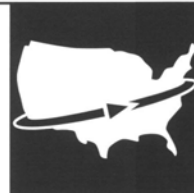


Ways Golf Courses Deal With Bad News



By Patrick O'Brien and Chris Hartwiger, USGA Green Section, Southeast Region

Editor's Note: Good golf course reading abounds across the country, and some of the best comes from 1.) the USGA Green Section Agronomists, and 2.) the CAROLINAS Green, official publication of the Carolinas Golf Course Superintendents Association. We are offer both in this excellent article from the September/October 2005 issue on a subject that is still a worry one year later. Thanks to my friend Chuck Borman, executive directors of the Carolinas Golf Course Superintendents Association for permission to share this advice with you. And thanks to Bob Vavrek's colleagues for the same kind of sound thinking that we get from him.

The staff of GOLF WEEK reported in an article in the July 23, 2005 issue that according to a new report released by the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association International, "the number of American golfers declined six percent in 2004 and now is smaller than the U.S. golf population in 1987." Also reported was a statistic from the National Golf Foundation that "the number of care golfers, defined as people 18 and older who play eight or more rounds of golf annually, dropped 4.7 percent to 12.8 million in 2004."

These statistics are sobering for those in the golf business. The supply of golfers is shrinking yet throughout the country the supply of golf courses is flat or increasing slightly. Of course, these statistics only confirm what keen observers have noticed for the last few years. Golf courses, whether they are private, daily fee, or resort, have been placed in a position where they must battle to attract and retain golfers. Their economics lives depend on it.

Generally, golf courses we see in the Southeast are dealing with this difficult economic environment in one of three ways. The first group is the "Cost Cutters." These golf courses focus up the middle, carefully maintain costs, and try to provide an enjoyable golf experience for those who play the course. The clientele of these golf courses commonly is golfers seeking value.

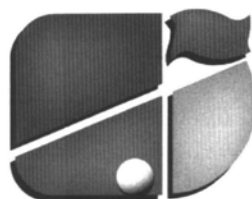
The second group of courses falls into what we call the "Gee Whiz Group." Typically, these are higher end courses that are using emerging trends or technologies to enhance golfer enjoyment. An example might be the use of a new species of turfgrass on the fairways that has a much different look than bermudagrass. Others are using turfgrass varieties on the tees that are used traditionally on putting greens. A few clubs are importing bunker sand from across the country. The goal of these improvements is to create a "Wow" or a

"Gee whiz" effect. Golfer comments such as "Gee whiz, I've never seen tees mowed so short" or "Wow, that is the most beautiful fairway grass I've ever seen" are common when these upgrades are made.

Some may believe that making cosmetic upgrades to a golf course during a recessionary time in the industry is foolish, but there is a method to the madness. These clubs are seeking ways to separate themselves from their competition and market themselves. It has never been more difficult to attract new golfers. Golf courses that want to increase their market share are using the "Gee whiz" effect and based upon results observed, they have been successful in impressing not only new golfers, but existing ones, too.

The final group of courses is the "Procrastinators." Lack of money and lack of consensus on the product to be produced hold these golf courses back. This group is the least likely to gain market share based upon their actions. These courses cling to the hope that the industry will begin to grow again because a rising tide floats all boats.

The message is clear. Now is a fantastic time to be a golfer. It is a buyers' market. Golf courses are entrenched in a battle to gain market share and keep their businesses viable. We cannot predict the future, but be certain that there will be clear winners and losers. Cost cutting may turn into quality cutting, "Gee whiz" may turn into "Uh oh," and procrastination may lead to dissatisfaction. In the meantime, courses are advised to take the competitiveness of this market seriously and develop a plan for attracting and retaining golfers. Work the plan and hope for the best. No one knows which strategy will prevail in the end, but market forces will provide us all with the answer. ♣



**GILL
DESIGN INC.**
Golf Course Architects

122 North 2nd Street • River Falls, WI 54022
715-425-9511 • e-mail: info@gilldesigninc.com

Visit our website: www.gilldesigninc.com

**Design • Renovation
Master Planning • Practice Centers**

Member: American Society of Golf Course Architects