

How to Win Friends and Influence Enemies!

Customer service in the Northeast Region.

BY DAVID A. OATIS

Customer service means different things to different people. Golfers might equate good service to things like curbside assistance with their golf bags, locker room attendants, or a helpful pro shop staff to assist them. Traditionally, golf course superintendents have probably equated good customer service with providing good playing conditions. However, the golf market has become increasingly competitive, and superintendents today think of all sorts of different ways to improve customer service. Doing the *little things* well in order to make the golfing experience unique and more pleasurable can have a big impact on how a course is perceived. This extra effort ultimately translates to a significant difference in the bottom line of a facility.

Golf's environmental movement has had a tremendous impact on how courses are designed and maintained. Many courses establish naturalized buffer strips around their bodies of water to protect water quality, and many others maintain naturalized areas to provide food, cover, and habitat for wildlife and to add interest, contrast, and strategy to the game. Since many golfers consider themselves environmentalists, naturalizing areas can have a positive effect on the golfer experience.

Paul Scenna, golf course superintendent at Beacon Hall Golf Club in Ontario, Canada, is doing just that. In addition to maintaining many acres of naturalized areas, Paul developed a 16-page natural area field guide that describes some of the unique environmental aspects of the Beacon Hall



This portable bull's-eye adds meaning to the phrase "target golf." A portable target for special events can stir competition and add fun and interest at the practice facility.

property. It details the flora and fauna found on site, and the guide is small enough to easily fit in a golf bag. The purpose of the guide is to educate golfers and increase awareness of and appreciation for the natural and diverse beauty of their property. It provides fun and useful information, and the natural area field guide demonstrates Beacon Hall's commitment to the environment. What is perhaps most important, it can positively affect golfer perception. The uneducated golfer may look at a natural area and perceive it to be weedy or unkempt, whereas the more environmentally educated golfer might actually look for some of the plants detailed in the natural area field guide and would almost assuredly consider the natural areas a positive addition to the golfing

experience. Developing a natural field guide is a great way to educate and influence golfers.

It is important not to discriminate among the various segments of the golfing population, and it is incumbent upon us to make sure that all are welcome at our various facilities. Creating a welcoming and hospitable environment is an important step in ensuring the success of a facility and the growth of the game of golf. Attractive landscaping can improve the aesthetic beauty of a facility, but the key word here is *attractive*. A landscape that is poorly done or unkempt may create an unprofessional, derelict appearance that could be bad for business. Flowers can certainly be a nice touch, but only if they are done well. The message here is, "If it cannot



Golfers frequently are asked to submit surveys designed to assess customer satisfaction. Sometimes this request for opinions is done tongue-in-cheek!

be done well, don't do it." A plain, simple landscape that appears well kept would likely be much better for business compared with a more elaborate landscape that is poorly maintained.

Facilities send all kinds of messages to golfers based on their design, management, and maintenance. Some are intentionally positive, while others may be inadvertent and decidedly negative. Providing prime parking spaces to the key people at your facility is a nice way to say thank you for your volunteer efforts or congratulations on your accomplishments. Just be sure not to discriminate. Providing a prime parking spot for the men's club champion is a nice gesture as long as the ladies' club champion is recognized in the same way.

Al Fierst, superintendent at Oak Park Country Club in Illinois, works closely with the ladies' group at his course to make sure their guest days are something extra special. This year, he procured pink flags and painted tee markers and hole liners pink for the theme of their ladies' guest day, which happened to be "pretty in pink." Obviously, this is not something that can be decided upon or pulled together at the last minute. Al works with the committee several months ahead of

time to ensure effective planning, preparation, and coordination. In addition to making one day extra special, this approach shows a strong commitment to the club's women golfers.

As a golfer, it can be frustrating and difficult to find sprinkler heads with yardage plaques that are overgrown

and/or illegible. To avoid this problem, Al also goes to the trouble of edging around and cleaning his sprinkler heads so they can be found and yardage markers can be read more easily. One could argue that cleaning and edging around the sprinklers could speed up play, and it is a nice way to help golfers have a better day.

