

# If I were a pro...

The pro has so many plusses going for him that this merchandiser wishes he had even just the 'locked-in' loyal clientele

by Jimmy Brown

Co-partner in Steven Brown Sports, Salt Lake City

If I weren't co-partner in a sporting goods store, there is no profession that I would more gladly follow than that of club professional. For one thing, I would be near to playing scratch golf—instead of playing to a fluctuating, frustrated 7-11 handicap! For another, I would enjoy capitalizing on the historic advantages of running a golf shop next to the playing area.

The pro has so many plusses working for him that I, as a merchandiser, would love to have even just the "pro-only" line and the "locked-in" loyal clientele. Also, he is able to select and advise equipment for players he teaches, and has a definite advantage in the area of charges to members. There is no accounts receivable problem where the club collects all members' charges. This should allow the pro to operate without any credit restrictions if the member is in good standing.

Of course, there is the other side to the coin. Advertising aimed at the consumer (golfer) motivates him into expecting a greater variety of goods than the golf pro shop can economically carry. And a superficial display of many different items with no depth is like *having no merchandise at all*. A club clientele can also grow "old" and become more difficult to motivate into the new and changing ideas in merchandise. However, both these problems can be overcome by sound merchandising methods.

## CREDIT AND INVENTORY

In order to properly set up your program of equipment and soft goods, it is imperative that you put your financial house in order. You cannot ask the manufacturer to carry your inventory without a sound payment schedule.

Inventory, carefully selected and sold at a consistent profit, is the center of your entire operation. Should you neglect the payment of your accounts, you lose the inherent advantage of the best lines and most widely accepted merchandise.

All manufacturers are enthusiastic if you buy, sell and pay. But lose the continuity by dragging your (payment) spikes across their green and they justly become more irate than a golf course superintendent. Your credit line should be backed either by a working agreement with the financial institution of your choice or by some other means, either personal or private.

## MERCHANDISE AND DISPLAY

To move the merchandise, you must now coor-

dinate the "dollar bills" you have bought and display them to their best advantage.

Yes, it is a pet theory of mine in the business that you sharpen your senses if, instead of thinking in terms of how to display a pair of slacks worth \$25, you imagine to yourself, "How do I best display a twenty-five dollar bill?" Create in your mind a visual "dollar bill" theory wherein everything that is stacked, sorted, exchanged and negotiated by you, the pro businessman, is a dollar bill with which you hope to entice the member to give you his dollar bills in return.

Not one of us would throw slacks carelessly into a dingy corner if they were *actually* dollar bills. We would look to hang them in a suitable and eye-catching manner, so that they would be admired—and bought. Another example would be an attractive display of golf caps on a convenient rack instead of hiding one cap from another by piling one on top of another.

Golf clubs, blended with the richness of bag display, combine to be the focal theme of the hard goods. Here again, the temptation to stock a little bit of everybody's merchandise, instead of relying on fewer manufacturers and having a solid presentation in depth is a malady we have to resist.

There are many fine people making equipment, but playing with thin merchandise, and having no particular program to put your salesmanship behind, could be contributing to a buildup of inventory.

I'll go further. How can you convince a member that he should buy the new "Titanic-shaft" woods, when you are stocking woods made by scads of other manufacturers. You, as a pro, are in a unique position. You can select what you think is the best club and push it. Then you have to make sales!

Naturally, I can't cover *all* the fine points of display here, but there are three things I consider vital to success—cleanliness, comfort and coordination.

There is no finer display than a clean, orderly-maintained shop. Fancy fixtures and expensive appointments mean *nothing* if cleanliness and neatness are ignored. With these principles in mind, I would also carpet my shop in the vital areas, if not all the areas.

I strongly believe that carpeting not only enhances the quality of the "dollar bills" you are selling, but is most practical in upkeep and appropriate in theme for the quality goods of the shop. The customer is warmed and more comfortable, as is the pro and his staff.

Coordination is a story all by itself, but I will say

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this. Too many shops have various isolated articles displayed throughout the shop without having a theme—an idea that makes the whole shop hang together.

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**"Above all, don't become  
set in your  
ways. Last year's  
'in' color speedily becomes  
this year's yawn."**

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Basically, this means you must have related merchandise displayed together—not scattered all over the shop. Clubs, bags, and club covers should be displayed in the same section. The same goes for the clothing, from hats through shirts, sweaters, slacks and socks to shoes. The displays then implant in the customer the idea of buying "something else" as well as the item he had originally in mind.

Coordination of color is also vital. This is where a lot of us men find ourselves initially a little "at sea." However, this skill can be learned. Look at the displays in the better stores, study manufacturers' catalogs, read the fashion articles in magazines, and, if in doubt, ask a woman. (Practically all women have a consuming interest in fashion.) Above all, don't become set in your ways. Last year's "in" color speedily becomes this year's yawn.

### THE "CAPTIVE" CUSTOMER

Assuming you have a membership-type club, sales can be achieved by using imagination in promotion.

If I were a pro, I would definitely have a membership identification file. I would tastefully ask all members, including their wives and teenage children, to assist me in filling out their cards. These would list not only name, address and standard golf club information, but also their sizes in shoes, shirts, slacks, skirts, etc., in color preferences.

Request this on the basis that it helps you to develop a statistical program of sizes when you go to buy the merchandise. It would certainly help the member identify with your shop. For example, when a husband is buying a present for his wife, it serves as a great sales tool to have a card on the wife stating her size or color preference.

### THE PROFESSIONAL IMAGE

To be a pro, dress like one. You are not an accountant, a lawyer, or a doctor, so don't play your

customer's life. Create an image that will excite your member by dressing in taste, but dressing with the idea that *you are your own best model*.

