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Professional Turf & Ornamental Products



Judy Hutt, manager of Shadow Valley Golf Course says golf facilities should identify what they're best at – whether it's leagues, instruction, pace of play, junior programs, etc. – and strive to excel in that area. Doing so will drive word-ofmouth, she says.

their dollars.

"People will not spend money on a whim," Porter says.

Tom Everett, director of operations for Landscapes Unlimited's Landscapes Golf Group, which operates 13 golf courses throughout the country, says the company is making sure its customers won't want to leave its courses.

Another Joe Jemsek colleague, Judy Hutt, manager of the Shadow Valley Golf Course in Boise, Idaho, says when things are tight operators must go back to the basics, which often means thinking like a customer.

"Separate yourself from the competition," Hutt says. "If you're the same as everybody else, the only differentiation is price. And when you get into that price and discounting game, you'll die."

ADDING VALUE

Operators believe the following are crucial to success:

Hiring customer- and service-oriented people;

- Producing and retaining new golfers;
- Filling dead times creatively;

· Focusing on what the club does best;

and

Adding value.

"What owners don't understand is if they

give people a 20-percent discount, then so what?" Alfonso says. "Find a way to give an extraordinary gift to someone who will be motivated to use it. Don't run the risk of slashing your green fees. Send out a thousand invitations to bring guests. When they get there, say: 'Sam, today we have a special promotion. With a cart rental you get a free sandwich.' The next thing you know, they'll spend \$8 to \$10 they might not have spent."

Once golfers are in the clubhouse, Alfonso suggests pointing out that you're taking a certain percent off anything in the golf shop, not cutting prices.

"You've created a way for that person to be motivated to come to your shop first," he says. "Once they get there, you make it almost impossible not to spend money."

Hutt advises not to discount rates. "If you have to do something, add something to the existing rates," she says. "We don't charge for tees, repair tools or ball markers. We don't put 'free' on them because if you do, there's no value to them. Our repair tools cost \$1. But when people get them, we just say, 'Don't worry about it.' People are always surprised."

Everett is an advocate of the free-prize concept. "If you're coming to one of our facilities, you experience something you wouldn't get at a comparable facility down the street," he says. "We offer free Hot Tamales on the tables, complimentary shoe-cleaning on prime weekend mornings. We're making sure our existing customers don't want to leave."

Everett doesn't discount rounds, but a \$30 green fee may include a \$10 lunch, a sleeve of balls or hat. He offers an all-day play rate for specific times and days. If it's \$30 for 18 holes, golfers can play 27 holes for \$30 or 36 holes for \$30.

Normally Illinois in November is cool and people don't ride carts. So Alfonso developed the Ride The Rail promotion: rent a cart and get a free barbecue sandwich and slice of pumpkin pie with whipped cream. "They got a sandwich that cost me \$1 to make, but I got their cart fee," he says.

Another time Alfonso rewarded golfers who arrived a half-hour early for their tee times with a small bucket of balls for the range. Many ended up buying midsize or large buckets instead of settling for the small bucket.

"As a daily-fee golf course owner, I'll create a reason for you to come to the golf course," he says.

Pacific Springs Golf Club in Omaha, Neb., hosts 9,000 event rounds each year and distributes a bounce-back for each of those.

"Each outing participant – whether they're brought by an association, business or charity – gets a chance to come back and play for an off-peak discount," Everett says. "And we have loyalty programs at each facility. When someone pays a dollar, they get a point and can redeem those points for green fees, merchandise, range balls, etc."

TREAT THEM RIGHT

When it comes to employees, Hutt recommends hiring people with the right attitude and then train them.

Everett agrees, pointing to the fish philosophy of customer service the Landscapes Golf Group rolled out in 2008. "Of all our goals, service is our No. 1 focus," he says. "Hiring is huge. It's finding the right people, the right fit for the position instead of just hiring a warm body. We treat them right, compensate them fairly and retain them."

The fish program, the tenets of which are "reeling in customers" by treating them superbly, costs nothing and sets courses apart from their competition. Training drives home the importance of treating customers extraordinarily well.

For Jemsek, whose father Joe said there's no such thing as a bad customer, it's crucial to treat existing customers well and with a smile to retain their play.

"Sometimes our worst teacher of the golf swing was our best at getting people to play golf because he thought golf was fun," he says.

