

Business Record

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It's All About Knowing Thyself

The best-performing golf facilities know what it is that makes them different **BY BRUCE ALLAR**

One secret to successful golf club management sounds as if it's coming straight from a personal-improvement guru: Know exactly who you are. Top-performing golf facilities — like top-performing individuals — have invested the energy to determine what makes them unique and then acted upon that knowledge.

"Everybody has little white balls and green grass," notes Heidi Voss, whose Bauer Voss Consulting firm caters to golf-facility clients. "Why are you different?"

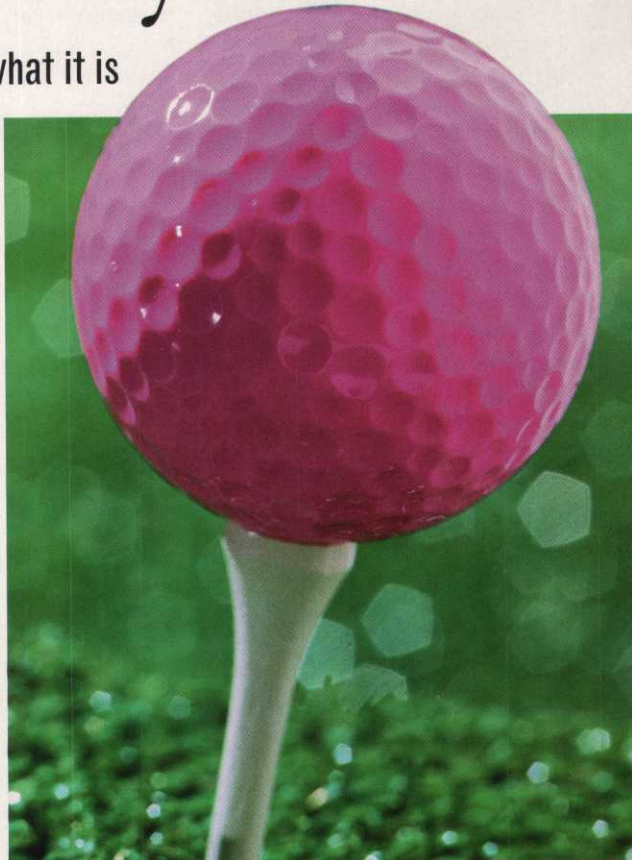
Terry Florence is currently director of golf and club manager at Bulls Bay Golf Club in the low country of South Carolina, a very private facility. Previously, he served more than 20 years on the management team at Wild Dunes

Resort near Charleston. This public-access facility, also a residential development, cashed in on its most singular asset — close proximity to that historic city and its status as a major tourist magnet.

"We played a lot on Charleston the city — its charm, its Southern character and the fact that it's a destination," Florence says.

Wild Dunes marketed itself as a larger experience by publicizing that golfers could play a Tom Fazio-designed course during the day and later dine at one of Charleston's famous restaurants or sightsee in the area. Word was spread, in part, through the purchase of advertisements targeted to the Southeastern-state readers of magazines such as "Golf Digest" and "Golf."

The resort's managers also sought out the media.



STANDING OUT: Right now, stop and ask yourself, How does your course or club stand out?

They entertained golf writers as frequently as possible and aggressively courted them during the swing that

the men's pro tour takes through the Southeast each spring, inviting as many

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writers to visit as possible near the time of the Masters Tournament. Florence says each year a group of eight to 16 golf scribes would assemble at Wild Dunes for expense-paid dinners, rounds on the resort's two Fazio courses and other events. "If you're good, they're going to write about you," he says, and the publicity helped get word out to a wider audience.

Wild Dunes also reached out to travel writers. The resort hired a New York City public relations firm to host a series of cocktail parties in the Big Apple, successfully pitching its golfing-near-Charleston theme to a different audience. Efforts were made to host as many regional golf tournaments as possible and

to make the links known to better golfers in the Southeast. The fact that the Dunes' first 18 holes also happen to be Fazio's first golf course design brought increasing attention.

By its second year, Wild Dunes did an incredible 43,000 rounds and, even though only 10 percent of residential units had been developed at the time, its owners purchased more property and commissioned Fazio to create a second 18, which opened in 1986. "You have to know who you are and what you want to be," Florence says. "You have to have a vision and a passion about what you're doing."

Owners at The Majestic at Lake Walden in Hartland, Mich., assessed their moderately difficult course, designed by Michigan archi-

tect Jerry Matthews, and determined that they wouldn't pin its identity on being one of golf's hallowed grounds. Instead, fun became the order of the day, every day.

The Majestic at Lake Walden has become known for nearly constant promotions, some of them wacky.

"One of our big philosophies is we're in the entertainment business," says operating partner Bill Fountain.

Opened in 1993 and located between Ann Arbor and Flint, The Majestic has since become known for nearly constant promotions,

some of them wacky (bringing in a giant air-inflated banana and dressing up staffers as bananas, for instance). The fee-per-round facility — there are no members — floats golfers on a boat across the lake to the 10th tee and from the ninth green to the clubhouse, where the bar has been designed to look like the front section of a watercraft. Regulars at its Sunday couples "fun night" are encouraged to value amusement over competition — and to expect putting-green shenanigans such as forcing players to hole out with a croquet mallet, pool cue or hockey stick.

