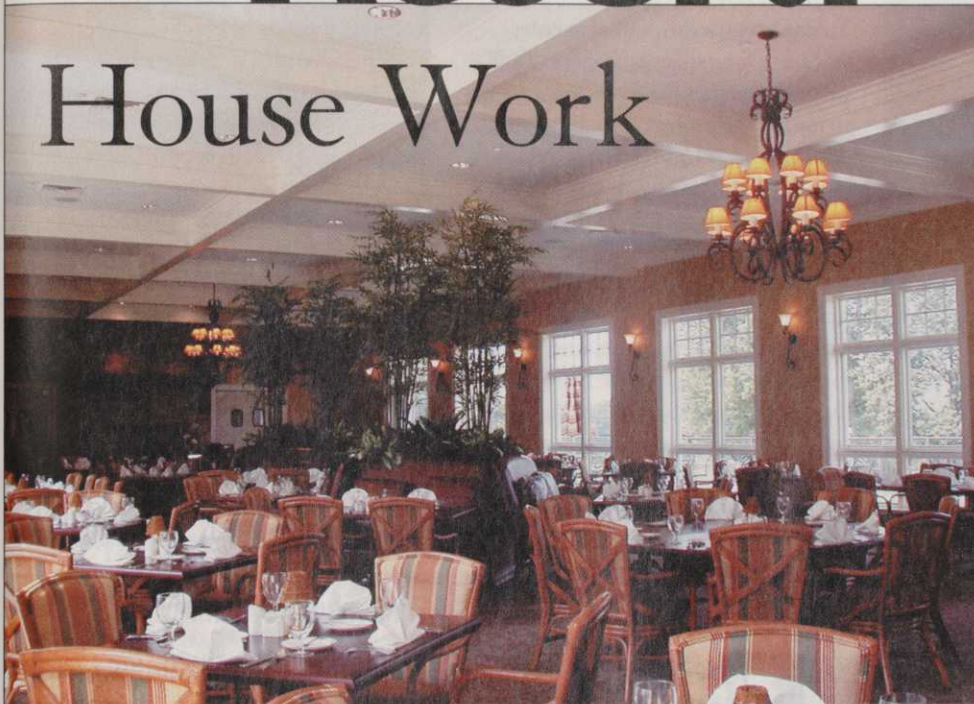


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PARADISE VALLEY

Country Club doubled its food and beverage revenues to \$3 million after renovating its clubhouse.

"We designed this clubhouse for little labor," Shafer says. "Two people can run this, and do it on a busy day if they have to." But, generally, there are three employees. With sightlines to the range, parking lot and several of the tees and greens, one counter person can manage the flow of play. Meanwhile, the cook and bartender are trained to operate both stations to serve the food and drinks.

Completed last March, the improvements seem to be paying off. Rounds and beer sales were up through spring and summer — and food sales, never before offered, are adding to the bottom line. Golfers are often spending \$10 or more extra in the bar and grill, Shafer says.

"Our theory was to build it to run with a minimum amount of people so we don't have more employee costs, and to get the people to stay after a round and socialize with each other," he says.

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It could be costly and inconvenient, but a clubhouse renovation could be fine for a course's image and its bottom line

BY BRUCE ALLAR

Golf courses are the best lawns in the world, but sometimes their owners can be house poor. If your clubhouse no longer measures up, a renovation could be well worth the expense and inconvenience — whether you manage a plush private club or a modest daily-fee facility.

At Valley Oaks Golf Club, a 27-hole public facility in Clinton, Iowa, that charges

\$32 per weekend round, revamping an outdated clubhouse has been good for business, says Chad Shafer, the club's general manager and superintendent. A facility dating back to the club's opening in the mid-1960s was gutted and redesigned to create a bar-and-grill atmosphere. "We no longer carry a pro shop," Shafer says. "It's hard to stock \$50,000 worth of merchandise. We can make more money selling beer, pop and food."

Shafer won't divulge the exact renovation figure, but says the owners — the Ladehoff family — spent more than \$100,000. Main features include a horseshoe-shaped bar and new windows with views of much of the golfing acreage. Point-of-sale computers at the bar and the check-in counter are programmed to process any purchases so that a customer can pay for 18 holes, a pack of golf balls and a snack or beverage in either location.