Hutt has latched on to this notion, as well. "We're in the entertainment business," she says. "Golfers pay us to have a good time."

Hutt asks her employees three questions every year: What do we sell? Who's the boss? What is the No.1 opportunity to create a raving fan? First answer: Fun and entertainment. Second answer: The customer.

"If a customer asks, 'When do you open?' then I say, 'An hour before you want to arrive.' If they ask when I close, then I say a half hour after they leave," Hutt says.

And the third question's answer: The complaint and how you handle it. "If we did something wrong, I want to make it right," Hutt says. "I'd much rather have someone come in and talk to me about it. Once they drive out of that parking lot, it's probably too late."

What golf course using rangers does not encounter conflict?

At Shadow Valley, which operates a Pace of Play program, Hutt softens the ranger-golfer relationship so rangers are "ambassadors not marshals." "Our standard policy is if it's below 70 degrees out, then we send out hot coffee and brandy," she says. "If it's above 90 degrees, then we send out cold water." The servers? Rangers.

"We want something to do every day for every player," Hutt says. "I've adopted some things from the hotel industry. I remember checking into a Doubletree Hotel and getting a big warm chocolate chip cookie. So every day we bake fresh oatmeal, walnut-cranberry cookies and the only way you get one is to play golf.

"Our player assistants [rangers] make sure everyone gets a cookie," she adds. "It softens their effect. People look forward to seeing them. It also gives them an easy way to approach a group if they do need to talk about slow play."

Tournaments and other outings are the times for a golf facility staff to prove its worth.

"Corporate outings, charity events, whatever it is, we treat them so well they don't want to go anywhere else," Everett says. "We try to make it as easy as possible on our event coordinators. Without doing their recruitment for them, we take care of most everything else."

Pacific Springs, which generates 44,000 total rounds a year, almost has its entire annual rounds booked by April 1, accounting for 9,000 outing rounds and 11,000 league rounds.

"All our club managers stay in touch with

past outings, are involved in local chambers of commerce and go to our vendors," Everett says. "We want to make sure the people we're doing business with are doing business with us."

Anything Hutt can do to take pressure off the tournament chairmen, she does. "We even have someone on site to give massages," she says. "We get the signs ready, take them out and bring them in and store them for next year. I want to hold onto those signs because it gives them a reason to come back. When they show up in the morning we have the register table, we'll do registration; everything's alphabetized. The carts are ready. Certificates are done. We take care of everything. All they have to do is get the players and the sponsors. Once they e-mail that to us, their job is done and ours is just beginning.

"We love doing that," she adds. "To me, if an outing is played at our facility, I want to have control of the outing so people will know it is done right and our reputation is kept intact."

In Chicago it appears the number of outings will remain about the same, Jemsek says, although he predicts he will see fewer homebuilder and auto-dealer events.

Regardless, Alfonso adds, "If you continue to offer exemplary service and better value, then everything will be just fine."

COMMUNICATION

Solid customer communication improves service and the bottom line.



"We try to stay in touch on a frequent basis, but not too frequent – seven- to 14-day intervals," Everett says. "We don't want to irritate them but we want to keep our names in front of them. We use our e-mail marketing system very efficiently to promote tee times, coursesponsored events, banquets and the like."

Hutt mails Christmas cards every year with a coupon for a free bucket of balls to people who have played Shadow Valley. And every second year Hutt e-mails surveys asking what people want at the course.

"Sometimes it's as little as water coolers, or fixing an uneven tee box," she says. "We let people know we've responded to the surveys."

E-mail, Hutt says, is an effective way to market.

"These are our customers," she says. "If I'm going to mark down my merchandise I want to go to my customers. If club managers aren't into e-mail they're missing the boat."

PRODUCING GOLFERS

"So many times we say golf is stagnant. Well, who is going to create players if we don't – at the grass-roots level?" Hutt says. "People need to embrace that it's not just dad going out on Saturday and Sunday mornings any more. To grow your business you have to embrace the whole family – dad, mom and all the kids. We learned a long time ago to keep the kids happy. There is not a lot of money in the junior programs. Make the kids happy and mom and dad will come along. So we focus a lot on the juniors and do a lot with them."

