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ZEITGEBER

Signals that guide marketing, membership and promotional programs

zeit•ge•ber (TSYT-ge-buhr) **n.** An environmental cue, such as light, that helps to regulate the biological clock in organisms to keep them functioning on a regular schedule.

Zeitgebers are nature's alarm clocks. For humans, the schedule of the work or school day and regular mealtimes, are zeitgebers. Superintendents, owners and operators recognize zeitgebers in the form of warmer soil temperatures and spring rains, which stimulate new root growth and signal the return of their customers.

But there are other zeitgebers you should heed, particularly weather and consumer confidence, which are impactful influences on golf participation and overall facility success. The first step in dealing with these zeitgebers is to understand them.

No factor influences the volume and frequency of rounds more than weather. Every owner and operator should understand weather patterns and take them into account for budgeting, planning the deployment of resources and, ultimately, cash flow.

In a business like golf, where success often straddles a fine line that divides good and bad decisions, knowing whether the forecast is for warm and dry or cool and wet is essential for effective planning. Whether you rely on the old-school Farmers' Almanac or current state-of-the-art capabilities provided by companies such as WeatherBug, owners and operators today have easy access to highly reliable weather trends to aid their business planning.

If all signs point to a wetter-than-normal season, you should be more aggressive in capturing and retaining golfers. Seasonal programs that reward frequency and customer loyalty should take priority in a rainy season, when every good day must be maxi-

mized. On the other hand, if the long-range forecast is for great weather, with an abundance of playable hours, you want to make sure your operation is running at peak efficiency so you maximize tee times. That means examining your pace-of-play guidelines and making sure your pricing reflects the anticipated demand.

“As sure as daffodils and dandelions are poking their heads above ground in many parts of the country, business signals are also there for the eye to see.”

Consumer confidence is another zeitgeber to heed. The Conference Board – a highly reliable reference point for consumer confidence – highlights three primary influences on consumer confidence: unemployment, housing and access to capital. Course operators should pay attention to all three.

- Unemployment rates are trending downward in many (but not all) markets. This zeitgeber signals participation levels and what should be expected when pricing the services of the club or course. Every club should have a current understanding and up-to-date market knowledge of employment in its area. Levels of education achieved, annual household income and other census-driven metrics also signal favorable market conditions.

- The housing economy directly impacts the stability and growth of most major metro markets. Housing influences the flow of families into a community, which in turn, affects membership at many golf facili-

ties. This flow of new families and school-age children is the lifeblood of demand for most courses. In addition, the housing sector – and the thousands of jobs that go along with it – improves employment statistics and the willingness to spend on discretionary items such as rounds of golf and memberships.

Home sales historically are at their highest in the spring and early summer. So that's the time for courses to be aggressive in capturing members and conducting family-oriented programs. Home sales slow around Labor Day as families want to be settled before the start of the school year.

- Access to capital and the ability for prospective homeowners to qualify for bank-finance mortgages also affects the health of clubs and facilities. Debt that supports and increases homeowner occupancy is currently constrained. New policy at the Federal Housing Administration makes it difficult to qualify for a home mortgage. Golf owners and operators can benefit from monitoring this indicator of consumer confidence. This factor influences lifestyle choices for golfers and prospective members at middle-market clubs.

As sure as daffodils are poking their heads above ground, business signals are also there to see. Pay attention and take action. **GCI**