



PATRICK D. WILLIAMS

THE PROFESSIONAL APPROACH

ON SELLING (OR BUYING) MERCANDISE

I do not profess to be an expert on the techniques of selling in the shop. I do claim to be an expert in buying from the golf shop, because I have dropped a bundle to gain that kind of experience. Certainly, my experience has taught me something. So, this month, I'm going to focus on the golf shop, as seen through the eyes of a typical customer, taking into account his likes, his dislikes and his idiosyncrasies. I believe that by understanding the pro shop buyer, the professional will be able to understand how to sell, or even better, how to merchandise.

By tradition, there are two kinds of buyers: one who buys first and pays the retail price; the other, who takes the buying mistakes off the pro's hands, is the bargain buyer. In the final analysis, one is not better than the other, because both types have a place in economic trade. Most professionals would prefer that all their customers be in the total retail category, but things don't work out that way. So, the professional has to live with both types and cater to both. Finally, I must add that there always will be a goodly number of customers who never buy and probably never will. Naturally, the professional takes these people in stride; doesn't get too concerned about them; treats them with courtesy and respect and hopes someday that they will buy a package of tees or three balls or something.

The first impression a buyer receives as he walks into a pro shop is of the general physical layout. No customer will insist that a pro shop rank with Neiman-Marcus, but everyone would like to spend their money in a nice atmosphere. This first impression translates into—is the shop clean, organized and basically well-kept? If the shop looks sloppy or has no "sales eye appeal," I, as a customer, imme-

diately reject the thought of getting serious about spending my cash. In conjunction with this initial impression of neatness, is the corollary one of novelty. A store that always looks the same each time I visit it, becomes boring. Granted, a golf shop is the toughest kind of retail operation to change its impression visually, because customers may come in two, three or even four times a week. But changing it, even occasionally, must be done.

The second impression I receive as a buyer is the more important one of who is going to "sell" me something. As everyone knows, the right salesperson can overcome the physical deficiencies of any shop. The professional and his staff are the experts in determining what kind of person has just walked into the shop. Is he or she a retail buyer, a bargain hunter, a looker, or what? That judgement must be made immediately. Why? Because more sales are lost on the wrong opening sentence than for any other reason.

When my wife and I go shopping, we do so usually for one of two reasons. Either we are looking for places to spend money, or we are trying to find a specific item we need immediately. After we walk into a store and tell the salesperson we are "just looking," we expect him to stay away from us, to let us look around. If the salesperson hounds us, we will walk out. If, however, we have a specific item in mind, we'll tell that to the salesperson right away; then we expect to get the item immediately. If he tries to second sell us, we usually won't buy anything.

A tendency that I hope is not becoming a trend, is the blatant "I couldn't give a damn" attitude on the part of many salespeople. This attitude is intolerable and must be eliminated if it exists in the pro shop. The members at a club don't have to pay higher prices to get that kind of treatment;

they can go to the nearest discount store, and probably will.

The third impression I receive as a buyer is the available selection of merchandise offered in the shop. How many times have you seen men's clothes displayed prominently, in a really eye-catching way? You go into the shop eager to buy. All that is left are 48-longs and a pair of size 26 slacks. What happens? The customer gets angry, and disappointed. So, whatever merchandise is being sold in the pro shop, don't push it unless you have a good selection.

Product knowledge is the next impression. In the golf shop, this is unquestionably a key ingredient, because it separates you from the discount store. When a customer asks you about graphite shafts and you reply that graphite is what is in a lead pencil, the customer will leave. You must know the products you are selling. How many times have you asked a salesperson about a product, and he has to go look it up, or he tells you to read the instructions attached to the item. Too many times, I bet.