To that end, Frank Jemsek created Family Golf, a program which has exceeded his expectations. Sunday evenings after 6 p.m. \$10 per person pays for golf and a cart – the only qualifier being that one person has to be over 21 and one under 12. Any child who plays four holes gets a coupon for a soft drink and a treat at the clubhouse.

"The kids come in for the treat and the family comes in to eat," Jemsek says, adding research shows if the entire family plays from the same tees, children are much more likely to continue playing. "The longest hole is 120 yards," he adds. "When a kid gets lucky on a 40-yard hole and ties or beats mom or dad, they're hooked."

Hutt also operates successful Family Nights on Sundays, as well as a number of activities for children throughout the summer. Youths can play any day of the week after 3 p.m. for \$5. They get a free bucket of balls every time. In addition, clinics throughout the summer regularly draw 350 youths. "Do the math. That means 700 adults," she says.

Meanwhile, Friday night scrambles are a weekly highlight, and Saturday nights focus on a couple's league strictly for fun, with golf and dinner packaged for a good time out.

Women are an untapped market, Hutt says. Golf historically has done a passable job attracting women, but a poor job at retaining them. "We have to realize that we can't have the same programs for women that we have for men," she says. "Boys at 6 are competitive. Men like competition. With girls it's all about having a good time, not competition."

While the ladies league tees off at 6:15 p.m. the newly formed Swingers – women who don't want to compete but still share the social environment – tee off afterward.

"All of a sudden there are more women in the Swingers than our league," Hutt says. "What can we do for women who just want to have a good time?"

FILLING DEAD TIMES

These programs serve three purposes – attracting golfers and filling the tee sheet while filling the coffers. However, men's, women's, juniors' and seniors' leagues operate on weekdays, but "dead time" means "zerorevenue time."

After those weekday leagues tee off, it's too late to set tee times because people can't finish 18 holes. However, golfers could play a few holes, Hutt says, which inspired the "bucka-hole" concept. "It has become unreal," she adds. "We never advertised a buck-a-hole but we're averaging \$800 to \$1,000 a night on a buck-a-hole.

It doesn't get dark in Idaho until 10 p.m., so quite a few people can squeeze in 18 holes.

Because tee sheets tend to be full in prime time, Alfonso says club managers need to use their imagination. "Do something your neighbor is not doing," he says. "When they copy you, find something else that's unique."

Later this year Hutt intends to start Million Dollar Mondays. "Every Monday someone will be stationed on a par-3, the longest putt will be identified and we'll give out a gift certificate," she says. "We'll narrow the field with a 'putt-off' each month. At the end of the year we'll get the media involved. One player will putt for a million dollars."

WHAT THE CLUB DOES BEST

Every golf course owner should ask, "What do I do better than anybody else. What am I known for?" Hutt suggests, adding if the answer is "nothing," then immediate changes are necessary. "We're known for pace of play, strong juniors, our men's association and corporate outings," she says. "We make sure we do a good job with everything we do and depend on positive word of mouth. You take care of the customers and I think the customers will take care of you."

[•] Every course can afford to improve its aesthetics and landscape, such as the entry road, the first tee and 18th green, around the clubhouse and parking lot. These areas are ripe for facelifts at many privately-owned public facilities.

Should course-maintenance expenses be cut?

No, is the unanimous answer. Everett even has a rule of thumb to determine the dollar figure.

"In course maintenance we're not looking to cut a bunch of dollars, but we are looking to make sure that if we are only getting a \$30 green yield we're only providing that experience to the golfer," he says. "We can't provide a \$50 course as it relates to conditions if we only get a \$30 green fee. Make sure the balance is correct.

"This is not scientific, but I've always believed you can spend \$100,000 in maintenance for every \$10 worth of green fees you're getting. If you're getting \$30 you can spend \$300,000."

Everett warns against overspending "but not under-spending, either," he says.

Hutt's advice: do things that will blow someone's socks off. "We ask ourselves, 'What can we do to blow anybody's socks off. How would we blow our socks off?"

THE FUTURE

No one's predicting the future, but Jemsek offered a perspective.

"Yes, I'm concerned," he says. "You just don't know what's coming. I hope it doesn't become 1929 again. I don't think that will happen. That was much more severe than now. A huge number of cities and counties have postponed infrastructure work ... and the guys who work on those projects are our customers. The NGF [National Golf Foundation] says more kids are playing golf than ever now: two and a half to three times more than the 1950s and 1960s. Eventually those kids will be a market."

