Time To Tear Down The Wall

BY PAT JONES

Here's some advice if you're ever invited to give a speech at an industry conference or chapter meeting: Avoid being scheduled into the dreaded "right-after-lunch" spot. More importantly, run like hell if they try to put you in the nightmarish "after-the-golf-outing-but-before-the-prizes" slot.

I've learned that trying to get the attention of people who've spent the morning in a darkened seminar room and then consumed a large lunch is nearly futile. Getting the attention of folks who've just played 18 holes (and perhaps consumed a frosty beverage or two) is roughly as difficult as juggling greased chain saws while wearing boxing gloves.

Nonetheless, I recently happily accepted the challenge of being the post-golf speaker at a joint meeting of the Wisconsin GCSA and PGA chapters. The WGCSA is one of my favorite groups, and the idea of speaking at its annual get-together with the state's pros was pretty cool.

I figured I had about 18 minutes to cram in my thoughts before I was rendered irrelevant by the combined effects of golf, beer and a burning desire to collect their prizes.

So I yelled ... real loud ... for 18 minutes.

Here's what I hollered about: In the modern golf marketplace, it's not "important" for superintendents and pros to cooperate; it's mandatory.

In case you haven't noticed, we've built a gazillion new courses over the past five years but the number of rounds played nationwide has essentially remained flat. That means new and old facilities are beating the stuffing out of each other for their share of the same market we had in 1996. If the pro and superintendent aren't working as a team, the facility's chances of success are thinner than Ally McBeal.

More importantly, there are some cold, hard pocketbook reasons to build better partnerships between the pro shop and maintenance facility. Here are three that have some appeal.

First, I've come across an increasing number of courses — many operated by management companies — that put the super and the pro on a shared bonus or incentive program. Part of this usually involves hitting certain profitability numbers through a combination of revenue growth and cost control. It forces the two managers to

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think carefully about issues like restricting carts, height of cut in the roughs, tree management and other maintenance vs. revenue matters. But if they work as a team and hit their target, there are financial rewards that they share equally.

Second, I like creative, cooperative programs that help solve problems like slow play or unrepaired ballmarks. The best of these involve "catching someone doing something right" and rewarding them. For example, at public courses, why not have rangers or even maintenance staff carry coupons to hand to players they spot properly fixing ballmarks or filling divots? Better yet, make the coupon good for $3 off the player's next round at the facility, which would give him or her an incentive to return. The idea is to reinforce good behavior.

Lastly, customer-satisfaction surveying is one of the fastest-growing trends in golf management. These range from simple rate-your-experience cards handed out with scorecards at daily fees to extensive member questionnaires at private clubs. Here's the twist: Superintendents and pros can use surveying to help build a bonus program. The idea is to go to ownership and say, "If we can increase overall customer satisfaction by 10 percent, you should give each of us a $2,000 bonus." It has appeal as a management tool because it's measurable, it's customer-oriented and it's easy to do. Best of all, it's one more thing that encourages the superintendent and pro to think and act as a team.

Courses can probably survive the traditional "wall of separation" between golf shop and maintenance operations, but I doubt too many will thrive in a ever-tightening market. To paraphrase Ronald Reagan — it's time to tear down that wall.

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