

RENOVATING GOLF COURSES:

LOOKING BEYOND ARCHITECTURE

In the 1980's and 1990's, American golf architects were building new golf courses at an astonishing rate. Land development was booming, people felt secure in their jobs and the National Golf Foundation had declared that Americans would have to build a golf course a day to meet demand. However, these are different times. For the past five or six years, most golf architects have shifted their focus to projects over seas or have been focusing on renovating existing golf courses. Much of the work at our firm involves preparing long-range master plans and helping golf courses understand what they can do to increase their position in the local golf market. For private clubs, this often means adding new amenities and an emphasis on attracting new members. For public daily-fee courses, this means looking for ways to increase rounds and green fee revenue:

Define the Niche.

Before making architectural changes, it is important to identify the golf course's niche in the local market. It stands to reason that the typical customer at a private club has different expectations than the typical golfer at an entry-level municipal or par-3 course. Where a member at a private club may be looking for exceptional conditions and a challenging experience, the entry-level or average golfer is likely more concerned about the price and having fun. In fact, the average golfer may not be concerned about the strategy of the game at all – they may not even keep score. As golf architects, identifying the target customer tells us how to design the golf course, which improvements are most important and where management should spend their advertising dollars.

We often work with financial consultants and golf strategists to look beyond the obvious architectural improvements to insure that the improvements we propose will actually translate into a bottom-line financial benefit. .

Know Your Customer.

It's amazing to me how often the owner or golf professional is completely out of touch with how the customer base feels. They typically hear from the most outspoken 5 or 10% of their customers that what they really need to do is add new back tees or improve the consistency of the sand. At the same time, the silent majority is thinking the course is too difficult. Spending money to reduce forced carries, remove trees and building new forward or senior tees may be money better-spent to increase rounds and revenue. In some markets, the smart move might even be to reduce the course from eighteen holes to nine holes or to shorten a 7,000 yard regulation course to an eighteen-hole executive or short-regulation course and to develop the remaining land as commercial or residential real estate.

It's not uncommon for me to go into a City and find four or five public courses all charging nearly the same rates and targeting essentially the same customer. This would

be like having a Ford, Chevrolet and Dodge dealership in the same town but nobody selling Lexus, BMW or Hyundai. More often than not, the management's idea of competition at those courses has been to focus on adding new back tees, building a bigger clubhouse or dropping their season pass rates a few dollars below the competition. They may have spent money to rebuild their bunkers or install a new irrigation system but, at the end of the day, they are still all essentially competing for exactly the same customer and charging essentially the same rates. Whatever you do, before making significant architectural improvements, it important to make sure you know who your customer is and what product your competition is offering.

Differentiate Your Course.

Once you've identified specifically who your customer is, it is my belief that owners and operators need to look for ways to differentiate themselves from their competition. In larger markets, this may mean a major renovation geared towards improving course conditions and the visual quality of the course. In smaller markets, this might simply mean repositioning the course to provide a unique experience and improve playability. For most courses, in this day and age adding more length is simply not the answer. We've all heard it said – "golf is too difficult, too expensive and takes too long to play".

In order to increase revenue and improve market share, there are a number of things that can be done to differentiate one course from another. It may be a unique bunker style, a well-designed short-game practice facility or converting the turf on your fairways or greens. At private clubs, this may be the addition of a swimming pool, a spa, a bowling green or, if you have the space, a skeet or trap range.

Before you start making changes to the course, make sure you understand which improvements your customers actually think are important and which improvements are most likely to impact the bottom line. This can be done by conducting a survey of your customers in conjunction with the completion of a long-range master plan".

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