Joe Jemsek would be proud. GCI

Mark Leslie is a freelance writer based in Monmouth, Maine.



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Golf facilities operated by management companies, like Billy Casper Golf-run Ka'anapali Golf Resort in Hawaii, may benefit from group pesticide-purchasing discounts.

Realistic expectations

Difficult economic times force superintendents to rethink pesticide use.

Golf course superintendents are an imaginative flot, adept at squeezing every last penny out of their annual operating budgets, whether that means coaxing an old mower through one more season or timing chemical applications to weather conditions to maximize efficacy.

Stung by last year's high fuel prices, superintendents and course managers have been in a savings mode for at least 12 months, if not longer. With the onset of a deepening recession and anticipation of less revenue because of a possible decrease in rounds in 2009, turf managers will be looking even closer for ways to save money. Brian Long, superintendent at Doublegate Country Club in Albany, Ga., has a mandate from ownership to cut his maintenance budget by \$100,000 this year. He plans a \$20,000 reduction in the fertilizer and pesticide line items.

"I feel I can have this reduction without really changing my pesticide program," he says. "I just plan to watch my spending."

The economy will affect Paul Brandenburg's operation dramatically.

"We'll definitely purchase less control products this year," says the certified golf course superintendent at Furman University Golf Course in Greenville,

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S.C. "We'll become more curative and less preventive. I will cut down on pesticides when possible. I anticipate more spot treatments rather than broadcast treatments.'



One of the cost-saving

measures Brandenburg instituted this year was to take advantage of early order programs that allow him to receive discounts on pesticide purchases. He's already stocked for the entire year. Others, such as Brian Powell, CGCS, at Old Chatham Golf Club in Durham, N.C., purchased pesticides early but will delay their delivery until he needs to use them.

ACCEPTING HIGHER THRESHOLDS

Because of the questionable state of the economy and a resulting tighter budget, Gari Scherting, superintendent at Palm Valley Golf Club in Goodyear, Ariz., plans to accept higher thresholds when it comes to pests on the course. He'll cut down on pesticides, and that relates to his IPM program.

"From what I hear from other superinten-

dents, some are cutting way down on applications and say they'll basically worry about the outcome rather then using preemergent chemicals. Others say they'll continue with applications but will be more efficient with what they use," Scherting says.

Jeffrey Connell, superintendent at Columbia Country Club in Blythewood, S.C., agrees acceptance of higher thresholds for pest incursions will have to be tolerated in light of the current state of the industry.

"These times will allow for higher thresholds," he says. "These levels will be tested, and the lines of communication between golfers, management and superintendents will be tested as well. You'll have to address the issue before it becomes a visual problem for the course."

Informing paying customers what's happening on the course and why, as well as what they can expect regarding daily conditions will be key to establishing a realistic set of expectations among golfers.

Targeting specific areas of the course that have had pest problems previously will help superintendents spot treat more effectively and avoid widespread damage.

"The use of mapping and GPS hot spots, or target areas, on the course and treating just those high priority areas, while letting others tolerate higher disease and pests, is something we may have to do," Connell says.

CUTTING BACK CAREFULLY

While economic realities call for a bit of tough love for their courses, superintendents and managers are hesitant to alter their IPM programs significantly.

"If you view turf quality as an infrastruc-

ture component, it would be shortsighted to take such a risk there," says Bryan Bielecki, vice president of agronomy for Billy Casper Golf.



small percentages of mon- Scherting ey on several line items, so, in aggregate,

BCG is looking to save

the company isn't compromising or risking large-scale impacts. "The cost to recover is just too high from a

material and client perception standpoint," Bielecki says.

The superintendents who report to Dan



Above: Judd Newsome, superintendent at The Ranch Golf Club in Southwick, Mass., says the downturn may help lower golfers' inflated expectations. Right: Billy Casper Golf-managed facilities, like Wintonbury Hills Golf Course in Bloomfield, Conn., are looking to save small percentages from several line items that won't have large-scale impacts.



Evers, regional director of agronomy for Casper's Mid-Atlantic region, monitor turfgrass conditions vigorously, observe the weather and time pesticide applications to



help reduce the number of plant protectant applications, thus saving money.

