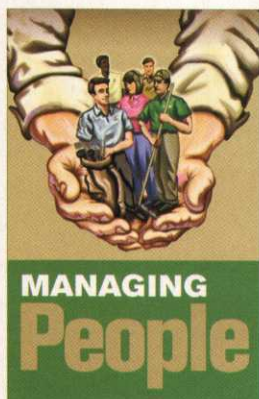


SUPER Service

Judy Hutt, owner of Shadow Valley Golf Course in Idaho, is known for her terrific treatment of customers

By Larry Aylward, Editor



It's Monday morning, and Judy Hutt is trying to wake up. The tall and twiggy 53-year-old brunette sits at a tiny table in the sunlit concourse of the Tampa Convention Center and orders a steaming cup of coffee.

But Hutt, the spirited owner and general manager of Shadow Valley Golf Course in Boise, Idaho, doesn't need a jolt of caffeine to stimulate her senses. All one has to do is start talking about the golf business to get her roused.

Hutt, who was in Tampa to attend the National Golf Course Owners Association's annual convention held earlier this year, is asked how she got her start in the business nearly 31 years ago. She tells the story about Shadow Valley, built in the foothills in southern Idaho, and then offers commentary on a range of subjects, including the state of the industry.

"Do you know what I think is wrong with this industry?" Hutt states, her piercing blue eyes widening. "People trip over dollars trying to save pennies. They're so worried about the dollar they make today that they don't worry about the dollar they're going to make the next day, the next day and the next day."

About 15 minutes pass. The coffee, its steam diminishing, sits untouched. One wonders if Hutt, who's wide-awake now, remembers that it's there. But that's Hutt for you. Start talking about the golf industry and the passion begins to flow from her like a swift stream after a fierce rainstorm.

Hutt is blessed with a sturdy pair of vocal cords and likes to use them. She stands out at

meetings such as the NGCOA convention because she asks a lot of questions and gives many opinions. But she says she's not one who speaks up just to be noticed.

"I told myself before I came to this conference that I wasn't going to talk as much," she says. "I have a tendency to [talk too much], but I never want to dominate."

Hutt adores the golf industry, but not because it's such a time-honored sport. Hutt, who seldom plays the game, enjoys the industry for its people. She can't get enough of them, even the rude ones. She'll give her all to get the brusque people to smile. And the whiners? Hutt just looks at them as the ultimate customer-service challenge.

Customer service is Hutt's forte. She's a stickler for it. In fact, her attitude toward customer service is what made her a name in the business and among her peers.

"She's one of the most progressive owners in the business," says Mike Hughes, executive director of the National Golf Course Owners Association. "Other association members perceive her as one of the real innovators."

Hutt entered the golf business by accident in the early 1970s. Her parents owned an alfalfa farm and opted to turn it into a golf course. Then they asked their seven kids if they wanted to help run it. Judy, who has a bachelor's degree in fashion merchandising, lived in Washington at the time and managed an upscale retail store. She decided to come home and help her family operate the course.

"None of us knew anything about golf,"



Hutt says. "Nobody in the family knew a green from a tee or a putter from a driver."

Business was tough in the beginning, but improved mainly because of the Hutt family's focus on satisfying customers. Interestingly, Hutt believes the golf course survived the early days because none of the Hutt's played golf and devoted all their time to running the business.

"We worked really hard, and we listened to the customers," Hutt says.

Today, the course is a partnership between Hutt and her mother and siblings. But Hutt is the only family member who works full-time. A brother and sister work part-time.

Because of the large number of family-owned golf courses, there are many women involved in the golf business. But there are few women like Hutt who take such up-front roles. There might be no other woman as devoted to the business as Hutt, who jokingly refers to herself as the "token babe" in the industry.

"She always stretching the boundaries of what she can do," Hughes says. "She's definitely someone to listen to and admire."

Bill Fountain, operating partner for The Majestic at Lake Walden golf course and a frequent attendee of the NGCOA show, doesn't know Hutt personally but says he's impressed with her charisma.

