



Pat Jones is president of Flagstick LLC, a consulting firm that provides sales and marketing intelligence to green industry businesses. He can be reached at psjhawk@cox.net or 440-478-4763.

GOVERNMENT THAT'S NOT DUMB

Big ideas sometimes come in small packages. I recently found one right in the palm of my hand.

The other day, I grabbed a can of Coke for a little mid-afternoon pick-me-up. I popped it open, took a gulp and glanced at the printing on the can to distract myself from the 93 things I needed to do for work. Isn't procrastination wonderful?

I noticed the can had some kind of ad or offer printed on it. You see these a lot. Usually it's a little promo that advertises some kind of discount for a theme park, renaissance festival (ack!) or NASCAR race or whatever.

But this ad was different. It was for the Cleveland Metroparks golf courses. It was a "buy one, get one" deal that allows two golfers to play for the price of one during limited hours.

I was – to use a wonderfully emotive Briticism – gobsmacked.

Someone at a municipal golf operation overseen by a bunch of county bureaucrats had created a brilliant idea to drive rounds and promote their facilities. I immediately wondered who dreamed this thing up, how much it cost and whether it was working.

So, I e-mailed my buddy Sean McHugh, CGCS, who's been the big cheese of Cuyahoga County's golf/turf department for years, and asked him if he was the super-genius behind the scheme. In a rare burst of honesty, he admitted he wasn't the originator of this scheme and gave all the credit to Jane Christyson, the director of marketing and clubhouse operations for the Metroparks. It turns out that golf is just one of her babies along with the parks themselves, various nature centers, facilities and programs. She does it all on a shoestring...but it's a pretty cool shoestring.

Every year, the Metroparks buys a lot of stuff – pop, bread, buns, beer, etc. – plus the inevitable balls, shirts,

clubs and turf products. They provide 108 holes of damned good golf to Greater Clevelanders and they generate about 340,000 rounds annually. So, because of the purchasing leverage they command, they are able to get – and I use this term bluntly for entertainment purposes only – kickbacks from the various suppliers.

Happily, those kickbacks – er, I mean marketing partnerships – are used for public good instead of personal gain (which is quite rare in Cuyahoga County, as I understand it from the appalling things I read in the paper lately). The Metroparks actually reinvests the money and other benefits into the system. What a concept, huh?

One of the benefits is a relationship with the local Coca-Cola bottler that makes it possible for them to put this amazing ad on a bazillion cans of pop. So, every time some hacker opens a soda can, he/she sees the cool Metroparks Golf logo and is offered a chance to fill a tee time during the slower hours on the sheet. And, gee whiz, it's actually a measurable promotion. They can count the number of can/coupons redeemed. "We know how it benefits us and they (the bottler) like the idea of a 'pour' off of a sponsorship," says Christyson. "It's not a warm fuzzy thing. We show them value of the investment."

But wait – as they say in the ShamWow infomercials – there's more!

Christyson and McHugh are also driving rounds through a modest media buy with a local TV station... which offers a value-add under which the station's very popular morning host does video podcasts. The local TV guy plays with the pro on the Metroparks courses and gives tips. The program is underwritten by a local bank sponsorship.

They're also using social media like Twitter and Facebook. Twitter "follow-

ers" can get updates on weather, aeration, special deals and other things that might affect play. There's even a Twitter-driven trivia contest that ties into the local TV deal. Again, they're measuring what works, according to Christyson: "We count column inches (of articles generated by PR), minutes on TV and radio and use a monitoring service and then we assign a dollar value to that exposure. Over ten or 12 years, we've had \$12 million in 'earned media' through those programs. Obviously, that's really important when we're reporting to our board."

What else? Among many other things, they're using "mystery shoppers" to secretly visit, observe and report on the experience of playing at the county's courses.

"Course condition is customers' No. 1 priority when deciding whether they come back again," she says. "So, it's critical that Sean and I work together on that."

How well do the turf guy and the marketing guru ham-and-egg it together? "It works out great," says McHugh. "We have a common goal... get more people on the golf properties. It's a no-brainer that marketing and maintenance work hand in hand."

The whole thing is part of a larger, decade-long branding effort to ensure that the Metroparks competes effectively in the Cleveland golf market. And, compared to the many government-operated facilities that are struggling, failing and getting spun off to management companies, Cuyahoga is doing quite well, thank you.

What hasn't worked? "Discounting!" they yell in unison.

"We've learned how incredibly careful you need to be to maintain your green fee structure," says Christyson. "You can't panic and cut prices. We may work for the government, but we're not dumb." **GCI**