Dave Wasenda, owner of Appliedgolf, a management and consulting firm that operates eight facilities in New Jersey, Maryland, South Carolina and Indiana, also is hesitant to tinker with IPM programs and pesticide purchases.

"The economy has made us rethink our strategy with our overall operation of the golf course; however, pesticides are something we really don't want to fool with in the big scheme of things," he says.

Because companies like Billy Casper Golf and Appliedgolf oversee, own or manage numerous courses, they benefit by having superintendents order pesticides as a group to obtain discounts on large purchases.



A CATCH-22

There can be a Catch-22 logic when looking for ways to reduce operating budgets. For example, if Jedd Newsome's labor budget was reduced, he'd have to look at changing how he cares for The Ranch Golf Club in Southwick, Mass., where he's superintendent.

"That would probably bring more pesticides into use," he says. "This is what many people don't understand. If we have thatch and we're limited in labor, we have no way to remove thatch effectively without disrupting play. So what's the situation if I can't remove thatch and it breeds disease? Spray, of course. One fairway application can cost between \$7,000 and \$8,000, and that costs more than half of what I pay a laborer for the season."

Newsome believes it's vital for superintendents to communicate such concerns to ownership to avoid having to use more pesticides in the long run.

Ben Ratzlaff will continue to spray pesticides preventively on the greens at River Oaks Golf Course in Cottage Grove, Minn., four or five times this season but spot treat as needed in the fairways and elsewhere.

"You have to be careful before you make any big changes in your pesticide program," Ratzlaff says.

The last thing Scott Ledet wants to do is curtail his preemergent pesticide program.

"I'm going to keep doing what I've been doing since the course opened 10 years ago," says the superintendent at Gray Plantation Golf Course in Lake Charles, La. "You cut back on your preemergents, and it ends up costing you more in the long run to fix the problem. While I may tolerate a few more pests on our driving range, I won't on our greens, tees and fairways."

SPENDING LESS

Ledet plans to keep it old school, which means using less expensive products whenever possible, putting up with a few more problem areas away from the main playing surface and cleaning up eyesores when they occur.

Powell believes spending less on chemicals is simply a matter of good business.

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PESTICIDE PURCHASING

"The majority of superintendents I speak with are always looking for ways to spend less money and be more efficient in their operations," he says. "That alone dictates using pesticides only where



needed and only when no other effective alternative exists."

One way to reduce the amount of pesticides used preventively or curatively is to reduce the amount of area that's highly maintained.

"We just won't be managing the rough areas farther out from the fairway," Ledet says. "You tolerate a few more problems out there than you used to."

Superintendents will use generic pesticides as another way to save money.

"I'm not 100-percent sold on generics, but I'll research the companies," Long says. "I've used generics in the past, and they're a good way to cut costs, but you have to be careful because some may not be worth the savings." Superintendents at Appliedgolf-managed properties have used generics but that doesn't mean all products used are generic.

"We always ask our superintendents to talk to their peers and compare notes," Wasenda says. "If a good report on a new or generic product is made, it's usually tried."

But some superintendents are hesitant to opt for widespread use of generic pesticides, even in the face of budget restraints.

"I'll consider buying generics but probably won't," Brandenburg says. "I feel a brand loyalty to the companies that did the original research and development."

Powell agrees, citing the larger chemical manufacturers still do a lion's share of the research or research funding.

"It's important our industry supports them, so that advancements that lead to more efficient products continue to come to market," he says.

REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

The harsh realities of a deep and long-term

economic recession and fears about what that might mean to the golf industry worry managers. Communication and collaboration at all levels of management and staff will be important to a golf course's physical health and fiscal viability during the next several years.

"Almost everyone I talk to has had their budgets reduced," Newsome says. "They all do their best to educate boards and owners about the ramifications of doing so. It is a tough time, no doubt."

But the situation may be a blessing in disguise.

"Expectations (for course conditions) have gone through the roof," Newsome says. "We have 20 handicappers complaining because the bunkers aren't consistent. We're all going to be forced to cut somewhere, which may not be a bad thing. Maybe some of the lofty expectations will come back down a bit. Greens will always be a priority, but some other areas may fall to the wayside a bit."

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