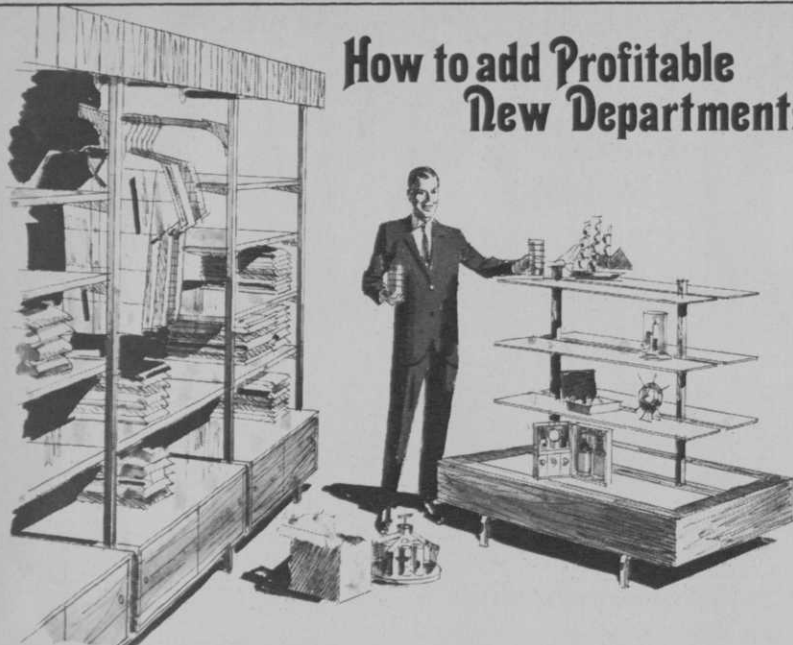
How about the impression the customer receives about the length of time consumed in winding up the sale? I've been in stores that would not take certified travelers checks, but would allow me to open a charge account and to charge the sale. I've also been in stores that "almost" would not take cash.

When people have made up their minds to buy something, they do not want a bundle of roadblocks to jump over. Make the paying easy, regardless of what method you use in the shop.

Finally, what about the over-all impression of the place? Are the people as nice and helpful immediately after the sale as they were during it, or are they now thinking about the next sale? Did they wrap up the item or fix it so it

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was convenient to carry? Did they take my name and address so they can call me when something comes in that I might want? Did they leave me with a feeling that they really enjoyed selling me something? These "little things" are very important to the rank and file customer. The antithesis of this impression was observed by me at a discount store in Kansas City, Mo. I quote a sign over the cash register: "We don't bag, wrap, sack or tie it. You bought it—you haul it."

The final impression is the one created when the customer comes back with the stuff because something is wrong with it. Now is the time when the professional has to be the champion of all champions, because you have the customer's money and he has your defective merchandise. The battle lines have been drawn. Here's an example of what not to do: I bought recently a color television as a gift for someone. At the time of the sale, I asked the salesperson if the set had been checked out. His answer was definitely yes, without question. Following the buyer beware principle, I plugged the set in when I got home. Not only was there no color, but the channels did not come in on the corresponding numbers on the selector dial. When I returned the set one hour after buying it, I was told to put the set in the shop, and I could get it back in a week or 10 days. Because my column is rated G, not X, I cannot quote here where I told them they could put the set.

Your attitude toward a customer when he returns defective merchandise either pushes him out the door or makes him a customer for life.

Earlier, I mentioned two types of buyers. The bargain hunter expects the same treatment and conditions as the full-retail buyer. Keep in mind that even at a bargain price, he really thinks you are still making too much money. The other side of this coin is that he is taking something off your hands. Treat him as you would your best customer.

Take a look at your shop from the customer's point of view. Not just from behind the counter, because that's the wrong side. Look at the entire shop. Set up a customer program that meets your demands as a customer in other stores. Take a hard look from the other side of the counter. □

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WHY COURSES FAIL

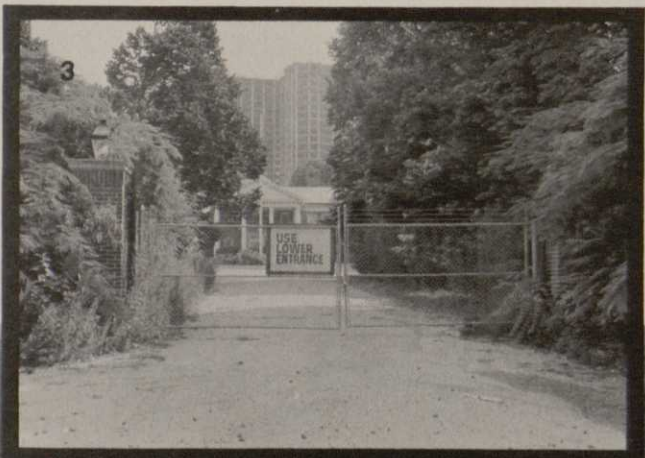
Poor management policies and entrenched attitudes by golf course officials, combined with public need and private profiteering, usually force the end of a golf course

by DOUGLAS LUTZ

Envious eyes view golf's open green spreads as territory fertile for acquisition. As seen by the public sector, those prime lands that green the urban landscape unjustifiably support the sporting activities of only a handful of people. Better use could be made of these acreages. They could produce the much-needed income to help fill local government coffers; help ease the housing shortage; expand crowded college facilities or provide more macadam ribbons to relieve traffic clogged highways.

