



The golf professional is on the front lines, receiving a great deal of face time with the golfers. They are privy to many issues that pertain to other departments at the golf course. Comments, concerns, and complaints can be relayed to the appropriate department.

# ALL ABOARD!

Part 2: Working together has never been more essential.

BY KEITH HAPP

This is the second of a three-part series that examines the views and perspectives of the three parties most involved with meeting the needs and desires of golfers: The general manager, the golf professional, and the golf course superintendent. This article presents the responses of four golf professionals (GP1 - GP4) to the same questions posed to the general managers and the golf course superintendents. Once again, anonymity was preserved to elicit open responses.

## What is the single most important aspect of your job?

**GP1:** Without question the single most important aspect of my job is delivering member satisfaction. I/we need to realize the members' level of expectation of their experience while on the property, and this means from the time they drive in, to the time they leave. If they come to the club with a specific expectation and we do not meet it, then we want to know how we can do better.

**GP2:** I think the number-one aspect of my job is to provide an excellent golf experience by providing superior service in all aspects of our operation. I am talking about the golf tournaments/events we conduct, teaching/instruction programs we offer, junior programs we promote, and daily enjoyment of the game we strive to provide each and every day. The total experience includes the presentation of merchandise in our shop down to the smallest item we can attend to to ensure that when they are

departing they do so with a good feeling.

**GP3:** My role is to be the ambassador of fun at our facility. People belong here to play golf, and when they are on the property they want to have fun. Their enjoyment of the game begins when they show up at our pro shop. Whether it is for a lesson, a tournament, or a quick nine holes, the experience needs to be fun.

**GP4:** I/we try to keep it simple; our job as a golf club *team* is to make sure that our members and guests enjoy their time and their experience at our facility. So when they eventually leave, they remember their experience. When our superintendent does his job, they remember the course and the great conditions offered from tee to green. We want them to remember the little things. It could be as simple as how the range was set up or how the scorecard was prepared. When they leave, we want them to have a feeling that they can't wait to return.

### What is the single biggest pitfall of your job? What is most frustrating?

**GP1:** Not meeting the member expectations is the biggest pitfall and it is very frustrating if they leave unsatisfied. They pay money for their experience, so we want to make sure we meet their needs. We cannot always anticipate what will happen with weather or uncontrollable factors, but we must make every effort to learn from a bad experience so we can respond to our members' concerns. Rapid response to a bad experience is essential.

**GP2:** The biggest pitfall is trying to get my staff to have the same daily and long-term goals and objectives as I do for our golfers' experience. You can have training sessions, staff meetings, and do all the right things, but it doesn't always translate to expected actions in the field. My assistants and I can't be everywhere at once. One mistake can mean the difference

between a good and a bad experience. It is very frustrating when we rely on others, and our philosophies and goals aren't always presented and carried out as we want. I/we try to be patient with our staff and continue to train and develop them so that they value every interaction with the golfers as the most important thing they do. No detail is too small!

As an example, we may provide a great golf experience or a great playing lesson. Then they have a bad experience in the restaurant or locker room; it reflects on all of us. All departments have to work together to complete the experience from when they enter the property right up to when they leave the parking lot. We need people who share the same values.

**GP3:** The biggest pitfall of my job is trying to keep everybody on the same page. Everybody needs to have the same goals to satisfy our golfers, and we need to have the resources necessary to accomplish this. It is particularly important in these economic times. There is a fine line between watching your budget and compromising the experience for our golfers.

I enjoy my job, but as a department head I believe it is important to come to the table with solutions. If there is a problem, solutions need to be presented, not complaints about why we can't deliver!

**GP4:** There are not a lot of pitfalls with my job, but not exceeding golfer expectations is an issue. We deal with many people on a daily, weekly, and monthly basis. Each one has expectations for their experience, and I have expectations for my staff and the way they do their job. Sometimes we do not satisfy the customer's needs. That can be frustrating because you do the best job you can and, sometimes, for some people, it is just not quite good enough.

The one aspect of this job that is hard to accept is working hard to develop good relationships with golfers, and

then they move on to another course or leave town completely. It is not wasted time, but it does mean starting over with new prospective players.

### Do other key department heads understand the scope of your job?

**GP1:** Yes, I do think the other department heads understand the scope of my job. We are very lucky to have a group of people who work together as a team. We have recently had some budget cuts, and the people I work with have accepted the changes and implemented them into their daily routines to the best of their ability. It is getting tougher to offer the same level of service with fewer resources!

**GP2:** I would say for the most part, yes. When I look at the other department heads and try to put myself in their roles, I think I have a decent understanding of what they do. However, I don't think I have a good understanding of their frustrations and the challenges they experience on a daily basis.

We do have regular weekly staff meetings that offer the opportunity to ask questions. I am aware of the perceptions of the golf shop staff. This is a challenge because the perceptions center on the golf staff having luxuries that other departments do not.