HOUSE WORK

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By contrast to Valley Oaks, consider Paradise Valley Country Club in metropolitan Phoenix, an exclusive private club with golf memberships at a reported \$80,000 and a multi-year waiting list. It recently built a new \$30 million Tuscan-style facility with two entryways, one for expanded banquet facilities and the other for access to the locker rooms. In the process, Paradise Valley doubled its food and beverage revenues to \$3 million annually and has added employees — from a former peak of 200 to 240 during the busy season.

General Manager Steven Richardson says the club's original 1953-vintage ranch-style clubhouse remained standing adjacent to the new structure during construction so Paradise Valley could continue to operate. Special emphasis was placed on easy access to the kitchen in the new space. "Dining needs to be all on one level and from a central kitchen," Richardson says. The former clubhouse struggled with service and quality control when a kitchen located in the rear of the building was forced to accommodate dining rooms on various floors.

The addition of a steakhouse-quality charbroiler and other top-of-the-line equipment gives the chef an opportunity to match the cuisine in upscale restaurants. Increased member meals and banquet events are keeping Paradise Valley bustling. Another area of focus is a 4,000-square-foot fitness center.

Paradise Valley paid for the new facility with a one-time assessment to its members. A few members quit at assessment time, but they were easily replaced. "If they're not using the club, it's a good time for them to drop their membership," the general manager says. "Fortunately, we had a long waiting list, and we still have a long waiting list."

Most clubs contemplating a new or renovated clubhouse should go through a series of steps prior to construction.

Bill McMahon Sr., an architect whose St. Louis-based McMahon Group Inc. consulted on the Paradise Valley project, says a membership survey is an important early action. He recommends either a focus group involving up to 100 members or a survey of the entire membership, the often-chosen alternative. Begin with a simple question: Are members satisfied? The process should measure support for improvements, rank those upgrades in order of importance and provide a sense of the maximum dollar amount the membership will agree to spend for the projects.

"Once you have the survey results in front of you, you can silence any opposition," says McMahon, who specializes in private-club planning.

Jerry McCoy, an independent consultant based in Norcross, Ga., says that once the fact-finding stage is complete, a strategic planning phase should follow involving ownership, a club's

A membership survey is an important early action. Begin with a simple question: Are members satisfied?

board of directors (if one exists) and outside specialists. The goal is to set a vision for what the club should become. A capital investment program and master planning process can then be initiated.

"I often help a club hire an architect and interior design team," says McCoy, who calls his business Clubwise Consulting. In many cases, three or four groups will be asked to submit bids, and McCoy suggests that clubs or golf course managers request "future fees" quotes in advance from these firms. Fees that are bid nearly the same at the master planning stage can often diverge

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CLUBS TODAY ARE selected for much more than golf. What goes on inside the clubhouse has much to do with the decision-making process.

greatly when work begins on the actual design. "The key is: How much are you going to charge me for architectural fees and interior design fees later?" he says.

Daily-fee courses have the option of selecting from cookie-cutter architectural designs when building a new clubhouse or renovating an existing structure. Like lot owners in new subdivisions, golf course operators can select from a number of suitable pre-existing floor plans. This option may particularly appeal to golf-only facilities, public or private, but club and resort courses are seeing a bigger emphasis on clubhouse function and aesthetics.

"The club industry is an image business," McCoy notes. "If you want to compete in the marketplace, you have to have a very positive image. And the exterior and look of the clubhouse are a very important first image for prospective members."

Says McMahon: "For a club to be successful it should excel at three things — its golf course, its clubhouse and its dining program. If it has one area of weakness, it can survive. If there are two areas of weakness, that club is in trouble."

While the food and beverage business in most clubs is not profitable — in large part because of high staffing and low table turnover — this aspect of the operation must excel and must be seen as a revenue center.

Norwood Hills Country Club in St. Louis recently completed a massive \$7.5 million renovation project, with \$2.5 million directed toward expanded kitchen and clubhouse facilities. General Manager and Chief Operating Officer John Wright says memberships at the club, which hosted the 1948 PGA Championship, were suffering post-9/11, down to 624 with golfing privileges. There are now 750 golfing members and 940 total and what Wright describes as a "modest waiting list." Norwood Hills added 20,000 square feet to its clubhouse and renovated an existing 30,000 square feet.

