

Golf: The Bridge Between Generations and Gender

As population demographics shift, we must make an extra effort to introduce a new generation to the game. **BY PATRICK A. SHEA**

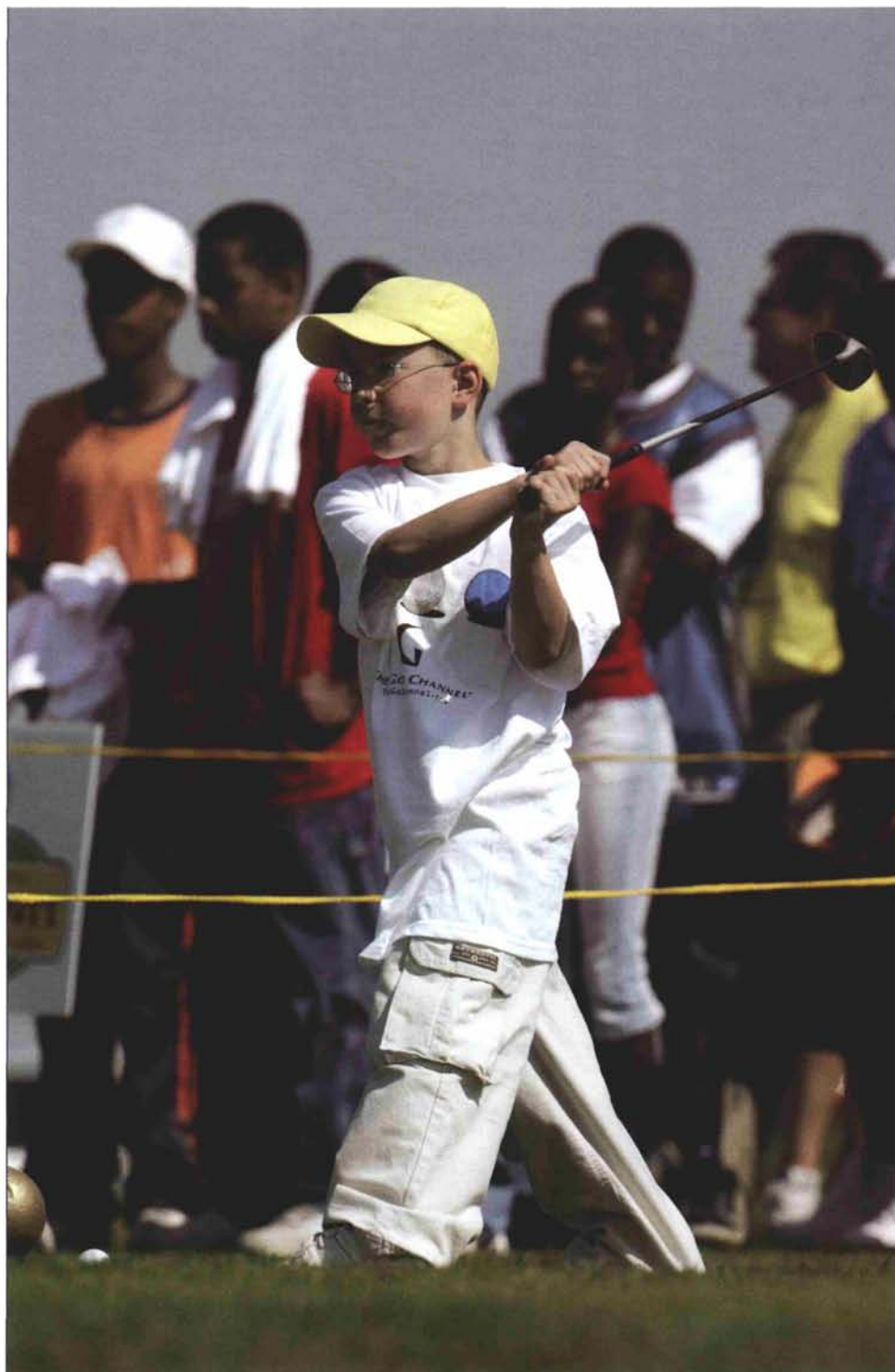
The United States has a population of more than 300 million. As a society we find ourselves divided, sometimes intentionally and sometimes unintentionally, into many different categories. Speaking demographically, we are an aging population in which the respective age groups as a percentage of the whole population are increasing in the older age categories and decreasing proportionally in the younger categories.