On a recent visit to Ridgewood Country Club in Paramus, N.J., superintendent Todd Raisch's staff was observed trimming around the yardage monuments on the tees. In between more aggressive edging, scissors are used to snip away errant blades of grass so that golfers can easily find the yardage plaques. On a visit to The Park Country Club in Buffalo, N.Y., last summer, superintendent Scott Dodson's staff was observed carefully folding the ball washer towels over the top of the ball washers. Scott explained that this is done every morning for two reasons: seeing the towels folded over the top of the ball washers allows Scott to quickly assess whether they have been serviced on a given morning, and it prevents the overfilled ball washer from leaking



Plenty of cooperation and lead time can make it possible to go the extra mile to make special occasions even more special. The theme for this Lady's Guest Day was "Pretty in Pink." Accordingly, Superintendent Al Fierst purchased pink flags and had tee markers and hole liners painted pink.

soapy water onto the towel, thereby creating a mess. These are examples of little things that golfers are more likely to notice if they are not done rather than if they are.

No one goes to greater lengths to accommodate women golfers than Jim Moore, golf course superintendent at Puslinch Lake Golf Course in Ontario, Canada. Recently, Jim mowed out a forward tee in the shape of a heart for a special occasion. He later mowed another forward tee in the form of a ribbon for a breast cancer fund-raising event. While this may not be possible or appropriate at your golf course, it certainly speaks volumes as to Jim's commitment to his clientele.

Just about everyone is guilty of taking the game of golf too seriously at one time or another, and it is important to keep in mind that golf is a game that is intended to be enjoyable. Wayne Lamb, golf course superintendent at Transit Valley Country Club in East Amherst, N.Y., recently rebuilt and expanded his practice facility. With the popularity of practice today, this was a tremendous hit with his golfers. A larger tee with better turf combined with target greens add to the value and enjoyment of the practice experience. However, the finishing touch came at the closing day when a different sort of competition was held at the practice facility. Wayne placed a target out in the range and the golfers held a competition trying to hit it. Initially, the target was an old dump truck placed out in the range with its bed elevated, and the golfers tried to hit the bed. It was so popular that Wayne expanded it the following year by building a large bull's eye that easily fits on the back of a small maintenance vehicle equipped with a dump bed. In this fashion, the target can be placed out in the range with just a few minutes of effort.

Many courses have developed one type of hole location guide or another over the years, and they range from a movable indicator on a flagstick to color-coded flags to indicate front,

middle, or back hole locations. Unfortunately, they all have the same thing in common: they frequently generate golfer arguments since the identification of a hole location tends to be subjective. Golfers who come up short may argue that the guide indicated a front hole location when it was really a middle or back hole location. One superintendent, who asked to remain nameless, was so frustrated with the situation that he actually painted an arrow on the green, telling his golfers, "There is the hole. Play to it!"

At the end of the day, the number-one priority in terms of customer service must always be golfer safety. Facility managers must maintain their courses in accordance with all appropriate laws and regulations and with staff and golfer safety in mind. Although it is inevitable that accidents will occur from time to time, some accidents are predictable and many others are preventable. Thus, be sure to inspect your facility regularly with safety in mind. Make sure that cart paths are designed, built, and maintained to be safe for



The little things mean a lot. Folding the towel over the top of the ball washer in the morning lets the superintendent know that it has been serviced. It also prevents an overfilled ball washer from leaking soapy water onto a clean towel.

Golf course accessories say a lot about a course and its management. Accessories that are color coordinated, clean, and attractive in design add to golfer comfort without detracting from beauty. They convey a message of taste and competency. On the other hand, broken or poorly coordinated accessories (ball washers, benches, and trash receptacles of varied and different color and style) create an unattractive and attention-grabbing appearance. Signs that are old, rusted, and falling down create an air of frugality or neglect. Clearly, these are not messages most superintendents want to send to their golfers.

golfers and maintenance equipment. Inspect the trees on your property and quickly remove unsound trees or branches. Check for sunken irrigation or drain lines and holes made by burrowing animals. Broken valve boxes or missing lids create an obvious and significant hazard. Higher insurance costs and reduced revenue combined with golfer dissatisfaction and bad press are the results of accidents, so be sure to make safety the number-one priority at your course!

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