"We take excellent care of you and you never know what's coming for you around the corner," Fountain says.

Behind this apparent nonsense is a 25-page marketing plan directed by Fountain that forces him to analyze every segment of every day and target promotions to specific hours on the course. Separate pitches are made to ladies, seniors, couples and even juniors. Monday-through-Thursday golfers teeing off before 8 a.m. qualify for the "Majestic Sunrise" deal, for example, which includes breakfast and nine holes for \$25 or lunch and 18 holes for \$50. Rounds during this time have gone up in each of the four years of Majestic Sunrises. Seniors get special

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RECOGNIZE THIS HOLE?: Some golf courses have nature on their sides when it comes to making them different, like Pebble Beach Golf Links and its breathtaking seventh hole.



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KNOWING THYSELF

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rates before 10 a.m. Mondays through Wednesdays, and the course runs teachers' leagues in the summertime. The hours of 4 p.m. to 6 p.m. are reserved for league play on Mondays through Thursdays.

There were more than 30,000 rounds played on The Majestic's 27 holes in 2005. Internet and e-mail-based marketing are Fountain's biggest tools. He captures e-mail addresses from players and then sends them notices of events or specials. When an unusual January thaw settled in this winter, he decided to open the course for play. An e-mail blast to his database brought in 125 players the first day.

An emphasis on customer service is preached to the staff and delivered to repeat customers. The Majestic recently hand-delivered a dozen Pro V1s to 50 of its most regular customers; the balls were logoed and the name of each player was printed on his or her balls.

"We want customers for life," Fountain says. "We try to live it and breathe it."

The vice president of golf operations for Orlando-based Marriott International, Claye Atcheson, oversees 45 course locations in 13 countries. He believes branding is critical to success.

"It's so many things compiled together that it becomes the perception of



FUN, FUN, FUN: Bill Fountain says golf and entertainment go hand in hand.

the golfer at those facilities," he says.

Atcheson equates branding to a promise that must be delivered to the customers. In the case of Marriott, much of the pact involves the same high levels of hospitality and maintenance that the company's hotels strive to deliver. This translates as standards for new properties (Marriott typically opens three golf courses a year), including the size and components of the clubhouse, as well as certain specifications for course design. It also gets into details such as grass-cutting heights and the frequency of bunker raking.

"Players may not know exactly what our standards are," Atcheson says, "but they know our courses are well-groomed. Golf can become a commodity very easily if there's not customization or not differentiation."

Marriott also seeks to stand out for the personal touch of its service. Employees are trained to engage themselves with customers — to learn and understand their preferences. Small favors — hand-delivering range balls or scented cold towels on

hot days — are designed to leave subtle positive impressions on golfers. Staff members are asked to learn tee-time preferences and food likes and dislikes of repeat customers in order to make them feel appreciated.

"It's not discounting to get customers out there, it's value-adds," Atcheson notes. "I think the average operation should focus on treating its best customers so that they want to come back the most often."

Loyalty programs also are set up to reward frequent players. "It doesn't

cost a lot of money and there's not an advertising campaign that goes with it," he says. "It's a one-on-one relationship."

Marriott employees are trained to engage themselves with customers — to learn and understand their preferences.

Noting that most golf facilities are not selling enough rounds per year, Atcheson points to potential benefits from marketing efforts if they have "very

specific goals and are incentive-based." If someone is given the job of selling events, that salesperson should be compensated

with a base salary and bonus clauses that reward performance. "For every group over 40 players they bring in, they get a lot more compensation," Atcheson says.


He also says it often makes sense to designate, or hire, someone to work marketing and sales full time, at least during the best months for sales. "A dedicated person—or dedicated time of

year—when you'd be very active from a marketing standpoint can be effective," Atcheson says.


Consultant Voss agrees that the job of marketing, whether it's for memberships or group sales, often requires the services of a specialist, not the part-time attention of someone in the pro shop or the general manager's position.

"You need people out there generating that revenue," she says, "and somebody can't do that as a second job." ■


Bruce Allar is a frequent contributor to Golfdom.




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Want to Know What Your Members Are Thinking?

BY HEIDI VOSS

Wouldn't it be nice if you could read your members' minds?

If you could, hopefully you would gain very insightful knowledge that would help you make the club a better place for them.

Your members are brilliant, affluent consumers pursued by everyone to capture their time, dollars and loyalty. But as clubs you do not have the budgets of the fast-food restaurants or soft-drink companies to produce Super Bowl-like advertisements to capture their interests.

You need to find out what they want, zero in on it full force and give it to them.

In the past, clubs sent out lengthy surveys to members asking them about their overall club experiences and how the clubs could be better. Many times companies were hired to compile the questions, send out the surveys, bug the members to return them and compile

the tedious data. This process could take months. And frequently the issues on the survey were non issues by the time the results came back.