For golf, this change in demographics is an opportunity if one assumes the aging categories will have more free time with a corresponding interest in activities like golf.

The World Golf Foundation has done repeated studies that show regular and frequent golfers are individuals who were taught the game in their youth by a parent, grandparent, or a friend. With the onslaught of the baby boomers entering the age of social security, the relative/friend category must be used to bring new, younger, and older golfers into the golf tradition.

BREAK DOWN AGE BARRIERS

The sad fact is we live in a chronologically segregated culture. Think about it — in your own day, how often do you have a chance to have a meaningful and sustained interaction with someone outside of your family who is ten years older or ten years younger than you are? Frankly, superintendents and golf professionals, because of their employment force or their students, have a greater chance to have cross-generational interaction in a meaningful manner than almost anyone else.



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Besides chronological segregation, we tend to separate ourselves into racial, ethnic, and religious groupings. The projected U.S. population by race shows the respective changes from the year 2000 to 2050 in five sets of categories: White, Black, Asian, Hispanic, or other races (Figure 1). You will see that the relationship based on popu-

lation changes dramatically over time, with the minority population having the greatest changes in percentages.

From a marketing perspective, both the race categorization and other demographic information show a separation by age differential, thus producing a dramatic change in the aging population (Figure 2). By dramatic, I

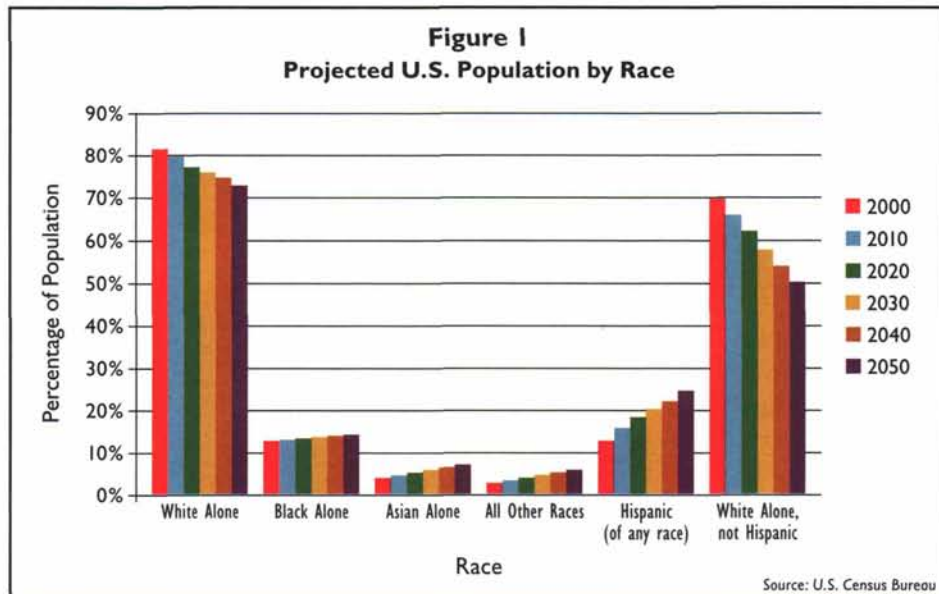
am talking about the difference, for instance, between two or three percent, representing a minimum of 1 million and a possible maximum of 6 million individuals shift, based on the present population of 300 million. My point with these charts is to suggest that there are significant marketing opportunities outside the traditional country club set. If one looks at the population by gender, in all human populations there are always 1 to 1.5% more females than males, a significant difference that needs to be addressed by golf marketing to maintain a consistent level of participation.

In 2003 the National Golf Foundation developed a chart showing the total population (the red column, Figure 3), percentage of African Americans (the blue column), Asian Americans (the light blue column), and Hispanic Americans (the green column). The age category of 18-29 shows a significant increase in the Hispanic population that should, over time, translate into greater Hispanic participation if invited into the great game of golf.