The revamping has doubled the kitchen size to 3,000 square feet, allowing the club to simultaneously serve 200-plus a la carte and up to 500 in its banquet facilities. Bar business is up 22 percent and a la carte food up 30 percent during the first year of expanded operations. With food and beverage revenues now at \$2.3 million per year, Wright says "I can see the ability where we could break even."

Wright began the whole renovation process by scheduling board retreats away from the club, either at other well-managed golf courses or at resorts. Those became the most productive board meetings of the year, he says, and left time for playing 18 holes in the afternoons.

"Make sure the board has a good plan because that plan has to be sold to the membership," he advises. "There's a point where members will agree and a point where they'll say, 'That's enough.'"

Once it was determined the clubhouse and food and beverage operations needed attention, Norwood Hills brought together its three principal

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Don't Fret the Newsletter. Here's How to Make It Right

BY HEIDI VOSS

Every month one staff member at the club is avoided like the plague. This person's responsibility is to collect an article from each department head for the newsletter. The horrible job is usually given to the membership director or administrative assistant.

Department heads have been known to use back entrances and hide out in the locker room to avoid being cornered. I would invariably turn my article in late. I always wished that someone would publish a book called, "Monthly Newsletter Articles That You May Plagiarize."

This monthly — or at some clubs, bi-monthly — ordeal has been the cause of a great deal of undue stress and drama. My challenge in this article is to try to guide you toward making the process better for all and creating something that your members will read. The very scary statistic is that the members actually read only about 20 percent of the newsletters. So after we have gone through all of the agony, it's getting pitched in the garbage.



First, the advice that I would like to give the person in charge of collecting the articles is to blatantly lie about

the date you actually need the articles. Give yourself a seven-day cushion. But don't let the others know about your cushion. Also, if you have a person on your staff who has difficulty writing

an article, step up and help out by writing something. It is easier to critique something that you have put together and for him to put his spin on it than starting from scratch. I'm sure he will pitch in and help you in the future. This is what we call good newsletter karma.

Second, use a professional printer to format your newsletter. Show him samples of newsletter formats that you like. This should include size, paper samples and colors. Then determine a layout that can be used each time for consistency. Clubs that buy color copiers and try to put this job on a staff person generally end up creating a newsletter that looks like it was made in house. The newsletter should be something that your members are proud of and that they leave on the coffee table or kitchen

counter where friends may peruse it. To increase the chance that they will show it off to friends, be sure to incorporate as many pictures as possible of members having fun. Make sure they are flattering photos and be sure to crop kindly for the best look.

To increase their reliance on the newsletter, publish a calendar of events that can easily be removed and placed on the sacred "refrigerator" shrine in each home. You may want to publish the calendar with hours of opera-

Be sure to incorporate as many pictures as possible of members having fun. Make sure they are flattering photos.

tion in each dining room, aeration and topdressing schedules for the golf course, special outings or course closings, contact numbers for reservations and tee times, and other important items relevant to your club.

Third, publish a PDF version of your newsletter on your Web site each month to which members can continually refer. This is very easy for the printer to create and for your Webmaster to post. In the future, hopefully this

is where members will go to find out what is going on at the club. We are just beginning to gather positive data on how many members choose to view it online.

Finally, if you are a new club or in need of members, print an overrun of a particularly good newsletter and direct mail it to 5,000 of your closest neighbors that are not members with a cover letter telling them about the club and welcoming them to inquire. We have found, from a marketing dollar, this is the

largest generator of new inquiries for membership. The key is to be sure the newsletter is well written, has no typos and presents the right image.

I hope these tips will help alleviate some of your stress. If not, I recommend hiding out with the shoeshine folks. They can help you keep your shoes shiny and they generally have advice on how to make the world a better place.

Heidi Voss is the president of Bauer Voss Consulting, a club marketing consulting company. She specializes in new development, conversions from public to private and member buyouts. For more information, visit www.bauervossconsulting.com.

HOUSE WORK

Continued from page 43

players early — the architect, interior designer and contractor. "Having them on board from the beginning really helped," Wright says. The large addition is a window-wonderland, offering views to the course. The kitchen was given a central location, negating long walks by servers that had affected promptness and from-the-grill freshness.

The club also added a 2,100-square-foot fitness center. "That's attracted a lot of young families," Wright says.