Private needs give way to public concerns; the few must move over for the many. Again and again the same story is told. The vulnerability of the golfing community lies in the inherent conflict between the private and public sectors. Expansion is an American obsession, belied by hypocritical sentiment. Educational institutions extol the ideal of an education for everyone while unceremoniously acquiring precious greenswards. The corporation, with a little help from industrial park promoters, dangles the lure of more jobs and less taxes, and ends the life of yet another golf course. Housing contractors, mindful of the housing shortage, bulldoze a once-venerable course, and build houses too expensive for most Americans. Highway departments insist more roads are needed to ease traffic-choked highways; slash across a fairway, thus creating more traffic.

To all these special interest groups, the golf course repre-



All the courses pictured here have failed, due to public apathy, industrial expansion, academic encroachment or high-rise building. Lake Hopatcong (bottom, opposite page; photo 4), closed two years ago. Valley View (photo 1) has become headquarters site of the National Biscuit Company. Ferncliffe (photos 2, 6) fell victim to industrial park acquisition. Glen Oaks (photo 3) fell

to luxury housing. Queensborough Community College (photo 5) now occupies the former site of Oakland CC. Unique architectural features built into all these courses can never be duplicated.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY DOUGLAS LUTZ

sents an easy solution to pressing, public needs.

Who supports a golf course when it is threatened by an expressway of doubtful routing? Why doesn't the community appreciate the value of a golf course enough to fight for its survival? Perhaps officials are short-sighted. That the golf course has stood on its superb landscape for 50 years or more has no bearing on their thinking. But the public doesn't attempt to alter official thinking. Why? What is the golf course to most people?

In their minds, they see Private, No Trespassing, Keep Out, Members Only signs. The meaning of these are clear; the public is not wanted. The golf course is interested only in maintaining its privacy, its elitism. Despite the popularity of golf, the golfing community has alienated itself from the community at large. Its welfare, no longer of concern to the public, is easily sacrificed.

When a county needs a college for its education-hungry children, how

strong a protest might be expected if the local government begins condemnation proceedings against a commercial golf course that may be barely holding its own? Its position in the community as a fine example of an outmoded style of architecture does not sway those determined to secure the land for education. Interests of the very youth for whom a scholastic atmosphere will be created, as surely as the plans are announced, are soon to be denied on another level: the elimination of a recreation facility that for many years attracted the community's young as players and as caddies. Ironically, in the same county and concurrently with initial bulldozing operations at the existing course, ground is broken for a new 18 hole course. Hypothetical? Not by a long drive.

In 1968, Bergen County, N.J., condemned Orchard Hills in Paramus, and Bergen County Community College began building on nine of the holes. The other nine were to be operated under a five-year lease. The lease

lasted two years, and Orchard Hills was gone forever.

Land acquired to build Overpeck GC at the other end of the county in Teaneck, N.J., is traversed by Overpeck Creek. Heavy spring rains, always a hazard in this part of the state, cause serious flooding and ultimate damage to the new course. Why the county did not acquire Orchard Hills as a public course and have the school built at the Overpeck site remains a mystery.

Orchard Hills was an excellent hilly course, one of the best in northern New Jersey. Overpeck, by comparison, is flat, dull, almost devoid of trees. Following heavy rains, it is virtually unplayable, causing many days of uncollectable green fees.

A principal villain contributing to the demise of golf courses has always been the educational sector. In New York City's borough of Queens, the 78-year-old fairways of the former Oakland CC are hidden under the Queensborough Community College campus. Any reminder of its past glory as a truly unique example of old-fashioned design and topography can only be found in the clubhouse, which still remains. That, too, is an alteration of its former self; it was rebuilt after a fire in 1912. Currently used for special functions, faculty dining and student club activities, this once-proud Dutch Colonial style mansion now looks down on masses of students who tramp unknowingly across the plateau of Oakland's highest hill, a hill that once supported the incomparable ninth and 18th greens. These were majestic uphill finishing holes that terminated in terraced layers below the beckoning umbrella-decorated outdoor refreshment area.

The acquisition of the property received an assist from another, larger villain. The city in its zealous campaign to ring itself with new and better roadways, condemned part of Oakland in 1958 to make room for housing displaced from the path of the then-building Long Island Expressway (now called the world's largest parking lot). Doubtless, other open territory in the immediate vicinity should have been the choice for relocation, but the city government at that time was not particularly disposed to any considerations of ecology, preservation of a golf course or the wishes of the golfing fraternity. There was, in fact, a blatant

continued

COURSES FAIL *continued*

disregard of opinion conflicting with officialdom's road-building fanaticism.