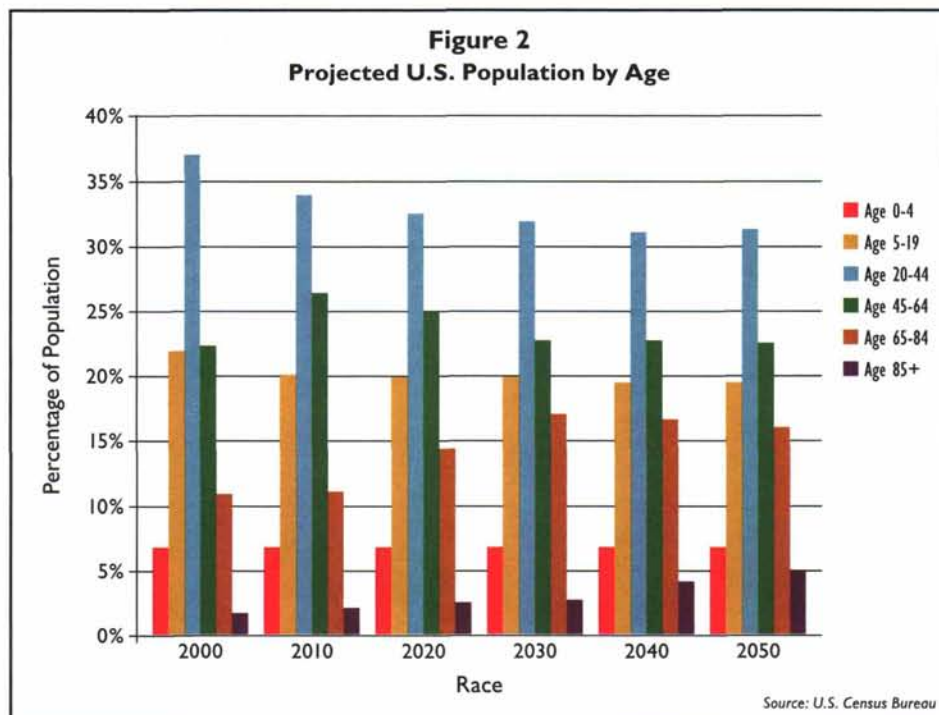
In the same study, Figure 4 shows U.S. golf participation by gender and race. You will note that of the minority golfers, the male Hispanics are ahead, and yet female African American golfers are ahead. Each of these categories should be a focus of both public and private promotion of golf.

RETENTION

We know the numbers: each year approximately 3.5 million people take up golf, and 3.2 million people leave golf. The net gain of 300,000 is less than 1 to 5%, assuming a golfing population of approximately 36 million. This lack of increase is difficult to follow scientifically, but other economic activity clearly demonstrates the lack of significant growth. That evidence is the number of golf courses, usually public, that are being sold to developers because they are worth more and are better use of the land. Golf course



The percentage of the population represented by minorities will increase over time. Golf marketing strategies need to address and take advantage of demographic changes.



The percentage of individuals aged 65+ will steadily increase through 2050. Fortunately, golf is a game that can be enjoyed throughout a lifetime.

construction, which has expanded over the last 20 years, has come to a screeching halt. It will not be a surprise if a dwindling demand takes golf into negative numbers in the near future.

It is because of this dire prediction that we need to focus our attention, as members of the golf industry, on those segments of our population where growth is possible.

Figure 5 shows the number of female vs. male golfers, beginning at age 18 through 70. The disparity between male and female participation indicates great potential for growth of the game if aggressive marketing is focused toward the female player.

Men and women golfers tend to come from affluent economic categories. They have the money to spend on golf. The same is true for educational achievement levels, where the vast majority of golfers have some college, a college degree, or post-graduate education.

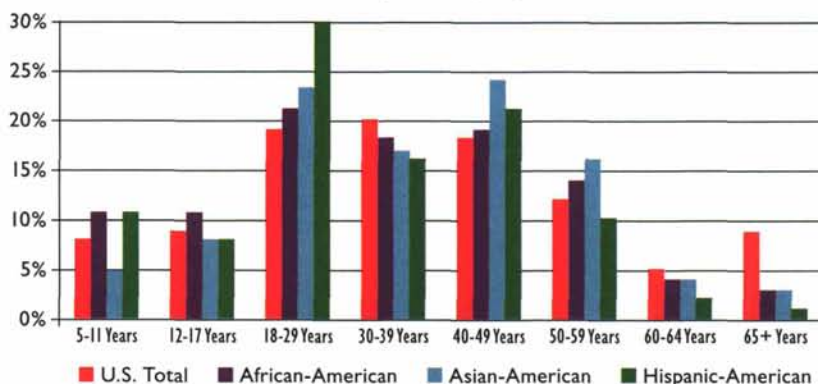
One of the more interesting charts is male vs. female golf participation by occupation (Figure 6). The blue-collar category has a disproportionate ratio of male to female golf participants, whereas the retired/not employed category has a greater equality between male and female players.

