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Extreme ✓ Customer

Golf courses can boost business – and grow the game – by serving their clientele to the max

BY LARRY AYLWARD, EDITOR IN CHIEF

THE COURTEOUS MAINTENANCE worker at Saddle Rock Golf Course in Aurora, Colo., turned off his mower when the golfer approached the green, putter in hand. The worker stood quietly near the green while the golfer lined up his long putt.

When the golfer tapped the putt and watched his ball's lengthy journey end with a sweet-sounding clang in the cup, the worker began applauding as if Phil Mickelson sank the shot. *"Great putt!" the worker cheered while clapping enthusiastically.*

It was only the reaction from a gallery of one, but it was a very meaningful reception to the golfer. In fact, the player was so touched by the applause that he phoned the worker's boss, Certified Superintendent Dennis Lyon, to tell him about the considerate worker.

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Service



PHOTOS BY: ISTOCK INTERNATIONAL INC.

[ABOUT THIS SERIES] “Growing the Game” is *Golfdom*’s quarterly series – now in its fourth year – that focuses on how the golf industry can attract more players to create more rounds. In addition to this installment on “extreme customer service,” we’ve also explored the impact women, minorities, disabled golfers and baby boomers can have on increasing play. We’ve also talked to golf course architects about ways they can make the game more friendly, and we’ve highlighted creative marketing programs that golf courses use to attract new golfers. The next installment of the series appears in August. Visit our archives at www.golfdom.com to view the “**Growing the Game**” series.

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◀ Dennis Lyon (right), manager of golf for the City of Aurora's (Colo.) Golf Division, instructs his staff to be courteous and friendly with golfers.

▼ John Gurke, certified superintendent of Aurora Country Club, is doing everything he can to not let maintenance budget cuts impact golf course conditioning.

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"The golfer called me up and told me how great of a gesture it was," says Lyon, manager of golf for the City of Aurora's (Colo.) Golf Division, which includes Saddle Rock among its seven courses.

To Lyon, the scene was the epitome of awesome customer service.

The moral of this story is simple: Golf courses can help grow the game — and their businesses — with excellent customer service. Not only will the same golfers keep coming back to a course that treats them like champions, but new golfers will come, too.

Customer service is vital to an operation in any economic environment. And it can be argued customer service is increasingly vital in an economic downturn to retain patrons in addition to growing a business.

Customer service takes on many forms around the golf course, from value to playability to personal attentiveness. Sometimes great service doesn't cost anything, and sometimes it requires a monetary investment. But all great customer service requires a commitment from a course's every facet — from the pro shop to the maintenance staff and every department in between.

The customer and the course

Superintendents throughout the country have had their maintenance budgets reduced in response to the economic downturn. That includes John Gurke, certified superintendent of Aurora (Ill.) Country Club, who says the club has been hit hard by the recession and has lost about 40 members. "Our whole operation has changed, with many cuts made to budgets in all departments," he says.

Gurke's maintenance budget was cut 15 percent from



2008. This translated to cutting two seasonal staff members and one full-time salaried employee. Gurke also had to freeze staff wages and implement seven-hour workdays with no weekend overtime. Gurke accepted no bonus in 2008 and will receive no salary increase or bonus in 2009. "We all realize we need to suffer a little in order to keep our jobs," Gurke says.

But what Gurke doesn't want to see suffer too much is his golf course's condition. Thankfully, he says the impact on conditioning at Aurora "should be minimal at most."

That's good because veteran Certified Superintendent John Miller, who is the LPGA Tour's agronomist, says if a course's maintenance budget has been cut to \$700,000 from \$1 million, the golfers playing that course still expect it to look and play like a million bucks. They don't care that the maintenance budget had to be cut.

Fortunately, there are some things superintendents can do on their courses to help alleviate cuts. They can try to cut their budgets where it won't show on the course. For

instance, Gurke says more out-of-play areas at Aurora will be naturalized to save money on maintenance. He also plans to reduce bunker maintenance and reduce other supplies. Miller suggests superintendents cut a fertilization application in the course's rough, where golfers probably won't notice the aesthetic impact. Or they can reduce weekly fairway mowings from three to two to cut back on fuel and labor costs.

Lyon warns not to cut corners on some areas, such as putting greens. "After the greens, there are two other obvious areas not to cut corners: clean bathrooms and paper products supplies," he says. "Then you look at fairways and tee boxes. You prioritize where you're going to spend your money."