The president of I.R.I. Golf Development, Debbie Pedersen, says her company, which owns and manages both daily-fee and private clubs, would not consider adding a fitness center at the public facilities. (However, I.R.I. Golf Management recently added fitness cen-

ters in two Dallas clubs in residential developments.) As the company's point person on clubhouse facilities, Pedersen instead looks at the dining facilities at daily-fee courses. Expansion makes sense, she says, if the dining room only seats 100 and many events are drawing 150 or more. So does the ability to host groups of varying sizes. I.R.I. has more smaller outings of between 20 and 60 players, who use the course and require a smaller dining room.

Particularly at daily-fee courses, kitchen operations are designed so that one person can run things during non-peak hours. They're also laid out so that cold-prep items can be managed in an area with a view to the golf shop and the food counter, allowing employees to move from one station to another.

For Pedersen, there are always tough choices any time capital dollars become available. "Most of the time we make decisions based on what will generate the most revenue or save the most expenses," she says. "Sometimes aesthetics lose. If we have a bad mower that's costing us \$2,000 a month, we'll replace that mower."

Clubs today differ from their predecessors. Where 20 years ago the man of the house selected a club largely for its 18 holes and business benefits, now it's a family decision based on programs for children and juniors, swimming, tennis, fitness and a rounded social program.

As McCoy says, "The clubhouse facility plays a bigger role today." ■

Bruce Allar is a frequent contributor to Golfdom.

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This Letter Could Help Your Course 'On Any Given Day'

Editor's note: This column, which will run occasionally in this section, focuses on superintendent and owner relationships from a superintendent's perspective.

BY JIM BLACK

I've written a letter that I'd like to share with the front office. It's a letter that was written from a place of awe and respect for the greatest of all games, in an attempt to help shrink the triangle gap between crew, clubhouse and customer.

It was written mainly for the golfers who come to play my course and, even if only a small percentage of them read it, I think the course will be better for it.

The letter was also written to make an attempt to say something in a new way—something that golfers see and read and hear everywhere they go but seems to slip their minds once they're actually playing golf.

I was also making an attempt to give the golfers a new perspective on who we are—that is, my crew and me. Sometimes it seems the players think we're out to get them and make their lives miserable by somehow foiling their games, which is never the case.

I'm offering this letter for you to consider for your club. If you would

like to put your own personal spin on it, then by all means help yourself. Customize it for your club and rewrite it in a way that your members will remember when they're playing golf.



Maybe you even like it just the way it is. If that's the case, go ahead and cut it out, sign it, make some copies and post it where it can be read. Here goes:

DEAR VALUED MEMBERS AND MOST-WELCOMED GUESTS:

We would like to welcome you to our facility and wish you a most enjoyable round of golf.

My maintenance staff and I have been working diligently to afford you the best playing conditions possible.

On any given day the golf course can play differently from the day before, but I can personally assure you that we have done the best we can do to make today's conditions the best they can be.

On any given day your golf game can be on or off. If your game is on today and you are playing well, I share with you in the joy a good round of golf can bring. If your game is off today, I hope you get at least one or two bounces that go your way.

On any given day you can come to the golf course in the spirit of competition, and grind out a round that brings you out on top. You can also come to the golf course in the spirit of friendship and enjoy a relaxing round with friends, taking in all the beauty a golf course has to offer.

On any given day, my staff and I may need to undertake a plan of action in order to improve the golf course. Hopefully, you will view this action as a minor disturbance and understand that whatever we do is in the spirit of the betterment of the course.

On any given day you may come directly in contact with one of my crew members. They may be hand watering the greens, mowing fairways, blowing leaves or fixing equipment. Please understand that their intention is not to disturb your game and they will do their best to grant you the right of way.

On any given day I will have arrived before the sunrise, prioritized the day's assignments for my crew, pitched in to help finish a task, toured the course in search of signs of trouble, and consulted with other turf professionals for ideas and information on how to make our course better.

On this given day, a day that I am very grateful you have chosen to join us and partake of this greatest of all games, I ask you to please be kind to your fellow golfers and to the golf course by fixing your ballmarks and replacing your divots. And please remind others to do the same.

Jim Black, a veteran superintendent and frequent contributor to Golfdom, can be reached at greenkeeperjim@yahoo.com.

THANK YOU,
(Your name)