"She's a dynamic lady, and she has great ideas," Fountain says. "She knows the business as well as anybody from an operations standpoint."

Fountain says he's impressed with Hutt's marketing ideas about gaining new customers and satisfying current ones. "She's done a lot of great things and has been ahead of the curve for several years as far as customer service," he adds.

Indeed, Hutt and her staff are frequent winners in the NGCOA's annual Idea Fair. Criteria for submitting a concept in the Idea Fair is that it must be "an innovative, revenue-generating or cost-saving idea" that was implemented and yielded a return on investment. Often, the ideas are related directly to customer service.

In 2001, Hutt and Shadow Valley won the Idea Fair for their "G.O.D. for a Day" program. Prior to opening on weekends that playing season, the Shadow Valley staff took all the names of players who phoned in reservations and put their names in a hat. A winner was drawn and named Guest of the Day. Everyone on the staff — from starters to marshals to golf course maintenance workers — were made aware of the Guest of the Day and treated that person like a . . . well . . . a god. The Guest of the Day, who was given a hat with a logo and the initials G-O-D, received a free round of golf, practice balls, lunch and drinks.

Where does Hutt come up with these ideas?

"My mind is like a ping-pong ball," she says. "Sometimes I have a hard time sleeping at night."

Judy Hutt (center) always makes herself available to golfers at Shadow Valley. To her left is T.J. Gomez, the course's pro.

PHOTOS BY LISA BROWN

Continued on page 40



Judy Hutt (third from left) says she couldn't operate the course without input from key members of her staff, including Jan Ashley-Schmall, deli manager; Greg Hunnicutt, superintendent; Suzie Lund, assistant manager; T.J. Gomez, head pro; René Hadley, assistant superintendent; and Jean Smith, golf shop manager.

Continued from page 39

One of Hutt's favorite books is T. Scott Gross' *Positively Outrageous Service!*, which she says brings customer service down to an elementary level everyone can understand.

Hutt is concerned about everything related to serving customers, from the condition of the bunkers to how many times the phone rings in the clubhouse before someone answers it.

"I like to have it acknowledged by the third ring," she says. "When I call someone, I count how many times it rings. And when someone answers, I'll tell that person, 'Do you realize that it was 22 rings before you picked up the phone and acknowledged me?'"

Excellent service breeds high expectations, Hutt believes, but that's what she wants. When a golfer drives into Shadow Valley's parking lot, Hutt wants that person to know what to expect from Shadow Valley. If a golfer has no expectations, he or she may as well have bad expectations, Hutt says.

There are certain "musts" the course strives for, Hutt says. They are a clean clubhouse, a well-manicured course, cold water in the coolers, fresh water in the ball washers, an on-time tee time and an 18-hole round in less than 4.5 hours.

Greg Hunnicutt, superintendent of Shadow Valley, says Hutt is passionate about the business. "The thing I admire about her most is that she takes the course to heart," Hunnicutt says.

Hutt instructs the golf course maintenance staff to be courteous to players. In fact, she

believes the maintenance staff plays an integral role in the customer-service process because players often encounter them on the course.

Hutt's philosophy is that Shadow Valley is in the entertainment business, and people play the course to have a good time. "And if they don't have a good time, I'm going to give them their money back," she vows.

Hutt believes the customers — and not she — should make most of the decisions regarding Shadow Valley's business. That philosophy stems from wanting to separate her business from the competition. One time while on vacation in St. George, Utah, Hutt says she and her husband went to a driving range about 4:30 p.m. The operator said he was closing because he wanted to go home.

Says Hutt: "When people call us and ask what time we open, I tell them, 'An hour before you want to get here.' When they ask what time we close, I answer, 'An hour after you leave.'"

Hutt realizes that marketing is personal. She prefers one-on-one marketing and often takes a nondescript approach. For instance, a golfer comes in the clubhouse after playing 18 holes on a hot summer day. Thirsty, he walks up to the counter, lays down \$2 and orders a cold beer. Hutt gives him the beer, pushes the money back and tells him the drink is on her today.

