

# 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**

**O**ne 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?"

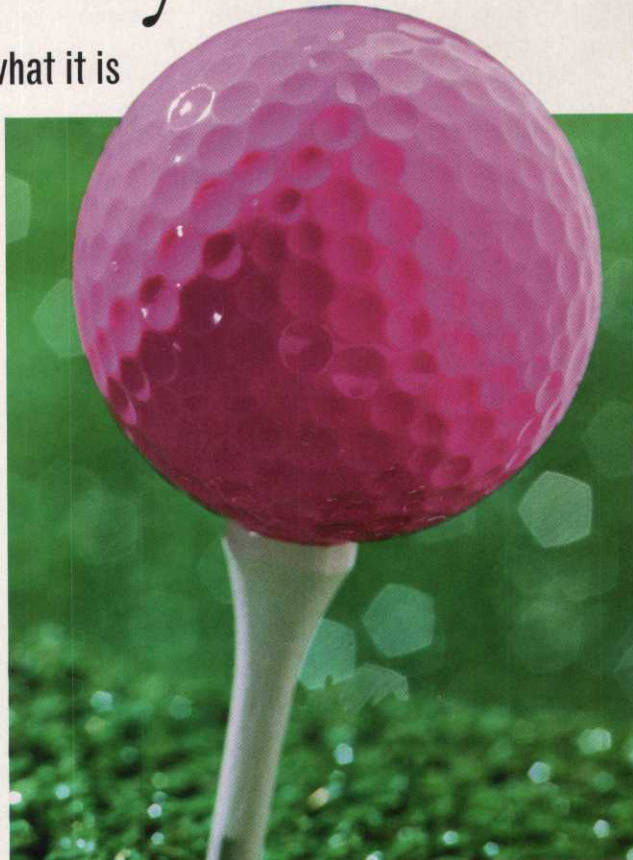
Terry Florence is currently director of golf and club manager at Bulls Bay Golf Club in the low country of South Carolina, a very private facility. Previously, he served more than 20 years on the management team at Wild Dunes

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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## KNOWING THYSELF

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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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