Part of satisfying the golfers is playing golf with them, and sometimes this creates a rift. This is what our role is, and I am fortunate that I get to go away with members on golf trips for Pro Ams at other courses. My staff plays with the members and sometimes their guests. We play in events to potentially win some money and, yes, your name can be reported in the paper. So, there is a perception that the job involves playing golf and socializing. It is much more than that.

We are on the front lines and we want to build a relationship with our golfers. Other department heads do not have that amount of "face time" with golfers, and they don't necessarily

build relationships the way we do. I can tell you that when we build relationships, we are privy to many issues that pertain to other departments at the club. When we share the information, not as gossip but as good information, it can help all of us achieve our club's mission of satisfying our players.

**GP3:** I think other department heads often see their department as being the most important at the club. I do think that they respect the golf program and golf division. If the members are happy and they have fun when they are playing the game, then it makes everything good at the club.

**GP4:** Our superintendent and I have a strong relationship, and I know a lot of what he does and he has taken the time to learn a lot about what I do. I can't say the same for food and beverage. They might not completely understand what we do. Still, my key staff and I stay in constant communication with the food and beverage director to keep that department abreast of our schedule and golfer needs for our events.

All of our departments should have the same common goal! It goes back to that first question and my response; we are always trying to make sure that our players are having a great time so they want to keep using our facility.

### What are your areas of conflict?

**GP1:** We do not always meet a player's level of expectation. Recently, budget cuts have affected the amenities we can offer. Some activities have had to be reduced and/or eliminated. We had to reduce staff, and it affected our ability to keep our players happy. So, we have tried to reevaluate how we are going to maintain services that the players are accustomed to while staying within the new budget. It is hard to explain to golfers that certain programs are not absorbable; there is a price for things we provide!

**GP2:** The first thing I think about when I consider conflict is budget. My biggest area of conflict is being

restrained. We cannot provide what we think is important to our golfers. We always want to do more and provide the utmost golfing experience, and we are being limited by our operating and capital budget. This is a hot button for me, and I know it is the same for our superintendent. We are in a good situation; we have a healthy membership and I am aware that cost has to be a factor when we evaluate the benefit of providing a certain program or service. But it should not be the sole determining factor regarding

of what can be achieved versus what we want to provide do not match.

Budgeting is very difficult. Staff have to be more creative and come up with more realistic budgets for what can be accomplished with the resources available. Five or ten years ago, my budget may have received a 5% increase with little concern over how it was spent. But now our budgeting process is more realistic. The cost for services must be outlined, and justification is essential when budgetary requests are presented. We can't forecast what is



The golf professional staff should actively make sure that golfers enjoy their time at the facility. The experience begins when they enter the property and ends when they drive away. Attending to the smallest detail can make a difference to the golfers.

how we determine what we can provide.

**GP3:** An area of conflict between the golf program and other departments is budgeting and asset allocation. We are trying to provide service, and we feel that a certain level of service should be provided through the entire club. All departments should have the same goal for golfer satisfaction and be supported at a level that lets us accomplish this. Unfortunately, that is not always the case.

**GP4:** It goes back to the previous question regarding the pitfalls of the job. There is conflict when expectations

going to happen in six months; we have to be much more short term.

This year has been interesting because we went into this season with many unanswered questions. Are people going to use the club? Are they going to spend money at the same level as in the past? Will golfers tolerate a reduction in service simply due to the fact that the budget isn't there to provide what they have become accustomed to? It is harder now to budget and forecast activity. Ten to 15 years ago it was easier because the governing body didn't have to do anything; golf pretty much ran itself. Now the board

and committee chairs have to work a lot harder.

We need to work together to generate more rounds in order to obtain more revenue, and we need to do this together, not in a disjointed fashion.

### What are the areas of agreement?

**GP1:** We all know that we need to communicate. Our department heads work together very well. We talk with each other every day and keep each other caught up on what is happening. Our golf course superintendent is very good with communicating to the golfers on a regular basis. He sends out an email with daily conditions of the course and what can be expected for upcoming events. This allows us to present the same message to our golfers.

**GP2:** We are all in agreement that the single most important aspect of the job is to provide the best golf experience possible. The condition of the course, the quality of the food, the cleanliness of the locker room, and the attentiveness of my staff are all factors of the golfer satisfaction equation. We are just one of the parts that make our team.

**GP3:** We are in agreement that we want to make this a special place for our golfers and any guests that we have at our facility. The superintendent and I have a great relationship and we agree that golfers come here to play this great golf course and we should have whatever it takes to make it the best “total” experience it can be.

**GP4:** Agreement always comes when golfers are enjoying themselves and are pleased with what they are receiving. Every year my staff and I sit down and evaluate the season. We know the service we provide is good, but we want to make it better. It is nice when the players are positive

“The golf course is our number-one priority. It is what draws players to our club.”

about what we are doing. When they tell us that the pro shop looks really nice or the golf course is in the best condition they have seen or the food

and beverage quality was great, then

we know they had a good time. We agree that we want the players to want to spend their time and money at our facility.