How are you going to sell bright, colorful clothing if you yourself don't appreciate it? I would select at least a dozen outfits and see to it that I followed a pattern of interchange throughout the season.

As for my employees in the shop, I would insist that they, within their means, have at least four or five basic outfits. Better still, I would subsidize them in this so that I could control the final "look." Even the caddies would have some sort of clothing theme, even if only a distinctive T-shirt or other suitable clothes. This would, of course, help create my particular professional image.

Don't ever forget that image is what separates comparable products. And if industry goes to expensive ad agencies to work up a theme, why can't you, the pro, do the same to sell yourself and your shop with its colorful program of first class equipment and colorful clothing?

### DEFENSIVE BUYING

I have spent a great deal of time visiting pro shops to enhance my own viewpoint. The one glaring error that stands out is that most pro shops either don't have sufficient merchandise or seem to adopt an attitude that "we don't want to stock much because we hate sales."

Who doesn't? I don't, in my store, and Macy's chain of retail stores doesn't, but this is part of the game.

To properly motivate your clientele, don't make the mistake of being the "perfect buyer" and have on hand only the "goods that sell." *It can't and won't happen.* Too many lost sales, and driving the customer out the door due to weak stock, is by far, worse than having to hold an end-of-season close-out sale.

The only way you make profit in business is by selling at full markup. You lose this and you lose your initiative as a businessman.

With each new season you must present a new and complete picture or the customer will not be motivated into buying. Let him know that you had an aggressive and bona fide clean-up sale—and you psychologically set him up for your spring sales pitch.

If you think sales of a close-out nature are detrimental to your shop, how come we city sporting goods stores are able to operate 12 months successfully, having the same buying and selling problems, but without the advantages you have inherent in your operation?

Here is a sales formula that we exercise every year. Besides a very attractive and aggressive golf department, we are very dominant in the ski selling

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season—a highly volatile and short season dependent on weather just as is the golf season.

In ski merchandising, we stock the "pro shop" with all the pro-quality items such as "Head" skis, "Bogner" clothing (imported) etc. We have a clientele that consists of people that belong to all the fine clubs in the area, and we have been doing business with them for 14 years.

We sell at full markup from October through the winter ski season until February, when, even though there are still great ski conditions, the ski sales wane dramatically. We now prepare to have a sales cleanup. In the ski business, you must order and stock heavily or you lose too many profitable sales or you lose business to your competitor who has a better and deeper inventory of fine goods.)

So, at a given date in late February, and even though our competitors start advertising their cleanup sales heavily in the newspapers, we send to our customers a small, formal, well-done invitation that states we are desirous of offering them the opportunity of coming in and making great buys on quality merchandise (exclusive, of course, of restricted franchised items not allowed, such as "Head" skis).

Would you believe that we are so swamped in our store that \$20,000 plus is rung up in one day? Note one important admission: The ski season is still on, and the items bought can still be used right away. Timing, and not being afraid to clean up though you have some remaining play are the keys to success.

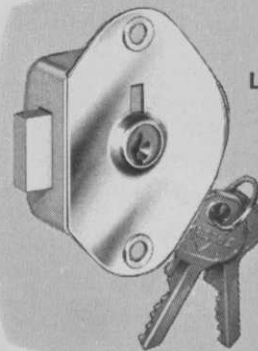
Also, when you can, ask any prominent expert in the soft goods field and he will tell you that style goods carry only 45 to 48-day merchandise life expectancy. So, if you have your sales when you have the least play, you won't and can't get much response. Sell it and let them use it.

Please dispel from your mind that we are "defensive buyers." We are not afraid of competition, nor do we worry that this big sale

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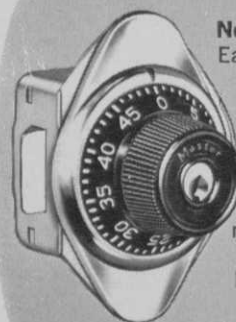
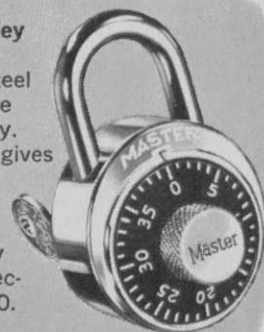
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will cause us to slump next year. Other circumstances may promote sales slump—but not this attitude of honest sales.

Don't play around with small bogus sales that insult the intelligence of the customer. Of course, I don't advocate for sales, hard goods that can be easily held off such as clubs, balls, etc. But don't commit the cardinal sin of holding soft goods too long.

Pro golf shop or city sporting goods shop, the rules of merchandising are not really that different. The aggressive pro shop will not lose much business to the city shop or to his fellow golf pro. But, the pro who does not educate himself through methods promoted by the PGA, such as the merchandise show, business schools, and sectional meetings, had best beware because there are retail people who recognize what a well-stocked, city "pro-quality" store can do for their sales.

There is also a prediction here that, in the future, as the golf business expands, that the manufacturers who have protected the pro and attempted to market their goods "through pro shops only" will come to realize that city golf "pro shops" may be more ideal because of better merchandising tactics and attitude on how to move goods.

Sophisticated advertising by these same manufacturers telling the golf customer that they can find the goods in specialized city "pro shops" would definitely motivate many golfers. The day may be nearer than some of us suspect.

The only way the pro shop can forestall this day is by becoming a better merchant and adopting modern retailing tactics in moving merchandise. Otherwise, it may be a completely new ball game. □

### About the Author

Jimmy Brown, a native of Salt Lake City, graduated from the University of Utah with a B.S. degree in Marketing and Business Administration. In 1954, he became co-partner with Tally Stevens, in Steven Brown Sports, Salt Lake City.