So, how do we find the bridge? The first question we need to ask is our own story — when did you start playing golf?

"I got started at 16 and earned money from my first job to buy clubs. I used those clubs for 10 or 11 years. When I went into the Navy I was finally frustrated with them so I sold them." — Jim Clark, Westminster College, Dean of Business School.

Sue Nyhus, the women's head golf coach at Brigham Young University, stated, "High school golf was really important to female golfers' early development." Or as Jennie Underwood put it, "Dad wanted Mom to learn and Mom didn't want to learn alone, so she dragged me along. I really wasn't into

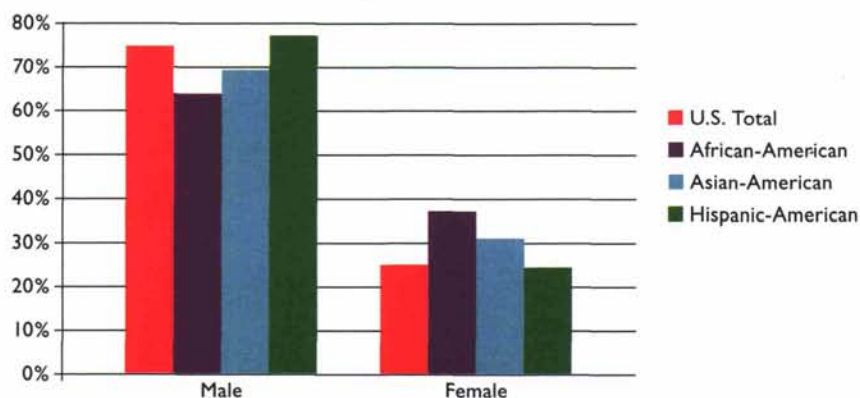
Figure 3
U.S. Golf Participation by Age and Race



Source: NGF, 2003

Developing marketing strategies that target the 18- to 29-year-old Hispanic population would be an effective way to take advantage of projected demographic changes.

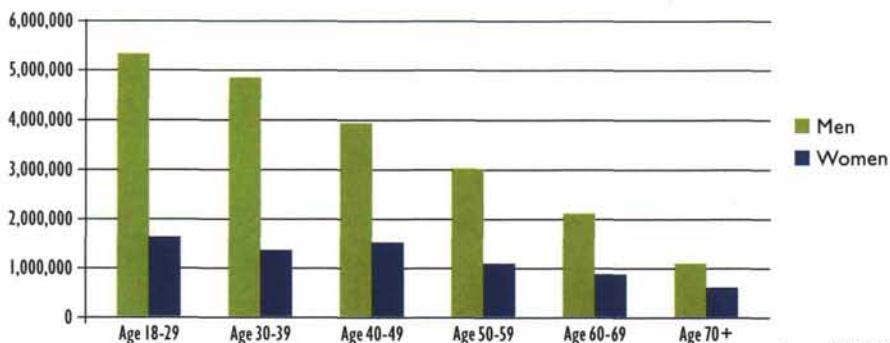
Figure 4
U.S. Golf Participation by Gender and Race



Source: NGF, 2003

Targeting male Hispanics and female African-Americans would be an effective way for golf marketing to maintain and grow the game.

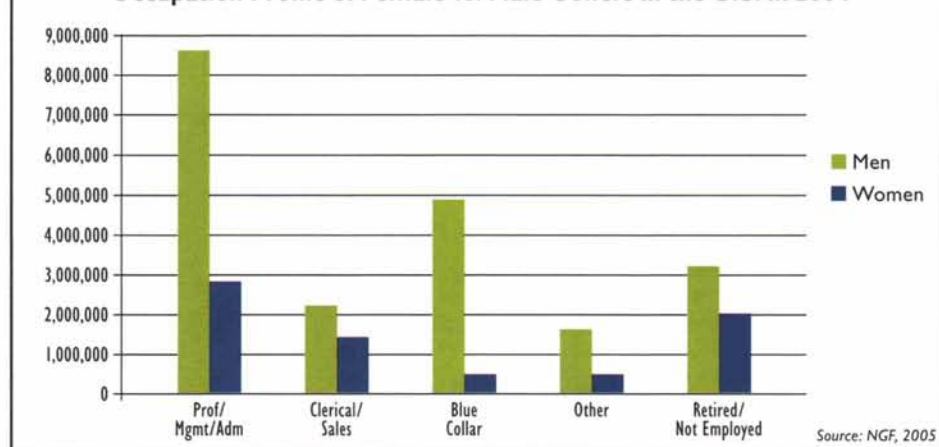
Figure 5
Participation Rate of Female vs. Male Golfers in the U.S. in 2004



Source: NGF, 2005

More men than women play golf regardless of age group, with the greatest disparity found among young players.

