hotels and restaurants.

"You have to find a category in which you excel – it can be more than one – and market that to the public," Brennan says. "What you're doing is positioning yourself in the marketplace, as opposed to branding, which is something a Pebble Beach or an Augusta National does well."

There are many tools with which developers and owners can ascertain their club's place in the market.

"I've used Pellucid, a consulting firm, to research golf demand in my target market area," Irwin says. "This, combined with the facility survey, usually makes it clear what type of facility should be developed and how to position an existing facility."



Brennan

But distinguishing a facility in a crowd can be challenging, says John Johnson, owner of J2 Golf Marketing.

"We talk about golf courses, but within the industry, there are municipal, daily-fee, upscale daily-fee, private and resort facilities," he says. "All of these are golf courses, but they appeal to different people."

Johnson provides an example in Ponte Vedra, Fla., where he worked with two clubs, Sawgrass Country Club and Marsh Landing Country Club.

"Both had country club as the last two words in their names and were a few miles from one another, but they were polar opposites," he says. "Sawgrass was a place for retired individuals, and Marsh Landing was a club where many of the members were young with families. We had to develop a new niche for each club for them to retain existing members but also develop a new clientele base to ensure their futures."

BUILD YOUR BRAND

Johnson agrees that determining what a course or club does best and then aggressively marketing those aspects is vital to strengthening the bottom line of existing facilities and allowing new facilities to establish themselves.

"You must develop a look and feel for your club, whether you're a high-end private club or a lower-end, daily-fee course," he says. "You do that by developing a visual theme for your course that positions you apart from the competition. You build your brand in the minds of your members through collateral materials, Web sites and e-mails. You need to reach out on a continual basis to your current and potential members."

Checklists and comment cards, sent via mail or e-mail to members, asking what they would like to see added to a course, can help position a facility as one that strives to meet the needs of paying customers. Staging social events for members, such as wine-and-cheese parties and equipment demo days, also can help define a club as member and player friendly and set it apart from other facilities that don't go the extra mile.

"Think outside of the box a little with some of your marketing efforts," Johnson says. "Everyone who visits a club, whether or not he or she is a member, wants to feel special."

One of the pitfalls course developers and owners need to avoid is trying to be all things to all people, Irwin says. Yet it's possible to be good in a number of categories as long as you don't overdo one aspect of the club's operation to the detriment of others.

"I worked with a wonderful semiprivate club in Chicago that was good at three or four aspects, which were all running smoothly," Irwin says. "The club has a Pete Dye-designed course, a 25,000-square-foot clubhouse and a 300-seat banquet facility. They were doing 30,000 rounds a year, about 10,000 each by members, the general public and outings. It was one of the best run golf businesses I've seen."

But while it's possible for a facility to be good at more than one thing, it's prudent to create an identity the market can readily understand, Irwin says.

"For example, it might be difficult to convey the idea you're a great family facility when your course has a slope rating of 149 or if you cater to corporations," he says. "Do your market study, and build your identity around a single concept at which you can be the best."



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ONE OF A KIND

The owners of the historic Renault Winery in Galloway, N.J., knew exactly what their property needed to complete plans for an all-inclusive resort: a world-class golf course. So the owners commissioned Arthur Hills and Ed Shearon to design and build a course that ambles easily through the winery's vineyard. The course was the final piece in the property's overall development plan that includes the winery, a hotel and several gourmet restaurants.

After three years, the course is approaching 25,000 rounds a year and is having the desired spillover effect on the hotel and restaurants, says Dennis Delvecchio, general manager for the Renault resort.

"Our niche in this market is that we're a one-of-a-kind destination," he says. "There's nothing like it anywhere on the East Coast, where you combine a winery, a hotel, fine dining and a championship golf course. We have set ourselves apart from the competition."

Building the golf course took some foresight and nerve. The area around Atlantic City is saturated with daily-fee courses, and adding

another track to the mix was risky.

"We knew it would work because we created an oasis here," Delvecchio says. "The owners live on the property, and they wanted to create a family feel and atmosphere. You can drive 30 minutes to the Atlantic City casinos and boardwalk, then return here and enjoy everything we have to offer in a country setting, whether that's playing golf on a great new course, enjoying a glass of wine, swimming in our pools or sampling a gourmet meal."

FLEXIBILITY AND QUALITY PEOPLE

Course developers and owners must not only understand existing conditions of their marketplace, they must also conduct long-range market analysis to forecast how changing conditions will affect their facilities, says Scott Beasley, vice president of operations for Meadowbrook Golf, based in ChampionsGate, Fla.

"You've got to know the direction you'll be heading in the future," he says. "Market conditions might change. You have to be flexible enough to be able to change what you're doing to accommodate different needs of the market

and your members."

For example, if you don't already have a fitness center at your club, babysitting on Friday nights and kids' tees on your golf course, you're behind the curve, Reeger says.

"All these little things that made blue-tee, 5-handicappers cringe a few years ago are what sets courses apart from the competition today," he says.

Finding and hiring quality people to staff your facility also is crucial in building and sustaining a brand, says Mike Diffenderffer, a former national director of marketing and membership for the Tournament Players Club network and now a part-time consultant.

"That was one of the things I did for 21 years – hire and train professional salespeople who could tell the whole story of the club and why it's different," he says. "And you have to be totally honest about what you are. It's not like you're selling a car. You have to see your members every day of the year." **GCI**



Beasley

The Renault Winery's niche in the market is that it's a one-of-a-kind destination on the East Coast, combining a winery, hotel, fine dining and a championship golf course. Photo: Renault Winery