"I do that all the time," Hutt says. "I tell everyone on my staff to do that. I would rather buy 1,000 golfers a cold beer each on a hot day than put a \$500 ad in the newspaper that says come and play Shadow Valley."

Continued on page 42



"I would rather buy 1,000 golfers a cold beer each on a hot day than put a \$500 ad in the newspaper."

JUDY HUTT

Continued from page 40

As part of the customer service plan, Hutt and her staff seek opinions from their customers constantly about how to improve the course, which charges \$25 for 18 holes during the week and \$33 on the weekend.

The process entails an annual poll sent to customers to ask them what changes they would like to see. We're not talking small things, like a new hot dog brand in the deli. We're talking big things, like course renovations. One year, respondents said Shadow Valley needed bunkers, so Hutt had them built.

In one survey a golfer wrote, "You're not my favorite course, but because of the condition you keep it in and because your staff is so friendly, it's where I choose to play."

Hutt says she puts money back into Shadow Valley every year. "We make sure that when we open our doors every year, there's something new and tangible they can see."

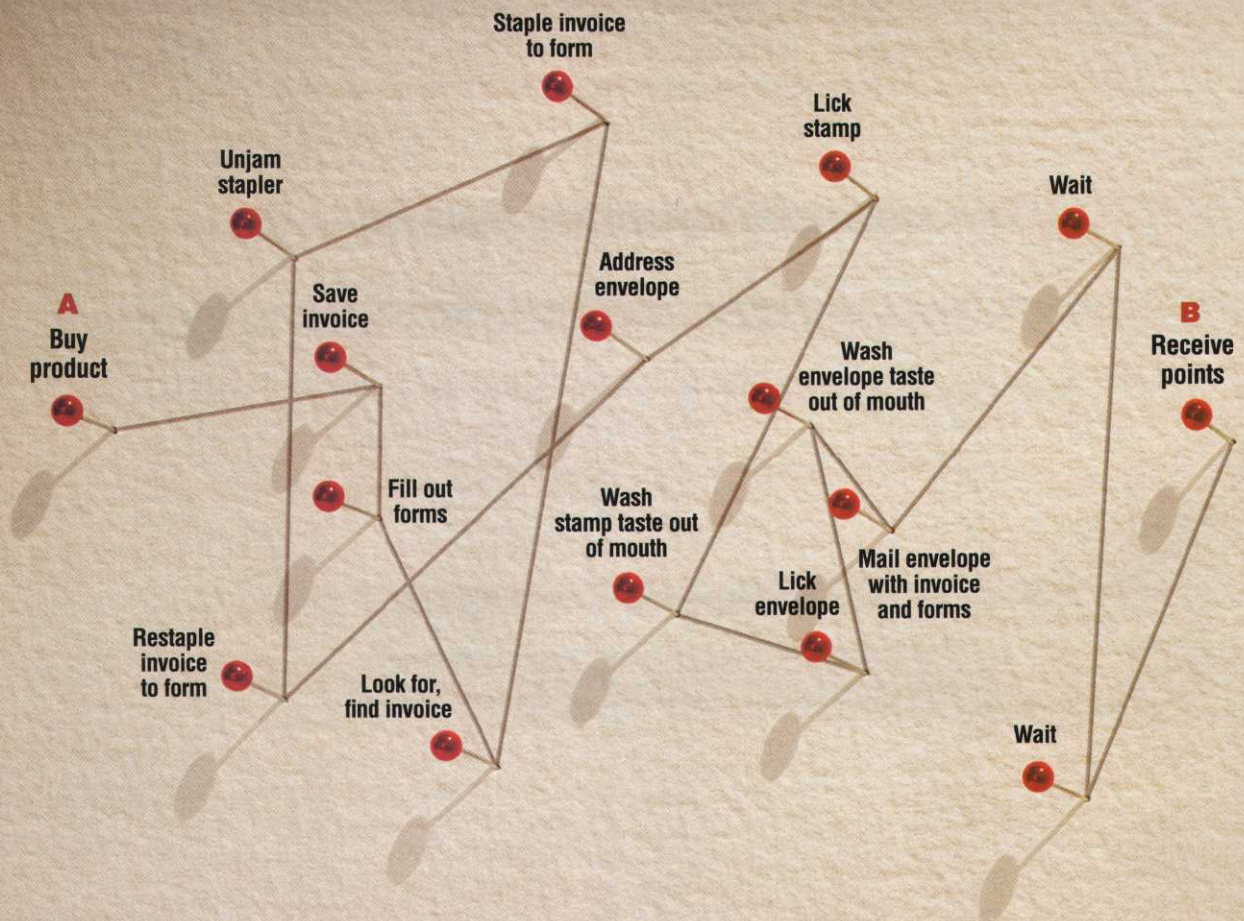
Hutt says her business savvy is the result of experience. She admits she has learned a few lessons the hard way.