Figure 6
Occupation Profile of Female vs. Male Golfers in the U.S. in 2004



The ratio of male to female golfers is nearly the same for retired/non-employed players, while considerably more blue-collar men than women play golf.

it until I got into high school, which is when I fell in love with the game.”

If you pause for a moment and think about your own story or the story of your friends, spouse, or relative, first experiences with golf usually began with a family member, a close friend, or some type of school program. The

real question for members of the golf industry in 2008 is, how can we enhance or expand the number of starting points for the game of golf?

Another fundamental question is why fewer women play golf. Again, Sue Nyhus at Brigham Young University suggests that in the coeducational

format that high school girls confront, the girls simply are out-competed by the boys. There needs to be care to make sure that starting female golfers, both at an early age or at retirement age, are not embarrassed by their first participation.

As Denise Larson, the head women’s golf coach at Utah Valley State College, states, “The number of female golf models is not large and needs to be expanded to bring new young women golfers into the game.”

So how do we get seventh and eighth graders’ reactions? We ask them, “Have you ever played golf?” and “What do you think of golf?”

“I haven’t played . . . Golf is really complicated. It seems too hard to play.” — Karly, age 13.

“No . . . I never want to learn how to play. I don’t have the patience.” — Sam, age 13.

“Yeah . . . I like the way that there are so many boundaries. It makes me feel contained.” — Luke, age 14.



The most effective way to attract a new generation of players is to introduce boys and girls to golf when they are young. Even if they decide not to pursue golf during high school and college, an early, positive experience may help them return to the game later in life.

"Yeah . . . I think people will forget about this sport." — Charlie, age 12.

"Nope . . . I think that it's a dead sport." — Mary, age 12.

And given the ever-present computer screen or iPod, when Hallie, age 13, comments, "No . . . I think it will become really popular later in the future," it represents a present reality that the golf industry has to deal with. On average, every child below the age of 16 spends *on average* 47 hours a week in front of some type of screen. The same child spends less than a half hour in unstructured outdoor activity.

These facts and comments from teenagers touch upon why many younger people are not taking up the game of golf. But imagine if these individuals, their parents, grandparents, or extended family saw golf as an opportunity not just for physical exercise but for family interaction and how their attitude might be properly directed.

A few of you reading this article will think of some argument you have had or observed between spouses, children and their parents, or grandparents and their grandchildren. Yes, I recognize disputes can and do break out. For instance, I taught skiing for three years in high school. I started wanting to teach girls my own age (15 at the time), but within a few weeks I moved to teaching the youngest class of 3- to 6-year-olds. Some of my most difficult student teaching involved students who had been taught by their parents or relatives. My lesson from those three years is: do not try to teach your own children or your spouse how to ski, and I would extend the teaching prohibition to golf as well.

To conclude the story about ski instruction, my wife insisted I teach my boys how to ski rather than putting them in a ski school. After my lessons, it took each of my sons several years to discover the true joy of skiing. Don't let your clientele make the same mistake with golf.

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There are many reasons why the growth of the game has leveled off during the past several years, causing concern about the state of the game. Maintaining a healthy level of play at golf courses will require facilities to think “outside the box” when developing marketing strategies to attract new players and maintain current clientele.

Back to focusing on recruiting new golfers, particularly women. We asked various members of the golf industry how they would recruit women to play. Randal McCracken, head golf coach for the University of Utah, made a good observation when he stated, “To get more golfers, you have to go for men, women, and children at the same time and make it a family thing.”

Think how you would recruit not just female golfers but the demographic racial and ethnic opportunities in the earlier graphs. Is there something about your golf course that would provide an unusual welcome mat to the family (conventional or unconventional) who wants to learn the game of golf at your course?

