

You and your buddies are driving to this cool golf course to play 18 when a rabbit dashes in front of your car. You hit the brakes to avoid bashing Bugs Bunny — and you do — but your car skids into a ditch beside the road.

The car, while not damaged, is stuck in three feet of mud. Your tee time, minutes away, is in jeopardy.

So you call the course and tell the starter what happened, and that you still want to make your tee time to play the course (you'll worry about the car later). So the starter sends a van to pick you up and drive you and your friends to the course just in time to tee it up.

You're impressed, to say the least.

After the front nine, you head into the clubhouse. The food-and-beverage boss, after hearing that you've had an eventful morning, buys lunch for you and your friends. You're even more impressed.

But you ain't seen nothing yet.

When you finish the back nine, you're led to the parking lot where your washed and waxed car glistens in the afternoon sun. You stop in your tracks and look around, wondering if you're on *Candid Camera* — or *The X Files*, for that matter. You wonder what you did to deserve this.

Then it hits you: You've been on the receiving end of extraordinary and exemplary customer service. You smile as wide as the course's 8th fairway, all the while feeling good about the world.

Yes, this is a lesson in customer service — but it's also a true story (except for my embellishment of how the car landed in the ditch). It happened a few years ago at the Majestic at Lake Walden GC in Hartland, Mich., where customer service is as important to course operations as green grass — or more.

"We try to do things for our guests that are unexpected and out of the ordinary," says John Dodge, a partner with Lansing, Mich.-based R.O.I. Golf, the company that operates Majestic at Lake Walden and two other Lansing-area courses.

That's like saying Tiger Woods is an OK golfer. When you go to extremes like R.O.I. Golf sometimes does, it's legitimate to use

Customer Service to the Extreme

BY LARRY AYLWARD



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words like "extraordinary" and "exemplary."

While R.O.I. Golf operates three courses, including Hawk Hollow GC in Bath, Mich., and Eldorado GC in Mason, Mich., Dodge says the company is not in the golf business.

"We're in the entertainment business," he insists. "We're competing with every entertainment dollar out there."

That's precisely why R.O.I. Golf employees — from the superintendent to the beverage-cart operator — are schooled in the essentials of customer service. Through their actions, they want their customers to remember the overall experience so they come back.

It's not uncommon for an R.O.I. Golf superintendent to hang out at a hole for three hours conversing with golfers about course conditions. And if you hit your ball in the rough and can't find it, don't be surprised if the superintendent stops to help you look for it if he happens by on his utility vehicle.

To Dodge, customer service also means customer fun. To make golf enjoyable, Dodge and his staff stage pizza parties and other events on the course. One time, the Majestic at Lake Walden GC held a "Banana Weekend." Staffers dressed in yellow shirts and handed out bananas and other giveaways. The wacky event ended up being featured in the *Wall Street Journal*.

Dodge explains that Michigan — one of golf's present darling states — is opening about 30 courses a year. "How are we going to separate our courses from those courses?" he asks.

He knows the answer, of course. It lies in bending over backwards for your customers and pleasing them — even if it means tugging a golfer's Honda from a mud-filled ditch and shining it up like it was brand new.

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