"I'm not saying I've always done it right," she says. "But I think we're doing it right now."

Hunnicut, who has been with Shadow Valley for about 10 years, says Hutt has learned a lot about the business in that time. For instance, Hunnicutt says Hutt "ruffled the feathers" of some sales and service people by trying to get them to flat-out lower their prices on products. But Hunnicutt says Hutt has learned that such negotiating strategies weren't good business. "She negotiates differently now," he says.

A few hours have passed, and the sun has risen higher in the cloudless Florida sky. It's time for Hutt to leave for another appointment. But before she goes, she has more than a passing remark to say about her staff. Hutt says she couldn't run the course without key input from staff members, from the pro to the superintendent to the deli manager, who are heavily involved in making decisions.

"Sometimes they say you're only as good as



the people you surround yourself with," Hutt says. "We have some really good people, and most of the decisions made are group decisions."

Hutt credits head professional T.J. Gomez, who joined the course about a year ago, with helping spark Shadow Valley's business last year. Business has been slow at Shadow Valley the past few years, but Hutt says the course posted an increase in 2003 for the first time in three years because of increased corporate-outing business secured by Gomez.

Gomez has a candid relationship with Hutt. He's not afraid to disagree with her, but he knows she's the boss and respects her.

"Everybody knows where she stands and what she believes in," Gomez says. "If she doesn't like an idea, she'll tell you. If she loves an idea, she'll tell you."

Hunnicuttt describes Hutt as a tough boss, but one who is honest and approachable. He also says Hutt has shown more gratitude to her staff the past few years and is paying staff members better as well as communicating to them how important they are to the operation.

Hutt thinks most golfers perceive her as a good businesswoman, although she believes men think of her as a "demanding" good businesswoman. "I have that perception because I'm hard-nosed, and I'm a woman in a man's world," she says.

Hutt, whose hobby is riding horses, doesn't play much golf, but insists she knows the game's ins and outs from talking to players.

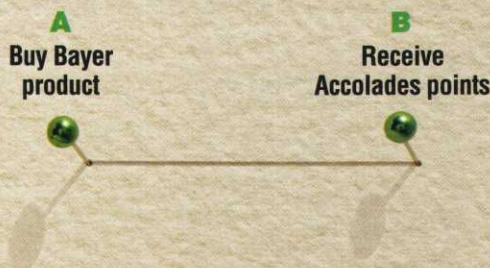
"I've been doing this for more than 30 years," she says. "I know enough about the game to talk the game."

She also has a pair of eyes in her husband of 15 years, Ron, who is a five-handicap and plays the course several times a week. He keeps Hutt apprised of problems on the course.

"He's the biggest complainer in the world," Hutt says with a chuckle. "He'll let me know if something is not right on the course."

As she does with other customers, Hutt will listen intently to her husband's concerns.

"I don't think I know anymore than anybody else does," she says. "But I always listen to customers." ■



Paperless Points.

The shortest distance between Products and Points.

They're automatic, effortless, and one more reason Accolades is the industry's top rewards program. Paperless Points.™ Just buy Bayer products through a participating distributor and Accolades points are deposited into your account. With no paperwork, it's the shortest distance between products and points.

For 1,000 free Accolades points, visit AccoladesRewards.com/PaperlessPoints.



Bayer Environmental Science

**BACKED
by BAYER.**