Finally, let’s look at an all-important component that distinguishes golf from almost any other sporting activity. That is, the rules or ethics by which we play the game. As a parent, I am always concerned about the ethical

standards my sons have learned from my wife and me. Many of the most valuable ethical lessons have been in what some teachers call “teaching moments.” These moments, more often than not, arise in unusual circumstances, where parent and child momentarily recognize the fleetingness of time and circumstances and take a snapshot that is shared in their respective mind’s eye.

The first time my son had an eagle, the several times he has sunk a long putt, or the increasing times he out-drives me — these are teachable moments. My growing up years were spent caddieing, and each of us knows that by watching different behaviors on the golf course, one can tell a great deal about the character, or lack thereof, of individual golfers. The moving of a ball on the fairway for a better lie, the nudging of a ball out of the rough, or the change of a marker to a closer location to the hole — all represent improper approaches to the game of

golf. The golfer who practices these habits rapidly finds himself either playing by himself or with similar cheating company.

One day, my son Michael and I went to play at our local public course. The PGA professional put us with another twosome. The other two golfers were gang members, as witnessed by their dress, tattoos, and language use (I was a legal advisor to the Metro Gang Unit for four years). As we approached the first tee, I thought to myself, “Oh great, this is going to be a long nine holes.” On the second hole, a long par 5, Michael sliced his ball into the rough, and in rapid succession one of our playing partners sliced his ball in the same area. As golfers everywhere, we all began to search for the lost balls. We found them. By the fourth hole we were talking and joking about our respective shots and putts. By the end of the round we had lunch together.

From my experience, there really is no other place besides a golf course

where people of different races, ethnic groups, genders, or other categories one can think of, can join together in a shared game with a common set of rules monitored by each individual. It is because of this heritage that I, like many others, want to highlight the First Tee program and its nine core values. They represent an ethical constellation that, if learned, will allow both the student and the teacher to be ethical and succeed at their various endeavors.

THE FIRST TEE NINE CORE VALUES

Source:

www.thefirsttee.org

1. Honesty
2. Integrity
3. Sportsmanship
4. Respect
5. Confidence
6. Responsibility
7. Perseverance
8. Courtesy
9. Judgment

CONCLUSION

With these ethical values, I want to conclude with a suggested to-do list. I don't know about your growing-up years, but in our household we always had a to-do list. It was helpful in planning for the week, although as a youth I thought it was simply a way of not letting me do what I wanted. This to-do list includes ten suggestions on how you might encourage potential golfers, young and old alike, to take up the game and keep playing. None of these are new, and most of them require follow-up and personality to make them succeed. But I do guarantee that if you explore and use them, golf will grow at your course.

TEN POINTS TO BUILD YOUR BRIDGE

1. Identify places in your community where families (traditional and non-

traditional) go as a family. This could include a zoo, a park, a recreation center, or other places you may have visited with your own family. See if their welcoming presence could be used in some way to attract potential golfers. Have a high school with a biology class near you or a local wildlife specialist do an inventory of the flora and fauna found on your golf course, with a list to be handed out to parents and grandparents as part of

6. Have golf events with pizza or barbeque when families are invited to your course to eat, socialize, and participate in a few contests, i.e., chipping, putting, and driving. Parents can compete against children, or children can compete against grandparents. Or nieces and nephews can compete against uncles or aunts.

7. Invite local and regional notables to your course to host a golf gathering, perhaps with pizza, barbeque, or some

other activity to show that notable people in your community are golfers.

8. Invite your local golf association, men and women, to host returning veterans, at no cost, to learn the game of golf and to host a round of golf with the veterans when their schedule allows.

9. Invite local business groups,

like the Rotary or Kiwanis Club, to conduct golf and business development events, including time-limited tournaments to be held at your course.

10. Invite local church leaders to hold youth or senior events in their congregation, ward, or parish at your course.

P.S.: Have a region-wide contest with a significant prize to be awarded to the one or two suggestions that attract the most new golfers to your course.

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their family introduction to the game of golf.

2. Work with your local law enforcement, fire department, and public education professionals to see how a cooperative effort, focusing on the tradition of golf, could be introduced to new players.

3. Identify senior citizen recreation centers where a golf program or a golf league could be established.

4. Visit golf retailers in your region and see how your course could be integrated into their marketing plan for retail sales and customer activities.

5. Start a grandparent/grandchild (parent/child, uncle/aunt/nephew/niece) golf time when the pace is slower and when your course would have golf personnel to assist the adults in teaching the children a lifelong tradition.