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## WHAT DO GOLFERS WANT MOST?

**W**hen golf was booming back in the 1990s, it was easy to be a genius, much like it was easy to be a stock-picking genius when the market rose 20 percent a year. In tough times, it's more difficult to look smart. But, some positive examples of genius in the golf course business are certainly still out there.

I am proud to say that one of my designs, Sand Creek Station in Newton, Kan., recently won the National Golf Foundation Annual Customer Loyalty Award in 2008 with a strong 87 percent rating. The award is based on customer responses to the course's staff friendliness, overall experience, value, course condition, amenities, scenery and aesthetics. Looking at the criteria, KemperSports, who manages the facility for the city of Newton, must be given much of the credit for the "experience" customers have.

It's clear that maintenance and service are important factors in customer loyalty. As someone who chooses golf venues based on playing a variety of courses, it's hard for me to fathom that about 90 percent of all "where to play" decisions are based on camaraderie, convenience and cost. Even so, there's so much competition out there that a quality experience is critical to your success.

While it also humbles me to see how low design ranks in decisions on where to play, I do think good design has some benefit in making facilities popular, even if it's largely intuitive to the golfer or mixed in with "aesthetics."

While golfers rarely notice design nuances (if they all did, I guess it wouldn't technically be a nuance) they do notice repetition in looks, club selection and features – especially negative repetition, like too many short or long holes, too many water hazards or too many narrow fairways. They also notice a course with few features that's totally boring, even when paying low fees.

Golfers do understand "value" – the feeling that they're getting a great experience for a reasonable price, no matter what the price level. A common comment on

Sand Creek Station is that it feels a lot more like a \$75 dollar course than a \$40 course.

But, it's a matter of degree – most golfers will play an expensive, difficult and well-known course occasionally (courses rarely get famous for being easy), but for their "everyday course," a facility like Sand Creek Station is popular because it isn't a back breaker or a bank breaker. Majority of the time, golfers want to play courses they intuitively recognize as "good" and shoot their normal score (not lose golf balls) and be able to enjoy some scenery.

However, catering to all 25 million golfers is getting increasingly difficult. The "typical customer" may be extinct. I believe future courses will be more narrowly targeted to a specific market segments rather than being aimed at "average golfers." An example would be

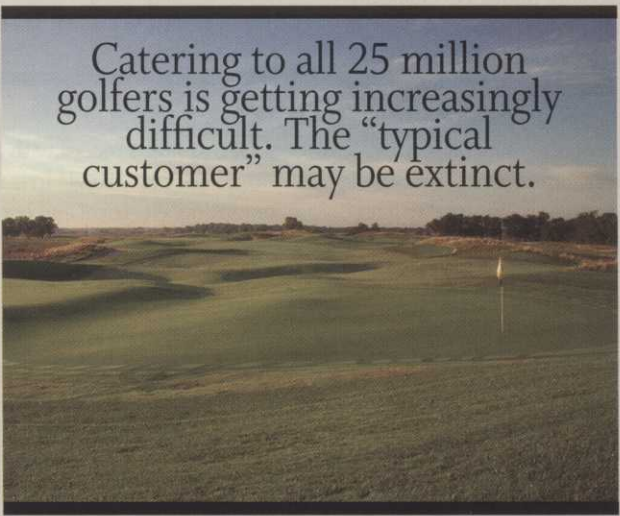
redesigning courses that lie within senior communities to provide what they want vs. the "championship course" that sold real estate initially.

While your customers can be harsh critics, asking for impossible ideals like lush, green fairways that give plenty of roll and soft greens that hold any approach shot but never get bumpy from traffic, in reality they aren't judging you against

Pebble Beach. Just as customers judge burger joints to burger joints and steak houses to steak houses, golfers judge similarly priced golf courses.

It's important that your "cues" tell golfers what it is they're getting for their golfing dollar. It's just as likely that spending money on flower beds at a low-priced course is as poor a business decision as not providing amenities at a high-price course.

Too many courses are competing only on price these days when with a little work and effort, they could probably charge more and golfers would happily pay it if the facility offered just a bit more value for the money. It might be worth asking some questions, rather than assuming your golfers like what you like and are the same as they've always been. **GCI**



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