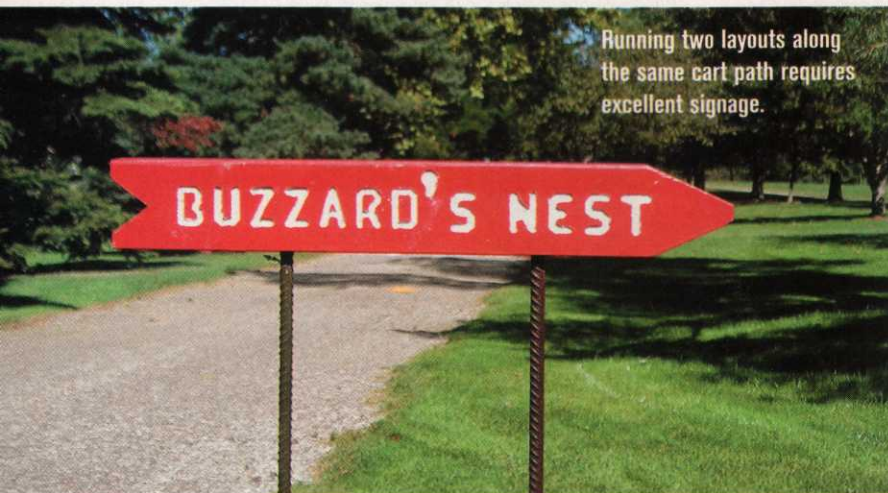


# Find Your Niche



Running two layouts along the same cart path requires excellent signage.

## EDITOR'S NOTE

This story and the accompanying Quick Tips examine several golf courses and the marketing initiatives that helped them create more rounds.

## Soaring Success: Five-hole Buzzard's Nest elevates area interest and lifts rounds.

**BY DAVID FRABOTTA**  
SENIOR EDITOR

**A**s a peculiar precursor to spring's rebirth, turkey vultures return to Hinckley, Ohio, each March 15. Their homecoming might be thousands of years old, but naturalists just noticed the phenomenon about 100 years ago. So each year, hundreds of spectators converge to get a glimpse of the unlikely harbinger of northern Ohio's seasonal rejuvenation.

Many buzzards make their way to the Hinckley Hills Golf Course and surrounding acres of farmland, and they've become a kind of mascot for the area. So it's appropriate that Hinckley Hills Golf Course named its new five-hole layout the Buzzard's Nest. And just as the giant birds return to the region each season, golfers flock to the area's myriad layouts.

With so many quality golf courses in such a small geographic area, Hinckley Hills needed a way to bring in new business for the short golfing season. The family-owned business wanted to add nine holes. But as suburban sprawl encroached on the course, nine holes just weren't in the cards.

And though its five new holes began as conciliation to those market conditions, it has grown into a forward-looking venture in growing the game and capturing more of the area's wallet share.

Situated in the middle of the 1964 Harold Paddock layout, five holes of the original championship design have been remarked, rebranded and resold as the Buzzard's Nest, which is in its third year of operation.

"Play has been up and down the past few years, but it's definitely generating interest and business," says general manager Susan Smith, daughter of Donald Krush, who developed the golf course from farmland. "It's a nice way to introduce beginners to the game of golf because it's not too hard."

Its relative ease has been pivotal for its success. Even though the five holes were part of

*Continued on page 38*



**Sister Act:** Susan Smith and Jeane Esposito co-operate Hinckley Hills Golf Course, home of the five-hole Buzzard's Nest.

**QUICK TIP**

**Water Works**

Residents of Pocomoke City, Md., received a free round of golf with their water bills in July. Pocomoke wanted to bolster awareness and enhance play at the city-owned Winter Quarters Golf Course, and get this: The coupons are fully transferable. Perhaps water-conscious districts would be willing to partner with an area golf course to reward residents who make an effort to conserve water, maybe in conjunction with Smart Irrigation Month?

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the original 18 that slopes at a 125 from the tips, the holes are very manageable for beginners while still offering a challenging greens complex for avid golfers.

