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MAINTAINING MOMENTUM

A mild winter and an early spring gave owners and operators a head start on a promising year. Their challenge will come in sustaining the momentum long after a gentle spring has turned into the dog days of summer. If it's true that fortune favors the most prepared, here are three tactics that will give you an edge.

ENGAGE YOUR GOLFERS. The latest research from the National Golf Foundation (NGF) shows golfers make choices based on their sense of engagement. That means when they're choosing where to play, their choice is based more on where they feel they are appreciated than on their schedule or even price. As NGF CEO Dr. Joe Beditz says: "Golf will grow where golfers are engaged."

NGF data reveal that the number of U.S. golfers has declined but is expected to grow by about 3 million (approximately 1 percent) between now and 2020. Most of the growth is expected to come from high-income and high-participation (seniors) segments.

There will be winners and losers in the competition for the patronage and loyalty of these groups. The winners will be those who engage golfers. It's not hard; here are three simple ways to increase member and customer engagement:

- Know your golfers by name ... and use their names! According to the 2011 NGF study, most people value being recognized above all other factors.
- Make it easy for golfers to remain engaged by inviting them to come back.
- Encourage your most frequent golfers to introduce their friends and neighbors to your club or course.

EMPHASIZE FAMILY FIRST. The PGA of America has launched Golf 2.0 through its 24,000 members and countless collaborators in the golf business. One of the program's foundational elements is the recruitment and retention of women golfers. Women are the key decision makers regarding a family's leisure time activities and spending. What's more, women play with family and friends, which helps fill the tee sheet. Here are three ways to attract families by engaging women:

- Launch a family-first program that allows family time at your facility. Protect the tee times and make it comfortable for families to play without the pressure of more experienced golfers pushing them from behind. Create the "safe haven" that Jon Last of Sports and Leisure Research talks about by installing family tees and a short-course routing that makes your course attractive to families.

- Encourage children to play the game by making your course a safe place for recreation, environmental stewardship and entrepreneurship. Try inviting Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts to the course as a place where they can work toward badges. Remember, moms support those who are good to their children.

- Create a platform for socialization where women can gather with friends for as much golf as they wish to play. Who cares if that's fewer than nine or 18 holes. Make those who participate feel welcome... not simply tolerated.

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REWARD LOYALTY. Facilities that are increasing their customer bases are rewarding loyalty. Price discounting has proven, in most cases, a flawed strategy. However, there is great benefit in yield-management strategies that match price to market conditions to improve tee sheet utilization. Here are three ways to improve loyalty:

- Use the simple approach popularized by Southwest Airlines, which now benefits from an enormous audience of devoted customers. When you comp a free round after every 10 rounds played at your course, for example, you're effectively providing a 10 percent discount for your most loyal golfers without having to use the word "discount."

- Invite frequent golfers to special events. The three remaining major championships of the year – the U.S. Open, The Open Championship and the PGA Championship – provide great opportunities to shower your best customers with appreciation and recognition.

- Host an annual drawing and make every round played count as an additional entry in the drawing to improve the odds for your most frequent golfers. Then make the prizes exceptional – tickets to the PGA Championship or a trip to a luxury destination – and consider the costs the best advertising you could buy.

It appears that 2012 will be a good year for the golf business. But it will be better for some than others. The advantage will go to owners and operators who increase their capture of market share and who retain their best customers. **GCI**