

## The Service Factor

**A**s the golf course industry reconsiders its future, solutions to industry woes are coming from all corners. Brace for impact. It's not pretty.

Instead of focusing on the core values of recreation, simplicity and affordability that somehow managed to get the game through 400 years (despite hard-to-use equipment and so-so course conditions), the knee-jerk reaction is not to look to the past for guidance. Instead, folks want us to look to the hospitality industry.

More service, more "touch points" and more branding. Translation: more nonsense.

What about stuff that really matters, like less cost, less time to play and less intimidation factor? It's not on the agenda.

Instead of peeling away at the multilayered and often bloated golf experience, many in the industry want to pile on more annoyance as well as more tips to be handed out. They want to do for golf what Marriott did for courtyards. Splendid.

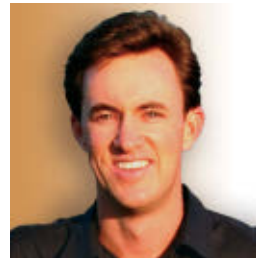
Unfortunately, the golf "experience" has become wrought with too many layers that only add time and stuffiness to a round. Just look at what the new LPGA commissioner had to say recently about playing the game.

"My invites have gone through the roof since getting this job," Mike Whan told the Orange County Register. "But my interest in playing has gone way down. I can't fathom the idea of taking six hours to play golf."

Nowhere is this extravagant mentality to the golf experience more

INSTEAD OF PEELING AWAY AT THE ALREADY-IRRITATING GOLF EXPERIENCE, MANY IN THE INDUSTRY JUST WANT TO PILE ON MORE ANNOYANCE

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD



evident than in the bizarre notion that changing your shoes in the parking lot is an evil, right up there with not fixing ball marks and refusing to love Bobby Jones with all your heart.

The image of someone getting out of his car, opening the trunk and putting on his FootJoys is ... disturbing? So much so that we have massive, energy-wasting locker rooms that have added hundreds of millions to the cost of clubhouse construction and maintenance. All for a stinky room that accounts for about 1 percent of the time most normal folks are at a golf course.

I recently asked PGA player Geoff Ogilvy what he loves about the "Aussie model" of golf compared to America's.

"For less than \$50 or so you can access all but a few public courses in Australia and private membership is only a few thousand dollars a year at most clubs," said the 2006 U.S. Open winner. "The maintenance budgets for the courses are quite small because water usage is always very carefully controlled.

"Also in Australia, golf is generally free from bag drops, valet parking and locker-room attendants," Ogilvy adds. "None of which really makes your day any better or worse, does it? In fact, I've always thought changing my shoes in the parking lot and walking to the

tee with my bag on my shoulder was part of the experience."

Architect Bill Coore recently pulled up to a high-end Scottsdale course in his beat-up pickup truck he uses for errands. Knowing the kind of club it was, Coore intentionally bypassed the lavish circular driveway, parked his truck in the back of the well-landscaped lot and carried his dinky 15-year-old bag toward the front entrance. As he approached the clubhouse, a greeter emerged and asked if he could help Coore in a tone that screamed, "You made a wrong turn, buster."

Coore replied, "As a matter of fact, I'm here to play a little golf." To which the greeter asked coldly, "Are you a guest of a member?"

Coore was a member, and the man allowed the co-architect of some of the world's finest modern designs to pass through. However, Coore says he never encountered that kind of condescension during a recent stay in Australia.

And in the future, Coore is confident he'll experience a lot less of that type of "service," despite increased calls for it to attract more players to the game.

Will the game really miss it?

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