Three of the holes are less than 350 yards from the back tees — slightly shorter from the forward tees — with fairways plenty wide for a wayward five-wood or slicing three-iron from the teeing area. No. 3 is 377 from the back tees and 268 from the front tees. And just when you're itching to hit driver, hole No. 5 stretches 460 yards from the tips (340 yards from forward tees) with about 20 yards of elevation on the second shot to the green. It was the No. 1 handicapped hole in the original layout, and it's still a difficult test.

It's fun to play for the experienced golfer, but it's still straightforward enough for children to accompany dad on a Saturday or Sunday when weekend duffers fill the regulation 18 holes.

But more importantly, it's a quick five holes. A busy working dad can play the Buzzard's Nest after work in about an hour on a busy day, and a wide-open five holes can be played in about 40 minutes, which means making it home on time for dinner.

It works out well from an agronomic perspective, too. Jeane Esposito, Smith's sister and co-operator of the facility, handles the grounds and the 23 golf holes as superintendent. She likes to stagger aerification around the course and close down the doctored holes during heal time. The Buzzard's Nest, which golfers play twice while the nine holes heal, allows her to administer aggressive cultural practices without sacrificing quality of play. It also allows her to keep greens cut at .17 of an inch under fairly heavy play.

The only tangible agronomic frustration might be due to golfers' treating the five-hole layout as their personal practice course.

"Sometimes I'll see five divots right next to each other, none of them replaced, of course," Esposito says.

But five holes is plenty for some, judging from positive feedback from the new families that have tried the five-hole concept. And with an \$8.50 price tag, it's about the same price as taking the kids to see the latest "Harry Potter" movie.

"We had a young family out here practicing for a family golf outing, and it was obvious that some of them had never played before," Esposito says. "It took them a little longer than an hour, but they said they really had fun. That's what it's there for."

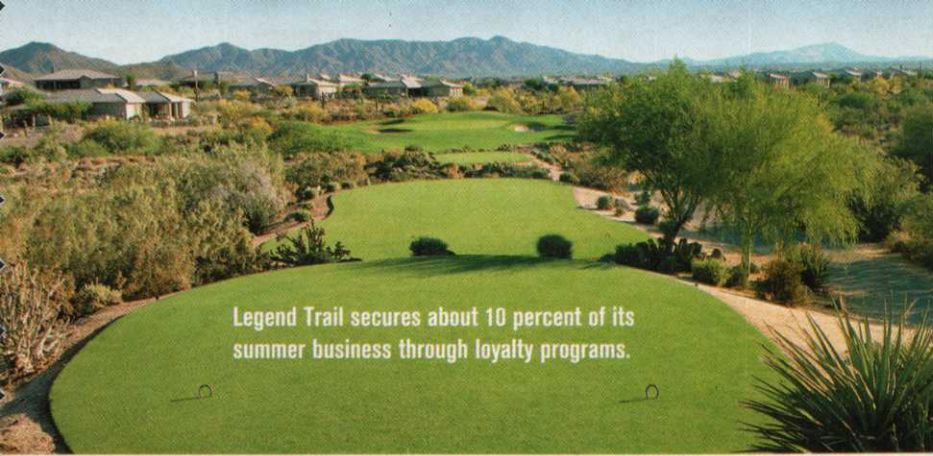
Hinckley Hills hopes such families will return each year as predictably as the area's beloved buzzards.

**[ABOUT THIS SERIES]** "Growing the Game," a four-part series appearing in *Golfdom* throughout 2007, focuses on how the golf industry can attract more new players to create more rounds. In addition to the third installment on what golf course maintenance suppliers and companies can do to grow the game, we've also reported on the impact that baby boomers could have on increasing play (February) and what golf course architects can do in their designs to make the game more friendly for beginner and average golfers (May). In this final installment, we singled out some of the more creative golf courses in the country to discuss the marketing programs they've implemented to attract new golfers.

Visit our archives at [www.golfdom.com](http://www.golfdom.com) to view the 2006-2007 "Growing the Game" series.

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Legend Trail secures about 10 percent of its summer business through loyalty programs.

## Loyalty Pays: Legend Trail's frequency program supplements slow season

BY BRUCE ALLAR  
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

**I**n Scottsdale, Ariz., summer golf can be a hard sell. The snowbirds have migrated north from their wintering grounds as Sonora Desert temperatures soar into the triple digits. Add the competition of numerous top-flight courses in the area, and the need to stimulate daily rounds becomes obvious.