It is important to point out that our golf course superintendent has daily goals that he wants to accomplish, and he understands that

I do as well. If you hire

people who are committed and care about what they do, a great deal can be accomplished, even during economically difficult times.

### Where do you rate the importance of the golf course to the overall operation?

**GP1:** The golf course is our number-one priority. It is what draws players to our club. The players would still come here even if we didn't have a clubhouse!

**GP2:** I am biased because without it you don't have the club that we have. Our golfers are here because of the golf course, and that is the number-one reason we have activity here.

There are a lot of other amenities at this facility. We have a nice new pool complex, a great clubhouse, and well-tended tennis courts, but golf is by far the most important driving force at our property.

**GP3:** If we did not have a golf course, one that is conditioned the way it is, we would not have anything approaching the facility we offer. This is a special club, and one of the reasons it is a special club is because of this special golf course. Our biggest asset is the course. If the clubhouse burned down, we could build another structure, but if the golf course were not here, we would be in trouble.

**GP4:** Without a doubt the golf course is number one. I can't imagine anyone at our facility disagreeing. People come here for the course. We do have a lot of social members who use other amenities because of our proximity to the downtown area. But we would not enjoy the level of activity that we do without the quality of our course.

### What percent of overall revenues (all inputs) is spent on golf course maintenance?

**GP1:** Thirty-three percent of our overall revenues are spent on the golf course. It is high because we realize the importance the course has to our operation.

**GP2:** I asked. Twenty-three percent of revenues are for the golf course.

**GP3:** Seventeen percent. I had to find out.

**GP4:** I cheated. I asked our superintendent. Twenty percent.

### Is there a defined protocol for handling member comments/complaints?

**GP1:** Yes, there is a formal protocol for handling complaints and comments. There is a section on our website for golfers to ask questions and specify who is to respond. This seems to be working very well. If we have a concern that cannot be handled by a department head, we have a committee that can address the concern. We also have comment cards that are passed out to members at the pro shop, and they are encouraged to complete these and send them back. Any questions that come my way are addressed immediately. We encourage all questions to be put in writing.

**GP2:** It is well known by our golfers that there is protocol to handle a complaint, concern, or comment. It must be sent to the department head, and we each work closely with our committee chair. A comment or concern will go to that professional on staff, and if it cannot be handled at that

level, it is forwarded to the committee. All issues must be presented in writing.

**GP3:** There is not a defined protocol for our department, but we respect that issues must be handled quickly. However, if there is a complaint about the golf course, then my personal protocol is to get the complaint to the expert, who is our superintendent. I need to get the answers from him so I can get the necessary information to handle the comment or complaint. I think knowledge is king, and I do not have all of the answers.

It seems like most of the comments, good or bad, come right after somebody's round of golf is fresh in their mind. Comments are seldom taken to the next level in writing for submission. However, when I know a complaint could be an issue, I write it down so I have the correct wording and the correct message they were trying to convey. The golf staff is often in the middle, and it is very important that we communicate issues accurately.

**GP4:** For issues that involve my staff, the golf chairman is the go-to individual. When something needs to be addressed, we do it together. Within our department we have a member/comment/complaint book that we keep. The shop manager may come to me and say that Mrs. Smith was complaining about something and then we try to fix it. If we can't, it is taken immediately to the department that can.

All major issues are resolved by the golf, green and grounds, or house committees. Some of the comments that we get are not realistic, but we cannot trivialize any issue. If one golfer has an issue, even though it may not seem important to me, it is worth addressing because it cannot be allowed to develop into a bigger problem.

## CONCLUSION

Themes similar to those of general managers emerge as the responses of the golf professionals are analyzed. They want to foster a team approach



Striving to achieve golfer satisfaction was described as the number-one goal of the golf professionals, and this takes a team effort. While the superintendent is responsible for preparing the playing surface, it is the job of the professional to teach golfers how to enjoy the game. Knowing how to putt the ball is as important as how the ball rolls over the surface.

to satisfy golfer needs, and communication within and between departments is essential to accomplish this. Although their department is important, they all agree that the golf course is the key asset of their facility. Some of the same frustrations were expressed, for example, finding and training quality people who share the same goals for satisfying golfers' expectations. Also, it was made clear that budgetary restrictions were stressful, and without question the budget restraints could not be absorbed without compromising the quality of the services offered. The most common

theme was striving to achieve the desired level of golfer satisfaction. The experience at a golf facility begins when the players enter the property, and it ends when they leave. The quality of the experience is often a sum of the parts. If one part is flawed, it will affect return business and/or golfer retention. Once again, during difficult economic times, working together is essential.

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