Lyon, who says he's accustomed to doing more with less, believes most superintendents are talented enough not to let budget cuts impact the golf experience. But it's important for superintendents to communicate what they're doing and why so everyone — from golfers to management — is on the same page.

Miller seconds the motion of communication importance, but he suggests superintendents choose their words carefully. They don't want to come off like they're looking for sympathy from golfers.

"You have to let them know that management has asked you to cut your budget, but you're aware how important the conditions are to the golfers — and you're doing everything you can to keep them happy," Miller says.

Another area of course conditioning just as vital as smooth-rolling greens is degree of difficulty. In most cases, courses should be set up to appease good golfers and bad ones.

At Shale Creek Golf Club in Medina, Ohio, the maintenance staff aims to make the course as player-friendly as possible for all golfers. The greens aren't fast and furious, and there are no tricks like bunkers and rough that make balls disappear. "Golfers don't care if your greens are lightning fast," says Ben Cavey, Shale Creek's general manager. "They just want them the same speed every time they play."

Shale Creek was designed with all levels of golfers in mind, Cavey says. The course offers five sets of tees. "I've heard comments that we're an old man's course," Cavey says. "That's fine. We'll have a lot of them playing this year, because that's the way our population is going."

The "value" factor

On a blustery March morning, Cavey arrived at Shale Creek to find about 20 golfers in the clubhouse waiting out a frost delay. "I was very happy to see them," he says.

Cavey was happy to see them because he didn't expect to see so many golfers on such a chilly morning. But Cavey knew a reason some of them were there was to take advan-



▲ Jason Bennett (left) and Ben Cavey (right) say employees take a "whatever-it-takes attitude" toward customer service at Shale Creek.

◀ Stacy Oney, who works in the clubhouse at Shale Creek, realizes the importance customer service plays by simply smiling.

tage of their new Very Important Player (VIP) cards to get a price break on rounds. This season marks the third full season for Shale Creek, which is normally crowded on Fridays, Saturdays and Sunday mornings. "But we also wanted to see what we could do to get more golfers here Monday through Thursdays," Cavey says.

So Shale Creek introduced the VIP program last fall. A VIP card costs \$75 for those 59 and younger and \$45 for those 60 and older. It entitles players to \$15 off 18-hole rounds and \$10 off nine-hole rounds for play Monday through Thursday, and Saturday and Sunday afternoons. The VIP cards are selling briskly, and Cavey believes the program will help grow Shale Creek's business this year.

The club is targeting senior players who watch their spending carefully, Cavey says. "They don't want to spend a ton of money on golf, but they want to play good golf courses," Cavey says. "The VIP card is right in their price points, with rounds costing \$23 to \$27, depending on the time of the year."

Other courses realize the value in retaining and attracting new players, especially during a recession. Stone Creek Golf Course in Oregon City, Ore., doesn't have a fancy clubhouse, a big-ticket restaurant or other fancy amenities. But it does have a quality golf course open to the public.

"There's a lot to be said about that," says David Phipps, Stone
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Creek's superintendent. "It's what our golfers want. I'm not saying what we have works for everybody, but it works here."

Stone Creek, one of the top public courses in Oregon, charges \$35 during the week and \$39 on weekends. Phipps suspects Stone Creek is picking up rounds lost at private clubs, whose members have left because of the bad economy.

"Golf is a game that people want to play regardless [of economic conditions]," Phipps says. "If they can't play it at the country club, they will go somewhere else that's affordable and is a quality place to play."

Kevin Bennington, superintendent of Red Wing Lake Golf Course in Virginia Beach, Va., expects play to increase at his mid-level public course because of the value it offers. Even though the course is located in a tourist community, most of its play comes from residents, who pay \$21 to \$35 for 18 holes.

"It seems value is driving our market here," Bennington says. "Conditions are important, but the courses providing the biggest bang for the buck are the ones getting the rounds."

But Bennington's course and others are careful not to increase business by just cutting rates. Once rates are cut, it's difficult to raise them back up.

Cavey says it's not worth the effort and wear and tear on the course for an operation to lower its rate and crank through a high number of golfers a week when it could collect the same revenue with fewer golfers without cutting rates. Courses need to take a more creative approach to growing business than just cutting rates, he adds.

