

Hospitality check (Editorial)

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Last month I was golfing with a few buddies on a public course in the Cleveland area. Riding along the fifth fairway, I stopped near my ball as a maintenance worker drove by in a utility cart. I waved and said hello. The maintenance worker nodded, mumbled something and drove by. I didn't think anything of it at first, but as I finished the hole and walked off the green, it dawned on me: The maintenance worker could have been more hospitable. It's not that I expected much, but I would have liked to hear something like, "Good afternoon. How's the course today?" A simple exchange is all I should expect. By greeting me more pleasantly, and asking me about the course, he would have accomplished two things: making a golfer feel more comfortable and welcome, and receiving a bit of feedback from a golfer to help improve the course. How can a maintenance staff focus on what's important to golfers when they don't ask them?

Golf is part of the hospitality business. Even though superintendents provide a product on which golfers play, they're part of an operation that aims to provide a pleasant experience for its customers. Golfers don't leave the course with anything tangible (other than something from the pro shop, but that's not why they visit the course). They leave with an experience. If it's a pleasant one, they're likely to come back. If it isn't pleasant, they might never come back. The course then potentially loses a customer for life.

LRA Worldwide, a consulting and research company based in Philadelphia, conducted research with 125,000 golfers to find more about customer satisfaction. The company's research indicates that while the condition of putting greens was the most important aspect of satisfaction, six out of the 10 satisfaction drivers were emotional and service related. Drivers such as "How was I welcomed?" "How friendly was the starter?" or "How cognizant was the maintenance staff to play around them?" are what golfers deemed important. They value these emotional elements.

The buzz phrase for this is customer experience management, and the industry is spending more time on this, partly because of overbuilt markets and the desire to increase revenue, according to Rob Rush, president of LRA. The industry thinks this is important enough to schedule Rush to speak at the 2007 Golf Industry Show, along with several webcasts before that.

Pros and the people who work in the pro shop are the type of people who usually are talkative, friendly and hospitable. And more superintendents are putting themselves in front of customers and explaining course conditions to them. But what about maintenance workers? Aren't they expected to interact with golfers?

The focus on service needs to be inherent in the culture of an operation, from the owner down through the maintenance staff. The focus should also include training. Superintendents can do their part by encouraging, teaching and training maintenance crews to be more hospitable and interactive with golfers so their experience is more pleasant.

At private clubs, this hospitality seems to happen much more often and comes more naturally because it's part of the culture. One advantage private clubs have over public courses is the ability to provide better service.

But the maintenance staffs at public courses, especially mid-priced ones, should be more hospitable to golfers. I'm not saying they need to walk up to every golfer and start a five-minute conversation, but a friendly "Hello, how are you doing today?" is better than no interaction at all.

The obvious goal of superintendents is to provide quality, well-maintained golf courses for golfers. But they should also keep in mind the hospitality aspect of being part of a golf course and instill that mentality in the mind of their staffs. They need to keep golfers' overall experiences in mind because that will help increase business.

With slightly declining rounds and the stiff competition golf has with other entertainment, as well as competition among golf courses, every little thing counts, including how maintenance workers interact with golfers.

This is just another aspect of the business in which superintendents and their staffs can improve the overall operation of the course.

So the next time I play a round of golf at a public course and cross paths with a maintenance worker, I'm hoping for a more hospitable exchange. **GCN**