As a summertime strategy, Legend Trail Golf Club in north Scottsdale, a public facility, sought a way to increase the play of core golfers with a tiered loyalty program. Initially, the goal was to get one more round out of each golfer, says facility general manager Rick Williams. The method: Increase the rewards to golfers based on the frequency of their rounds. So in order to promote return visits, Legend Trail now offers a sliding greens-fee scale to those who purchase a Summer Player Pass.

The \$25 pass was launched in 2006 and repeated this year. Pass holders are able to play on weekdays for \$35 before 11 a.m. and for \$30 after 11 a.m. (add \$15 for weekends) for their first five rounds and then get the sixth round free. Then, rounds seven to 10 cost \$5 less, with the 11th round free, and rounds 12 to 14 another \$5 less, with the 15th round free. That adds up to three free rounds

out of 15. Any further 18-hole outings are assessed at the lowest fee, \$25 early in the day and \$20 after 11 a.m. on weekdays.

"I'd rather get a group out there for 20 bucks a player than not get anybody playing during the summer months here," Williams says.

He estimates that more than 50 percent of rounds played in summer 2007 were by the Summer Player Pass holders, and 75 percent of golfers who purchased the pass played at least 10 rounds during the season, which earned them the lowest greens fees. The normal summer greens fee is \$70.

Legend Trail also sells an annual pass (\$2,600 for residents of the Legend Trail community, \$3,200 for non-residents). But Williams estimates that as many as 80 percent of those members are living elsewhere during the hot months, so the summer pass does not affect those sales.

### QUICK TIP

#### Business Booster

Many golf courses around the country have had good success with various Nine and Dine programs, which invite couples to play nine holes and have dinner at the club. It's a great way to generate revenue on a Friday night, and programs can be catered to single people — where the golf courses play matchmaker — or established couples.

Another promotion, the Loyalty Card, is based on the highly successful Southwest Section PGA Golf Pass.

"You're buying into the opportunity to pay discounted greens fees," Williams says, "and unlike a gym membership, we want you to come back after we sell it to you."

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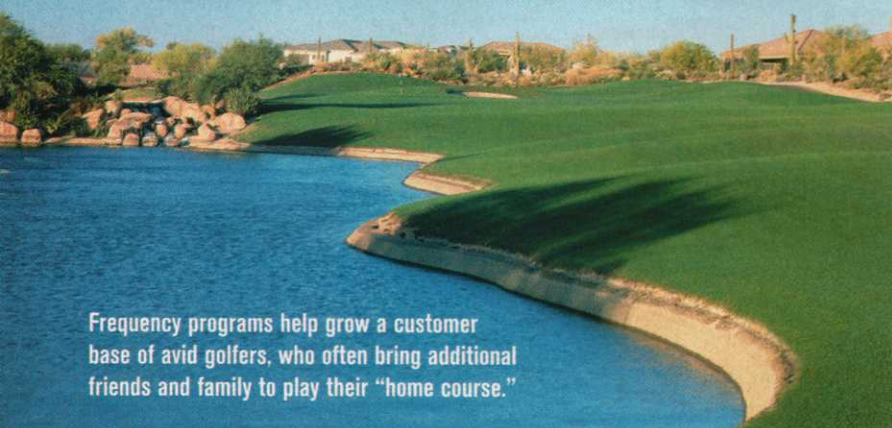
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PHOTO BY: DAVID FRABONIA (LEFT); PHOTO COURTESY: LEGEND TRAIL GOLF CLUB (RIGHT)



Frequency programs help grow a customer base of avid golfers, who often bring additional friends and family to play their "home course."

*Continued from page 39*

For \$99, Loyalty Card holders receive a minimum of 50 percent off weekday greens fees — and 25 percent on weekends — year-round for themselves and one guest, among other savings, including a free round for every five played. Williams captures e-mail addresses of card purchasers and blasts out promotions to the group. Among them: golf and lunch specials, Monday and Tuesday specials, and tournaments for Loyalty Card members. If

**QUICK TIP**

**Broaden Your Horizons**

The Tri-Valley Academy of Bergenfield received a grant from the United States Golf Association to start a golf program for adolescents with autism. The Far From Par program welcomed 16 middle school and high school students to learn golf etiquette and how to play the game.

