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THE HOT TUB OF OPTIMISM

From the time I hit the ground in Vegas for the GIS I was bombarded, barraged and berated about the “sense of optimism about the market.”

It was almost as if golf’s powers that be had gotten together last year and decided to sing off the same sheet. “We feel a sense of optimism in the market,” they all said as if scripted to do so. Imagine that.

Thus, every report about the industry, every blog and every Tweet seem to (cautiously) resonate with sweet, sweet hope. We have (maybe) turned the corner! Golf is (sort of) back! We have staved off disaster (for now)!

As my tone might suggest I, for one, am still having a hard time drinking the optimism Kool-Aid. I’ve been around a long time and I have learned the value of being at least mildly bearish when I sense the gentle tickle of sunshine being blown up my butt.

For example, I’ve learned not to make broad, rosy economic pronouncements. This “teachable moment” occurred after a top-level superintendent called me out at the end of a gloomy state of the industry speech in Connecticut a couple of years ago: “Wait Jonesy... weren’t you the one who told us for years that East Coast private clubs were recession-proof?”

Did I really say that? Not me! Must have been my evil twin or Bill Cowher or somebody else with a cheesy porn mustache and a lot of loosey-goosey opinions.

Okay, so I’m not friggin’ Nostradamus. Mea culpa.

I will admit there are reasons to dip our toes in the hot tub of optimism:

- The weather is good and rounds are up. (Duh. Even a broken clock is right twice a day and it’s about bloody time for the seasonal facilities to finally catch a break.)

- The stock market and housing starts and unemployment and all the other such random statistics on the CNN ticker are better than they were a few years back. (Thanks for the fine work, Wall Street! I’m sure you’ll never let us down again. Glad you finally have it all figured out.)

- A lot of facilities have regrouped, gotten their finances in better order and tried to change. (My gut tells me many courses are still operating at a 2006 status quo and “waiting for things to bounce back.” This is roughly equivalent to waiting for Jimmy Hoffa and Amelia Earhart to come walking around the corner arm-in-arm.)

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So, as golf’s designated curmudgeon, I automatically worry that one of the kids may have peed in the hot tub of optimism. So I’m going to take a pass. But climb right in if you want. I’m sure it’s fine!

Let’s saunter across the patio to the swimming pool of pessimism and see what we find floating there:

- Massive competition for core customers’ time due to work expectations and kid-related obligations. In my lifetime, we’ve gone from children generally roaming free on weekends while dad sucked a few beers with his buddies on the back nine to today’s hellish parental death march schedule of soccer practices, dance recitals and travel hockey tournaments.

- Value pollution in the form of discounting. When a lousy operation up the street is giving away rounds of golf, it’s pretty damned hard not to panic and stoop to their level. When

the process goes national and is being driven by online tee-time discounters, how do you ever get back to a fair price for a round of golf?

- Some kind of pervasive aversion to providing good service. For god’s sake... there are 15,700 of you competing for a dwindling customer base. Can’t you at least slap on a smile and pretend you’re happy to see me?

So, let’s conclude our little chat about optimism over at the tiki bar of reality. I’ll have an O’Douls, but you should probably get something a bit stronger because this is going to sting a little. Are you ready?

Yes, optimism is a lovely thing. It

creates a bit of a placebo effect that seems to make those nasty symptoms go away. It can become a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. All of that is fine, but here’s the thing:

You can’t eat optimism. You can’t use it to pay your bank note. They don’t accept it as barter for fertilizer at your local turf distributor. Optimism won’t put one round on your tee sheet or get you one new member to sign on the dotted line.

Want to feel really optimistic? Take immediate steps to offer good golf at the right price, differentiate your course from the pack and provide excellent service. You can’t solve the social/time compression problem but you can steal the rounds from lesser operations just by getting better and telling people about it.

So, there, that’s what I think about the whole question about optimism. Happy now? **GCI**