Evolution Of the Modern Pro Shop

Forget the pro shop of old—today’s on-course retail outlets are living, breathing retail merchandising centers. To succeed, course owners must embrace the new paradigm.

By George Whalin

In the not-too-distant past, on-course golf shops were much different from what they are today. Usually operated by the golf professional, the shop primarily sold clubs along with a limited selection of shoes, bags and logo goods. A customer would ask the pro what he was playing or what he recommended, then lay down a few hundred dollars and walk out with a new set of clubs.

Through the years, a significant transformation in merchandise selection and the focus of on-course golf shops has taken place. Nick Mokelke, general manager of Cog Hill Golf and Country Club in Lemont, Illinois, describes the differences between the golf shop of the past and the present as a “hardware store compared to a men’s wear boutique.” Increased competition from off-course retail stores, catalogs and the Internet—coupled with the changing needs and expectations of the golf consumer—are among the reasons for this transformation.

To survive in this competitive environment, on-course golf shops have found it necessary to shift their merchandise and service emphasis, and provide products and services not available from other merchants.

Getting Customers To Buy

Every golf retailer must give customers a compelling reason to buy. Some off-course stores and Internet sites have attracted customers by using low prices to differentiate themselves from on-course shops. In recent years, however, on-course shops have taken steps to competitively price such widely distributed merchandise as golf balls and clubs, making this much less of a factor.

There may still be minor variances in club pricing between on- and off-course outlets, but rarely do on-course shops sell merchandise at full list price while their off-course competitors discount the same merchandise. From exclusive country clubs to daily fee golf courses to golf superstores, pricing of golf balls and clubs is nearly identical.

Smaller margins may be a fact of life when selling golf clubs, but there are still opportunities for on-course shops. The most important opportunity for improving club sales at on-course shops lies in custom fitting. With nearly every major club manufacturer now offering a club-fitting program, placing one or more club-fitting carts on your driving range provides an opportunity for increased sales.

When you take the time to fit a golfer with the right clubs to help improve his or her game, it’s less likely that customer will shop around to save $5 when it comes
time to buy the hottest driver on the market. Savvy golf shops package club fitting and lessons to create an even more effective competitive position—helping the customer better enjoy the game.

Tim Moher, golf shop owner at Del Mar Country Club in Rancho Santa Fe, California, says that custom fitting has re-ignited his club business. Today, 90 percent of the clubs sold at his facility are custom-fit models.

**The Power of the Logo**

One of the most important competitive weapons a course owner has is an attractive, well-designed logo that represents his or her golf course. A great logo can be placed on almost everything featured in the pro shop, from apparel, golf balls and bags to gifts and accessories. The result: a product that can’t be purchased anywhere else. Well-known resorts and country clubs have long leveraged their logos to sell merchandise, but every golf facility should take advantage of this unique merchandising opportunity.

Without question, the key to selling lots of logo merchandise is a design that reflects the facility and adds to the desirability of the merchandise. Your logo may not be as recognizable as those of Pebble Beach and Augusta National, but it doesn’t mean customers won’t find it desirable. Invest in a great design, and you’ll sell considerably more merchandise. If your logo is not helping you sell more product, you may not have the right logo. Or, it may be time to freshen the design.

Once you have an effective design, there are myriad ways to use your logo. The key, however, is to place it tastefully on items your customers want. Some on-course shops also use different versions of their logo on different kinds of merchandise at different times of the year. This creates a sense of urgency and increases sales during specific seasons.

**Differentiate With Merchandise**

Another way to distinguish your shop from off-course competitors is to offer merchandise that’s not generally available in off-course stores—or even at other on-course golf shops in your marketplace. Limited-distribution merchandise usually provides better margins as well.

The most common sources of limited-distribution lines are suppliers that do business with the golf industry; however, there are other resources as well. Many apparel suppliers offer limited-distribution merchandise. Also, some gift and accessory manufacturers prefer doing business with only a few shops.

Distribution aside, one trend influencing the golf apparel business is a noticeable shift in customers’ attitudes toward clothes. Many of today’s golfers buy apparel that can be worn to the office or simply as a part of their everyday wardrobe, not
just on the golf course. A growing number of golf shop merchants are taking steps to stock lines that satisfy this demand.

Interestingly, you may find that traditional golf manufacturers are not the only source for this type of apparel. Instead of doing all their buying at PGA Merchandise Shows, a growing number of golf merchants have found such multi-use apparel lines at men’s and women’s wear trade shows across the country. Each year, apparel shows are held at the various merchandise marts in New York, Atlanta, Dallas, Chicago and Los Angeles. MAGIC, held annually in Las Vegas, is the nation’s largest apparel show, and it features manufacturers exhibiting a wide range of men’s and women’s apparel.

The New Professionalism
Among the most profound changes in the operation of on-course golf shops is the influx of professional retail managers and merchants. Today, professional managers, buyers and merchants are transforming golf shops into well-run retail businesses that just happen to be located on a golf course.

As the golf professional’s job has changed over the years to include more responsibilities, it’s become necessary to employ people with department and specialty store expertise to operate this part of the golf operation. The most effective buyers possess the knowledge and skills needed to get the right merchandise in the shop at the right time—and in the right quantities. To ensure they make the correct decisions, buyers use information from computerized point-of-sale systems, coupled with their own knowledge of what customers want and will buy.

Once the merchandise is in the shop, the best golf shop merchandisers know how to present and display the merchandise so customers are compelled to buy. With the right mix of merchandise that is attractively presented, the golf shop becomes an important asset in the customer’s overall golf experience.

Taking Care Of the Customer
Offering custom club fitting, a great logo, unique merchandise and attractive displays are all essential ingredients to building a successful golf shop business. But all these things will be in vain if you and your staff don’t do everything necessary to build productive, long-term relationships with customers. Little things, such as warmly greeting every customer when they come into the shop, will enhance the relationship. Making sure you do what you say you’re going to do—like calling the customer back when you say you will, following-up when a special order arrives or letting the customer know when something new comes in that they may be interested in buying—is how you build strong relationships.

Above all else, customer service is about making sure every person that walks through your door feels welcome and appreciated. Paying absolute attention to
what merchandise your customers want, don’t want and absolutely can’t live without—regardless of whether it’s a new golf ball, a strange-looking putter or a shirt worn by a PGA Tour pro—are valuable ways to ensure your customers know you are there to meet their needs.

Over the years, the competitive environment has evolved, the merchandise selection has changed, and the people responsible for running the shop have become more professional. What has not changed, however, are the opportunities available to on-course golf shops. Golfers still must come into the pro shop when they want to play the game. This provides on-course golf merchants with a constant flow of customers and the opportunity to serve the needs of every golfer while selling merchandise.

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