Let's Deep Six the Doublespeak

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD

IN THE WORDS OF WARREN BUFFETT, 'BAD TERMINOLOGY IS THE ENEMY OF GOOD THINKING'

Warren Buffet is worth a few billion dollars because he's all common sense. He recently wrote about big business's latest self-destructive trend: corporate doublespeak. Some might call the talk BS, but Buffet put it more diplomatically in a recent Berkshire Hathaway annual report: "Bad terminology is the enemy of good thinking."

He was referring to the smoke and mirrors that CEOs and their press-release writers put out to cover up for their inability to function with integrity. Buffet transformed his unusually sarcastic remarks into a golf analogy, mocking today's financial reports: "In golf, my score is frequently below par on a pro-forma basis. I have firm plans to restructure my putting stroke and therefore only count the swings I take before reaching the green."

Naturally, because we've all been told one too many times that golf is a metaphor for life, the insulting doublespeak approach has found its way to the golf course business.

Many courses have chugged along over the years doing quite fine on mom-and-pop business models. Management companies stepped in and turned around many run-down munis, often creating jobs and better facilities in the process.

Great. But then these courses and companies began going public. Their owners began to fantasize about IPOs and buying second homes in Malibu. Unfortunately, golf companies tried to grow steadily in a business that is cyclical by nature. They tried to grow by paying too much for courses that too few people play at a time when the game isn't growing.

Now, other than a couple of straight shooters who wisely remain privately held and devoted to customer service, plenty of golf management companies are experiencing growing pains. But instead of saying it like it is and trusting people who know golf to help them right the ship, they are dumping bad terminology on us to mask what we all know. They had started when we went from "public golf" to "daily fee." Then "marshals" became "player assistants."

Now the MBA Doublespeak 101 has become downright insulting. A few recent gems:

- *"We have improved the demographics of our customer base."* But aren't all green fees printed on the same paper?
- *"It's a platform to reposition the brand."* Translation: "We're starting over from scratch."
- *"Quality of rounds is more important to our brand than quantity."* Do you mean that fewer rounds played at a higher price is better than satisfied repeat customers over the long-term? Yep, that's working really well.
- *"He has left us to spend more time with his family."* Also, *"He's pursuing other interests."* Yeah, right.
- *"We can create a unified, focused corporate structure to unlock the full value of our combined property portfolio."* In other words, we're going to merge to avoid going out of business.
- *"We will not devalue our properties by lowering green fees."* Tell me, how does going broke help your property value? I guess we'll ask the bankruptcy judge who gives your course away for a couple of old gang mowers and a bucket of range balls.

Apparently, many in golf's upper echelon do not understand Buffet's simple advice never to invest in a business you don't understand, buy companies with strong histories of profitability and always invest in the long-term.

Golf is a game of integrity. It's also a difficult, expensive pursuit where customers need — ugh, MBAism coming here — "value" to keep coming back. But not the property "value" that MBAs are caught up in.

It's terminology that should go like this: Give people decent service and a fair green fee on a nicely maintained course that can be played in a reasonable amount of time.

Let's hope good terminology becomes the enemy of bad thinking.

Contributing Editor Geoff Shackelford's can be reached at geoffshackelford@aol.com