It was learned that the unhappy members or the cheerleader members were most likely to return their surveys. The nonplussed

members filed the surveys in the circular bin and went on with their lives — sometimes including the club and sometimes not.

Today you have the luxury of surveying your members through e-mail. The survey programs tabulate instantly, showing you up-to-the-minute data and even individual responses. There has been great success with these Internet-based surveys.

Here are a few keys for you if you should choose to survey your members:

Use survey software and try to keep the survey topic-based. For instance, do a survey on 2006 golf events for men and women or menu items for the grille room. The survey should have a theme and should

not stray too far from it.

Keep the survey short. Limit it to no more than 20 questions. The shorter the survey the better. Also, make sure that your questions are properly linked so that they skip to the next appropriate questions after certain responses.

Send out an update on the survey results to your members. They want to know what other members have to say. It's reassuring for them to realize that others have the same opinions and that the club is listening.

Yes, this is the key, folks. Just like the fictional radio personality Frazier Crane does, you need to listen to what they have to say and then try to respond in a quick and efficient manner.

Get on a survey cycle every two months. Plan out your topics in advance and let members know what the next survey will deal with so they can begin to think about that subject.

Do not overload your members with weekly surveys and random surveys. Send them on a schedule, with the updates following two weeks later.

Here are some topics that other clubs have found to be very insightful:

- golf events;
- food;
- golf shop purchases;
- social events;
- kids' survey regarding activities;
- the magazines, newspapers and journals members read;
- renovation dollars; and
- pool and fitness programs.

The surveys can help you dedicate your limited funds when it comes to advertising dollars, golf shop purchases for next season, and increasing attendance by planning events that members would like to see at the club.

Remember that using a survey is only a tool to make the club more member friendly.

You will glean valuable points from your members when they believe that you desire to continually improve the club and shape it to meet their changing needs.

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.



TALKING MAINTENANCE

Compelling Communication Depends on Consistency

BY JIM BLACK

I find myself constantly searching for ways and means to make our operation run more smoothly. Everything from crew scheduling to job assignments to staggered lunch breaks.

I also look for ways to make things run more smoothly between maintenance and the clubhouse. I appreciate the meetings (when I can get them), and I appreciate being kept apprised of outing schedules and the like. Good communication is paramount to a smooth operation.

Sometimes, though, communication breaks down — and I openly admit it goes both ways.

Sometimes, we aren't told of a special event until the day it's taking place, but sometimes we'll forget to let the clubhouse know when we're top-dressing greens.

What we need then is a consistent method of communication that is a wide-open line running back and forth between the two departments.

Each department also needs to openly support the other. I long for the day when the person at the pro shop stands proudly, looks the customer squarely in the eye and says confidently: "Yes, as a matter of fact we are aerifying greens and tees today. It's been a long summer (or winter), and they really need to be opened up. We'll give you a discount on fees today, and we ask that you kindly not hit into the crew as they're working. Give yourself a par, pick up, and move ahead to the next hole. Thank you very much."

We can in turn support the clubhouse by providing a much better product for the customers to enjoy.

So another article on good communication is fine and dandy, but we all know that it's a topic that has been covered many times before. But I'm going to attempt to take the good communication concept a step further.

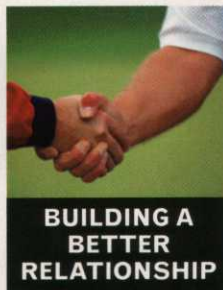
You can't operate in effective bursts of information, only to relapse into old ineffective habits. This pattern makes for poor efficiency. The information has to be clear, concise and consistent.

In order for the lines of communication to stay free and open, remember this one thing: Mean What You Say and Say What You Mean. I find this to be the ultimate key to consistent communication.

From my own personal experience, I've found that if I'm unclear in my meaning, or if I assume that the listener understands what I'm talking about, then the gist of what I'm trying to say somehow gets lost along the way.

In a business or professional setting, this can spell disaster across many different lines — employee/employee, boss/employee, department/department. Animosity develops, trust is broken and efficiency suffers — all because of a breakdown in understanding of what was meant vs. what was said.

In the golf club business, this is sometimes the root cause of the classic poor relationship that exists between the maintenance department and the pro shop. This poor relationship gets



passed along to the customer and the entire operation suffers.

There is a relationship triangle that exists whenever two or more people are communicating with each other. The parts of the triangle center around the main thought or idea that

is the topic of whatever is being said.

First, there is intention. What is the ultimate goal of the person who is conveying the idea? Is the subject of the conversation purely informational, or is there something deeper going on in regards to the information?

Second, there is perception. Is what you're trying to say being received correctly in accordance with your intention, or does the listener think you mean something other than what you're saying?

Which leads us to assumption. The rule of thumb here is simple — don't assume. If you're unclear in regard to what is being said, don't hesitate to gain clarity. For some reason, assumption always seems to lean toward the negative. In most cases, negative wasn't the original intention. So if something is coming across to you as negative, clarify it in order to release all assumption.

Simply put, mean what you say and say what you mean, eliminate assumption, and you will have more consistent communication skills and a smoother running operation.

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