

Creating attractive target greens accented with bunkers and approaches mown at fairway height makes a favorable first impression on golfers. This impression sets the tone for their expectations on the course.



Customer Service in the Southeast

It's all about the experience.

BY CHRIS HARTWIGER

With an abundance of golf courses and a population of golfers that is not growing, 2008 is a great time to be a golfer in the Southeast. On the other hand, golf courses continue to be challenged to attract and retain players if their business is to grow. In the Southeast, several strategies are used to try to achieve this growth and player retention. The first is to offer a no-frills, low-cost approach. This strategy relies on reducing course mainte-

nance inside operations costs in order to offer lower or no initiation fees, lower monthly dues, or reduced green fees. Interestingly, another strategy takes a very different approach and attempts to add value to the golfer's experience with the hopes of holding initiation fees, dues, green fees, etc. at current levels or, in the best case, increasing them. For the purposes of this article, this tactic will be called the value-added approach. The remainder of this article will



This portable case of golf supplies maintained by the starter makes a statement to the golfers that the club is committed to providing everything needed for an enjoyable round of golf.

Larger target poles on the range are easier to view with range finders than traditional flagsticks.



describe examples of how managing the golf course can influence customer service and add value to the golf experience.

LET'S BEGIN ON THE PRACTICE RANGE

Clubs seeking to add value to their product understand that the practice tee is where golfers form their first impression of turfgrass conditions and where their expectations for the upcoming golf experience are set. One first idea is the use of larger target poles out in the practice range. Often, the range at lower-budgeted courses is an open field that lacks definition and depth perception. Because many golfers today use the hand-held range finders to determine the distance to a target, the larger target poles are much easier to pick up with a range finder.

Golf courses built in more recent years have gone to great lengths to recreate the golf experience at the practice facility. For example, realistically shaped target greens are common. These are enhanced by creating approaches cut

at fairway height to simulate the view of a putting green on the course.

Another idea on the practice range requires more daily effort on the part of the staff, but it is appreciated by golfers. Each day, the range attendant goes to each individual station and determines the distance to each target on the range. These distances are then posted on a magnetic board on the side of the accompanying bag stand.

MOVING TO THE FIRST TEE

At the Cherokee Town and Country Club in Atlanta, the starter at the first tee has a portable case that contains supplies, including scorecards, hole location sheets, tees, ball mark repair tools, ball markers, pencils, and magic markers. Although golfers may come prepared with some of these items, having these supplies says to the golfer that the club is committed to providing its members and guests with a quality golf experience.

FAIRWAY WOW FACTOR

Much has been written about mowing patterns and how they may impact playing the game of golf. Traditionalists prefer no visible pattern, while others prefer a striped appearance. Although this tip will not resolve this dispute, it can be said with certainty that the visual component is a key factor in the golf experience. Tony Mancuso and his staff at Cherokee Town and Country Club implemented a program to pattern mow or stripe the fairways. To say the program is a success would be an understatement. They have accomplished their objective of creating attractive fairways by mowing in two directions only at a 45-degree angle as seen from the tee, using a growth regulator, committing to keep the mowing units sharp, and mowing three times per week. Numerous golfers have commented that the fairways at Cherokee are the best they have ever been, and they view these fairways as a premium surface.

THE RULE OF GREEN

There is one Rule that is not found in the Rules of Golf, and it is called the "Rule of Green." To golfers, green is good and brown is bad. Golfers from northern states who play on dormant bermudagrass fairways in southern states in the winter often ask, "Why are the fairways dead?" For years, overseeding and its costs and chal-

lenges have been used where winter color is an issue. Today, golf courses are using turf paints to get out of the overseeding game while providing green surfaces. Ultradwarf bermudagrass putting greens are the most common surfaces painted. A few courses in the region have achieved desired results painting tees, and one course successfully painted its fairways. Although painting satisfies the "Rule of Green," numerous agronomic benefits are realized, including lower costs, less water use, simplified weed control, no disruptive establishment and transition periods, and longer growing seasons for the bermudagrass to better withstand stresses such as shade and traffic.

CONCLUSION

The golf environment will continue to be challenging for course owners and operators for the foreseeable future. Every time they play, golfers are making value judgements regarding their time and the cost to play. Hopefully, this article has demonstrated that enhancing the customer experience through the examples included can be good for the business of golf.

CHRIS HARTWIGER is a senior agronomist in the Green Section's Southeast Region.

Turfgrass paint can create an acceptable green color at a fraction of the cost and time compared to overseeding.