In 1959, Queensborough Community College took over the remainder of Oakland CC, which was in extremely shaky financial condition as a semi-private course. The inevitability of progress, one supposes, stifled any resistance to the takeover by Oakland's management, even though golf in New York City had begun its popularity swing.

Clearview, a city-owned course, only three miles north of Oakland, had been establishing records as the most popular public course in the world. Oakland should have been the logical candidate for the overflow from Clearview. Instead, that distinction went to infamous Dyker Beach in Brooklyn.

Granted, the full impact of public golf had not as yet descended on the city: the managements at many New York area clubs were then unaware of the potential income soon to be realized, so no effort was made to hold onto golfing facilities. Clearview, as an example of short-sighted management, had been sadly neglected; a factor that drove golfers away. This, plus Oakland's crippling tax burdens, finished her off.

Typically, New York City's parks department took no action to acquire the property as a city park, even though there was enough indicators to show that city facilities were about to be over-utilized.

Another institution of higher learning had set the pace for golf course property acquisition some years earlier in the same general area as the Oakland site.

Hillcrest GC, hemmed in by semi-affluent houses in a section of Queens called Utopia, became the site of St. Johns University. Just to the south of Hillcrest, across Grand Central Parkway, was a particularly affluent neighborhood called Jamaica Estates. It would appear that among the residents of the surrounding communities, there might be enough support to forestall Hillcrest's demise. This was not to be, however, and once again golf was the loser.

In a weed-grown corner of the St. Johns campus, old course buffs can still glimpse through the rusted fence and underbrush one of Hillcrest's greens—perhaps salvageable as a

practice green for student golfers. However, any interest on the part of the institution seems remote.

The section of Queens where St. Johns and Queensborough are located was also home for Pomonok and Bayside Golf Clubs. Neither course could stem the tide of the housing explosion that took place in Queens. Earlier versions of garden apartments, forerunners of today's condominiums, and one and two family brick homes saturated the landscape in the Fresh Meadows area squeezing out both Pomonok and Bayside. Additionally, Bayside was in the path of the projected Clearview Expressway, which was ultimately to lead traffic arteries to and from the planned Throggs Neck Bridge.

In a five to six mile square of Queens, during a short 20-year stretch, six wonderful, old courses were wiped out—Oakland, Pomonok, Hillcrest, Bayside and Idlewild, as well as St. Albans, a private club in the community it was named after, that became a United States Naval hospital during World War II.

The marshy shores of Jamaica Bay were once home for the Idlewild GC. A few blocks in from the old Sunrise Highway, now part and parcel of the Belt Parkway, behind scattered rows of frame houses reachable along reed-framed rutted roadways, Idlewild's flags fluttered above tall stalks of swamp cattails. In this isolated setting, New York City had a fine example of a seaside links. A goodly share of hy-

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CHECK YOUR VULNERABILITY

Here are some danger signs and some positive actions to consider.

● Know what is happening to land development in your immediate area. Farms subdivided for small housing complexes usually mean more of the same. Population spreads into your general area should trigger percentage increases in your "future" financial planning. Taxes will be rising along with assessed evaluations.

● Committee votes against levies for anticipated increases in labor, tax and operating costs, while possibly not an immediate threat, will accrue to the detriment of the course. Gradual rises in assessments and/or dues should keep pace with cost of living indicators. Larger demands for sorely needed revenue can hit a portion of the membership at a bad time, causing panic and possible defection.

● Stay as close as possible to local public works planning projects. Road and sewer improvements outside your property lines have a direct corollary to assessed value. Always have a strong representation, your most influential members, at public hearings on road construction. Condemnation of property comes rapidly on the heels of public hearings. Routing of seemingly important arteries is not only the province of road engineers. They tend to think along the lines of the old bromide—the short-

est distance between two points is a straight line. Cutting off the corner of your course as an expedient path for a roadway is too simple a solution, which you should be prepared to rebut with creative alternatives—assuredly not with anger.

● Watch the political arena carefully. Challenge candidates on their positions regarding open space legislation. Better yet, put up your own candidate. Green belt legislation, theoretical in nature, is the politician's panacea against all clear-minded protest over open land loss. Be wary in this arena.

● Continual examination of student registration versus available classroom space is a good barometer of possible expansionist thinking within the scholastic community. Support local schools in their search for expansion sites. Enlist the positive aid of your young people, who are potential students, influencers of academic thinking. Again, suggest viable alternatives.

● The innocent-looking shopping center nearing completion down the road may be the vanguard of more commercial businesses or small industry moving into your area. Who are the principals behind the operation? Have they looked you over without your knowing it? Get to know your new neighbors and determine if they are intent on acquiring large tracts of land for future development.

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