TOP REVENUE WITH GOLF CARS

A grab bag of ingredients influences a golf course's profitability: course layout and design, length of playing season, membership base and club patronage. But how about the golf car fleet?

by John Allison, Yamaha USA

Few factors are as important to the successful long-term profitability of a golf course as a reliable revenue-generating golf car fleet. The fleet is a course necessity, both as a profit-generator and as a necessity for players.

Golf car fleets needn't be seen as a forerunner of all the calamaties associated with mechanized equipment, such as broken parts and long downtimes. It's important to realize that with routine care and a healthy dose of common sense, your fleet can make the course more profitable and become one of your most outstanding assets. To look at it another way, a fully operating fleet earns revenue that can compensate for other non-revenue-generating equipment like mowers, trenchers and tractors.

Impacting profits

So what can be done to impact course profitability with a golf car fleet?

The answers lie in the product of basic management and maintenance principles, with special consideration given to issues such as a fleet's reliability, durability and reputation during the purchasing or initial rental processes.

For instance, the superintendent influences which types of equipment are purchased or leased. With responsibilities that combine grounds maintenance along with vehicle service and operation, the superintendent obviously wants to acquire a fleet that delivers top performance, maximum up-time and meets the demands of golfers—without the hassles associated with breakage, parts replacement and long hours of labor.

As a key player in the purchasing and rental process, the superintendent must overcome the temptation to look at overall cash outlays, loan amounts or total leasing figures for a fleet. He or she must concentrate instead on long-term profitability and a fleet's ability to withstand the rigors of constant use.

Once superintendents realize that a fleet's earning potential far overshadows any reservations about initial purchase costs or yearly lease commitments, they can make educated decisions regarding style, manufacturer and whether to purchase gasoline or electric types.

Cost of down-time

Every superintendent knows the extreme value of a fleet's total up-time; or to illustrate another way, the cost and lost profit opportunity resulting from down-time. The value of any car lies in its ability to deliver revenue from its daily, routine operation. Its value substantially declines if it's broken or non-operable. A fleet plagued by costly down-time is the source of golfers' frustrations, management concerns and diminished profits.

To help guarantee a maximum and speedy return on a golf car fleet investment, key golf course staff should immediately enact a well-thought-out maintenance schedule. This obviously assures maximum fleet performance and revenue. Sound maintenance, especially preventive maintenance, can and will extend fleet life significantly. As the superintendent fully appreciates the fleet's revenue-generating capability, chances are that more deliberate steps will be taken to maximize its up-time efficiency.

To get the most out of your fleet, start with the basics. Develop and follow a comprehensive maintenance schedule, and keep accurate records of individual car's use. Insure equal use of all fleet cars by rotation; don't fall into the "last car in, first car out" trap, which unevenly distributes workload on select cars.

And to monitor costs, create a cost accounting maintenance chart that divides vehicle operation costs into two categories: "maintenance" (labor, service, fuel and parts associated with daily operations), like topping off the fuel tank, battery charging and cleaning; and "upkeep" (labor, service and parts that contribute to vehicle longevity and long-term performance), like tire rotation, filter replacements, engine valve adjustments, battery service and steering mechanism adjustment. In this way, daily operational costs and costs aimed at extending service life can be independently monitored.

You can thus show management the nominal costs associated with good upkeep, the value of a quality maintenance program and its relationship with fleet longevity.

A preventive maintenance program and effective refueling/recharging practices are essential to revenue-producing golf car fleets.

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Gasoline cars

For gasoline engines, the usual items like gas, oil, spark plugs and filters must be added or replaced on a consistent basis for a car's regular use.

If a car hasn't seen regular use, top off the fuel tank to help dilute stale gas and check all fluid levels, including the battery. After starting the car, let it run for a brief time and remember that if stored or inactive for a long period, the engine is liable to emit smoke for several minutes due to the gas/oil mixture that will have seeped into the combustion chamber.

Establishing regular intervals for in-depth maintenance of gasoline cars—tasks within the realm of preventive maintenance—will help assure maximum up-time and contribute to vehicle longevity.

Electric cars

For electric cars, several special maintenance procedures can drastically extend a battery's life. During a new car's initial break-in period, the service life of the battery will be extended if the car is only run 18 holes between charging. Keep a battery at least ¾ charged at all times. This not only influences performance, but keeping a battery at or near peak charge significantly extends its service life. Use only distilled, purified water when refilling batteries; never use pond water or hose water as the chemical contaminants and hardness of the water will, in effect, "poison" the battery fluid.

To obtain the best performance from electric golf cars, it's best to complete the fleet's charge just prior to tee-off. However, as any superintendent knows, this is not always possible. Because of convenience, cars are often charged at day's end and come off the charge sometime during early morning hours, permitting the batteries to cool down. There are devices that either delay or control the time and depth of charge, each with their own advantages and disadvantages.

Timers enable the maintenance staff to control when the batteries will come off charge, but timers typically overcharge an average of 22 percent, which wastes electricity and damages batteries. Since a battery operates stronger and longer when warm, golfers will be getting a car in peak performance. The disadvantage, of course, is that a battery's service life may be adversely affected. An automatic charger can better control the depth of charge, but no effective means to regulate the timing of the charge is available. In either case, examining variables such as weather, season, battery condition and fleet demand will help determine which type of system to use.

Extending life

Think of it this way: What is it worth if, as a result of good maintenance habits, your fleet's overall average service life is extended by a mere six months? To put it in perspective, simply multiply added rental fees and deduct maintenance and overhead costs, and the ends will surely justify the means.

All golf courses want to operate at peak performance and generate maximum revenues. By taking steps to make certain your golf car fleet runs at peak performance, you have also assured maximum revenue-generating performance. Don't underestimate the profitability of a well-maintained fleet with outstanding up-time figures. All things equal, the golf car fleet is among the only revenue generators with which greens superintendents can play a significant role and greatly impact overall course profitability.

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