It's all about them

The people who operate courses committed to excellent customer service realize it takes extra effort on their parts to satisfy golfers. Perhaps nobody knows that better than Jason Bennett, superintendent of Shale Creek.

Last year, Shale Creek implemented a new program to satisfy the many golfers who want to play the course on Saturday and Sunday mornings. The club waived tee times on the weekend and now begins play on both the first and 10th tees. The course runs two waves of golfers through those tees, from 6:30 a.m. to 8:30 and then again at 11 a.m.

"That's when people want to play, and this helps us get more golfers out there during prime time," Cavey says.

But when Bennett heard about the program, his head began to ache. "It will be a scheduling nightmare," he told himself.

Bennett knew he would have to send out crews on both sides of the course on Saturday and Sunday mornings to get ahead of the golfers to get the work done. "We have to start earlier in the morning, which is harder on the crew," he says.

But as Bennett and his crew grew accustomed to the task, they realized it wasn't that difficult. They also realized the importance of getting more golfers on the course for the business' sake. "My crew realizes the people out here playing golf are the people paying our wages," Bennett says.

It's for the same reason the staff at Stone Creek places the customer first. For instance, if there's a frost delay, the customer service machine kicks on at Stone Creek. The people in the pro shop are on the phones calling golfers and letting them know ahead of time about the delay so they don't go to the course and are forced to wait. And instead of canceling golfers' rounds, Stone Creek implements a "10 o'clock shotgun" to accommodate all golfers.

Phipps says the aim is to offer golfers an experience they won't find anywhere else for the money. "My crew members are very attentive to golfers as they're playing," he says.

Bennett says it's top of mind for his crew to provide excellent customer service.

"If my guy is hand-watering a green and a golfer hits his shot on the green, I want my guy going over to fix the ball mark and then say, 'I got that for you, sir,'" Bennett says.

Cavey says Shale Creek employees take a "whatever-it-takes" attitude toward customer service. Cavey demands his employees always wear their happy faces in front of golfers.

Happy faces are also plentiful at Aurora Country Club. While Gurke says the club has reduced amenities such as free bar snacks and weekend buffets, it has concentrated on heightening customer service. The people who work in the pro shop and clubhouse exemplify the "customer-first attitude," Gurke says.

A customer-friendly staff is just as important on the maintenance side, Lyon adds. "Sometimes, maintenance crew members think they should just keep their eyes down and not look at golfers when they pass them by," he says. "But golfers want to be acknowledged by them."

Just ask the golfer at Saddle Rock Golf Course how he felt after sinking his long putt. ■

Three Things for the Customer

Golf courses can help grow the game – and their businesses – with these three items:

1 Value – A lot of courses don't have fancy clubhouses, big-ticket restaurants or any other fancy amenities. But a lot of golfers don't care. They just want quality golf courses that are affordable to play.

2 Playability – Unless you're an Oakmont Country Club whose membership prefer greens as fast as the interstate, courses should be set up to appease good golfers and bad ones.

3 Personal attentiveness – Most all golfers want to feel part of where they're playing. And to make them feel that, they want to feel noticed by a course's staff, including the maintenance crew. "Sometimes, maintenance crew members think they should just keep their eyes down and not look at golfers when they pass them by," says Certified Superintendent Dennis Lyon. "But golfers want to be acknowledged by them."



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MINING FOR MOLECULES:
PART THREE

If products are less toxic with lower use rates and superintendents use them responsibly, then what's all the fuss about?

BY LARRY AYLWARD,
EDITOR IN CHIEF



The calls for less pesticide use on golf courses have been loud and clear *outside* the industry. But those same calls have become increasingly loud and clear *inside* the industry, especially in light of the current “green” movement.

Why?

It's not as if golf course superintendents are using arsenic and DDT to control pests on turfgrass. This is 2009, not 1959, and superintendents use pesticides that are more environmentally friendly than their predecessors.

“These are not the same products that were being used in past years,” says Dave Ravel, Turf Market Lead for Syngenta Professional Products in Greensboro, N.C. “They're more targeted than they've ever been.”

“Most of the products we introduced 25 years ago wouldn't even be considered for release now,” says Tom Hoffman, vice president of commercial sales and product development for Kansas City-based PBI/Gordon. “Our standard of safety has risen over the years.”

When he began working in the industry about 30 years ago,
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