Williams spots a wide-open tee sheet for a day or two down the road, he'll send out a mass e-mail offering 60 percent off to Loyalty players to keep the course busy.

This promotion, now in its third year, is his biggest success, Williams says. He will not divulge the number of Loyalty Card members, but estimates that they contribute at least 10 percent of total rounds played.

"We wanted to create a customer base of frequent users," he says. "It was a very simple thing to put together, and it has increased traffic quite a bit."

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## Elevate the Niceties:

Toad Valley's golf receptionist offers high-touch distinction

BY BRUCE ALLAR  
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

### QUICK TIP

#### Kids Play

The Oak Grove Golf Club in New Boston, Texas, gives junior and beginners a place of their own with small tee boxes located on the edge of each fairway. The tees average 500 square feet to 600 square feet and are elevated about 2 feet. Distances range from 100 yards to 130 yards on par 3s, 150 yards to 180 yards on par 4s, and 180 yards to 230 yards on par 5s. Tees were built in-house with no additional maintenance costs.

**The personal touch of Toad Valley's golf receptionist creates more repeat golfers and generates better wallet share.**

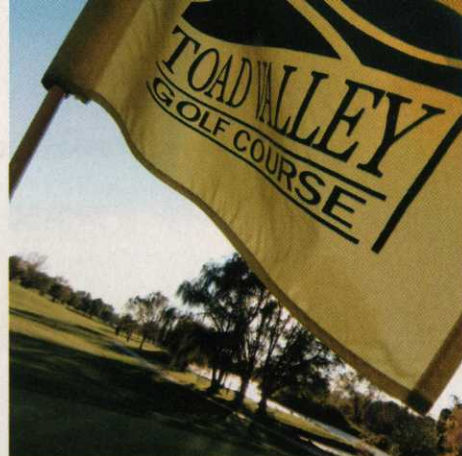
**T**he simplest ideas are often the best. In a departure from current corporate trends, managers of the family-owned Toad Valley Golf Course in Pleasant Hill, Iowa, sought to improve business by hiring a generalist instead of a specialist. By simply creating a golf receptionist position, customer relations and office efficiency has improved greatly.

General Manager Allison George says the Des Moines-area course recently hired a market research firm to gauge golfer satisfaction in the area. The company surveyed 2,000 golfers who had played the public course and 5,000 others in the area.

"We found that many times people feel neglected on the phone," she says. "So this is where the concept of getting a receptionist came to be."

Realizing that staff members in a busy and often noisy pro shop have little time to tend to phone etiquette, receptionist Kassie Underwood, who was hired in April, has been stationed in offices tucked away from the crowds. She works Friday through Sunday, on Tuesdays when the men's club descends on the course, and one other day of the week at her choosing to create a full-time schedule.

Away from the pro shop hubbub, she politely conducts telephone business and patiently gathers information for the e-mail and traditional mail databases. During down times, among other duties, she looks up player addresses in the phone book to add to the list.



"She's doubled our e-mail database and quadrupled our mailing database," George says.

Underwood also calls a few random golfers who played Toad Valley the previous day — mixing morning, midday and late afternoon players — to thank them for playing and to ask for feedback. George says this simple gesture has led to an increase in rounds played by repeat golfers. In fact, when George calls those who have risen from one or two rounds in a season to 10 or more to learn why they're now regulars, they often say, "We really appreciated that phone call back."

With revenues up about 12 percent during the first three quarters of 2007, George calls the hire a success. In truth, Underwood is more an assistant to the general manager than a receptionist. George, for example, designs Web sites for each outing, where golfers can sign up, pay and gather information online. With Underwood available to manage the flow of data on those sites, George is free to move on to creating more of them. Toad Valley has increased group rounds by more than 1,000 this year.

Underwood also helps with two other promotions: Ladies Night Out and Tadpoles. The night for ladies, most of them career women, includes instruction on etiquette, scorekeeping and shotmaking geared toward beginners; the Tadpoles program introduces juniors to the game.

"All of these people call in to sign up or sign up online," George says. "Kassie organizes all of it. She makes them all schedules and hands them out, checks them in and organizes them into groups. It's amazing customer service and frees up more time for me."

"There are over 20 courses within 20 minutes of us. It's extremely competitive, so we do things to try to differentiate ourselves."

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