



CONQUERING THE FEAR FACTOR

Jane Carter, Golf Unlimited, writes the fourth in a series of articles on marketing. In this document Jane discusses how to start talking to non-member golfers.

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As recession starts to bite, Jane Carter argues yet again that the time to embrace nomadic golfers and a different way of doing business is well past and golf clubs and their committees which choose to ignore the issues do so to the detriment of their long term future

By the time you are reading this it will be official. The world as we know it – or at least the financial one – will have ended and Britain will be in a recession. The only question now is for how long and how deep will it go.

I vividly remember the recession of the early 90s, having chosen just nine months earlier to start my own publishing business! Golf, however, was to an extent protected. We had just experienced the heady 80s when we seemingly couldn't build golf courses fast enough. There was still a supply and demand issue which meant clubs could draw on their long waiting lists and nest-egg of funds built up over years of joining fees and prudent management. For some, especially new, proprietary courses, it was tough but for most it was a matter of getting through it relatively unscathed.

How different this time around. Already battered by falling waiting lists, squeezed on discretionary revenue such as green fees, dwindling numbers of societies and rising costs of borrowing and running costs (especially fuel and utilities), owning or managing a golf club has never been tougher and I predict the next year will see some casualties.

For most clubs, the next four months will be crucial as they embark on their renewal process. It will be interesting to see what happens but on the basis that in normal times a golf club can expect a 10 per cent attrition rate, many should be gearing up for much worse.

However, despite all this I remain constantly amazed by how many golf clubs (and I have to say the committee-run private members' clubs are the worst culprits) seem intent on convincing themselves that: a) This is just a blip (it isn't!) and b) If they keep cutting costs and asking the members for more money it will be fine (it won't).

The simple fact is we are now facing a completely different way of doing business – a more complicated way and one that requires more effort than simply sending out renewal notices, but one which could be equally as rewarding if only we were to understand and then embrace it.

I return to my favourite subject of ‘non member golfers’ (I am fed up with the word nomadic). It was a subject which caused some consternation in the May issue of this magazine when I wrote about discount golf schemes and how rather than be scathing and indeed scared of them we should – finally – start to use them to our advantage.

There are two issues which stop golf from moving forwards in these difficult times – the fear factor and a lack of knowledge / resource to be able to run our businesses in a different way. This should strike a chord with most golf club managers I have spoken to who become increasingly frustrated by management committees who seem unable to accept the facts staring them in the face – falling membership, falling revenue and rising costs – and continue to run their golf clubs in exactly the same way, as if by repeating the process it will suddenly start to work again.

The fear factor

So what do I mean by the fear factor? I have sat and listened to numerous management and marketing committee meetings this year and am struck by how often the same fear factor raises its heads and it’s always when we talk about engaging with non-member golfers. Suggest a flexible membership scheme and the immediate reaction is fear that the existing membership will all leapfrog into this new category (yes, some might). Or suggest a simple loyalty programme for pay and play golfers in the locality and the reaction is if we do that they will never join (some never will anyway). And that’s without even dealing with the favourite excuse, “but what about the members? They don’t want societies, they don’t want more members”. No, but neither do they want prohibitively high annual fees.

And so we go on with the majority of golf clubs doing nothing or little to engage with non-member golfers unless the topic of conversation is their favourite one – membership – while these golfers who now considerably outnumber member golfers, happily pay and play for their golf, oblivious to the dark mutterings and tag of traitor which seems to have been applied to every one of them.

For every golf club manager who contacts me (and there have been many) bemoaning the fact that their committee won’t see sense and what can they do, conquering the fear factor is the first stage in the process. By now, you will have commercial reality on your side and possibly fear of a different kind but they need to understand that you are not abandoning all that is great but simply starting a conversation with the potential members of the future.

Membership is the ultimate aim of any golf club and should remain the mantra of the whole industry as a flourishing membership base is the foundation of a healthy sport. We should do all we can to promote it but rather we seem intent on protecting it at all costs, often to the detriment of what we are trying to achieve. For many non-member golfers, the leap from pay and play golf to membership is initially too great. They need to be courted, shown the benefits of this

relationship, enticed and finally wooed. To do that, you at least have to speak to them and, annoying though it may be, it initially has to be on their terms.

Striking up a conversation

So how do you start talking to non-member golfers? That brings me to the second factor holding back golf clubs in the new world order – a lack of knowledge or resource to enable them to do business in this new way. I return to my second favourite subject, golf club marketing, and will argue that unless it is taken seriously and you have the right tools and support to do the job, communicating the benefits of ultimately being a member of your golf club will be nigh on impossible.

The good news is that small businesses can now start the conversation in a cost effective and direct way by collecting data of visitors and using it to professionally and proactively communicate with them. Make it part of the day to day process and suddenly you are starting to take some control. As a golf club manager put marketing on the agenda, set up a marketing committee, involve the golf professional whose business will also be suffering, embrace all the tools available to you, especially the internet, and before long it will be as much a part of the working life of a golf club as cutting the greens.

I am about to embark on a series of England Golf marketing workshops (a full list of dates can be found on www.EnglandGolf.org) where the topic of how to strike up a relationship with non member golfers and how best to use that relationship to your best business advantage will be at the very heart of the message. It's actually not that difficult and golf clubs up and down the country are now starting to do just that. It's no longer a nice thing to do but a must and acquiring the skills and knowledge should be at the top of any golf club manager's priority list – especially if he wishes to be seen as indispensable to the future of his club.

For those where convincing the committee or owner is still an issue I leave you with the following quote which appears in a recently released report by the New Zealand Golf Union. Faced with the same problems (as is every country where golf is a mature market), the union has launched an initiative, 'Golf Nation', designed to help golf clubs promote membership by engaging with new golfers. The mission statement below is at its heart. I suggest you cut it out (the underlining is mine) and give a copy to every member of your committee:

"The reality of the 21st century is that golfers are consumers and they will choose to participate in the game of golf how it best suits them. It is our challenge as an industry to ensure that as the market (society and golfers) evolves, the golf product also evolves to be relevant and attractive to the current and any potential consumer."

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