

# FEATURE

## Customer Service - Report Card

by Gordon Grant

***Perhaps more than most service industries, running a golf course is crucially dependent upon customer satisfaction.***

And the quality of service that your facility provides is the major factor in getting your customers to come back and contribute to the success of your business. You don't have to take a "Total Quality Management" (TQM) course to realize that.

It takes judicious planning to provide the over-all level of service that will virtually guarantee golfers a day they will remember for a long time and - just as important - want to repeat.

Service is a two-pronged fork: It provides the person paying the freight -the golfer- with a good feeling and it allows the provider - the golf club - to grow by continuing to attract customers. In other words to compete.

### **But how does your golf course measure up?**

Here is how one of your typical golfing customers might view the experience at a unnamed property:

*"Picture this. I've taken a day of precious annual leave from my job to play a round of golf with friends at a challenging course with a good reputation. What could be better? The weather is excellent, my cell phone is off and I'll be spending the next few hours with friends doing what I like best: Hitting a golf ball - perhaps a few more times than I'd like, but what the heck. And later? Venture into the clubhouse for a much-needed thirst quencher and a decent-priced meal. At least, this is what I expect. But it doesn't happen that way. I arrive at the course in good time and struggle to find a parking space. Then I lug my bag about 200 yards and drop it at an already crowded bag rack. I can't see my golfing pals so I wander into the pro shop and join a line-up for service. About 10 minutes later I ask the youngster taking money the cost of the green fee and the price of a power cart. He tells me what I want to know. But I'm told that I'll have to wait for a cart to come in because they're all out now. You should have reserved one when you booked your tee time. Nice time to tell me, I think. Not exactly a brilliant start to the smooth, unhurried day I've looked forward to for so long. There's already a dark cloud and I sense this may not be a day fondly remembered."*

That's an experience that is bad, for the owner as well as the customer. And it goes against all of the cardinal rules for providing good service.

Why? Well virtually every successful golf operator agrees that first impressions are lasting impressions, and are what contributes to a reputation for good service.

**Westwood Plateau** is an up-market course in Coquitlam, about a 45-minute drive from downtown Vancouver on a good traffic day, and its greens fees at

\$125 are the highest in the Lower Mainland. Because it is a market leader, Westwood Plateau works hard to make a good first impression.

*"We have someone to greet you and we make sure it will be somebody with a pleasant personality," says Jim McLaughlin, vice-president and general manager. "That's not negotiable, it's expected."*

**Angus Glen** in Markham, Ont., just northeast of Toronto, is another high-end operation with \$130 greens fees. General manager and director of golf Kevin Thistle says the first contact is vitally important.

*"We want you to feel comfortable in your surroundings. When you drive up, you are greeted personally, and we take care of your bag and shoes. They are on your power cart by the time you return from the parking lot. The cart has your name on it along with a divot tool, a tee pack, a scorecard and a yardage guide. It's your cart. Put your glove and your golf balls on it and you're ready to go to the pro shop."*

Jack Kane is general manager of **Golf Links Inc.** of Prince Edward Island which operates the Links at Crowbush Cove, Brudenelle, Mill River and in July will open a new 18 called Dundarave, which will share a clubhouse with Crowbush. Greens fees range from \$47 to \$60.

*"Golf isn't expensive here, but we don't provide any less service," said Kane. "At Crowbush, for example, you drop your bag and then go to the parking lot. We valet you back to your bag and direct you where you want to go. The people who meet you really mean it when they say 'Welcome to the links at Crowbush Cove.' When Dundarave opens, the first tee will be some distance removed from the golf shop, so you'll be given information about where to go. The personal greeting is very important there because we don't want people wandering about in confusion," Kane says.*

Service is very much on the mind of owner Michael Scherloski at **Brooklea Golf Club** in Midland, Ont., who has two CPGA professionals on staff. He says they know how to look after people and make them feel good. Brooklea's green fees are only \$45 but the excellent service is the aim. Scherloski refers to it as "outrageous service" and "Brooklea Service."

Norm Myers at **Beaver Valley in Cardigan**, P.E.I., where you can play 18 holes for \$24, says: *"The first impression is what is going to affect the customer's game and if it's a bad one it may spoil the whole day."* Smaller courses with fewer resources, he says, have to try harder.

*"Having a greeter would be nice one of these days," Myers says. "Right now, golfers go to the pro shop first where they are treated well and are given the local rules by the starter."*

Service, however, doesn't begin and end with the golfer's arrival at the bag drop or the first tee. It's a day-long affair that must be carried through until the

customer leaves the property.

For example, **Westwood Plateau** is experimenting with a system where after being greeted, golfers are served by the same person - unless there's a shift change - until they leave. If there is a shift change between the tee time and the time they finish, the golfer is told who will meet them when the round is over. The greeter, or host, will escort the guest to the golf shop and get the group together and look after payment.

*"We don't want our customers to line up like they're in a bank or at a McDonalds," says McLaughlin. "The golfer will be offered a seat or a newspaper and offered a drink during the financial transaction - taking cash or putting through the credit card."*

The golfers will also be taken to the driving range or putting green if that's what they want and get them to the first tee. Too many golfers find the frenzied pace of getting to a golf course and getting onto the first tee stressful.

*"We want to get to a point where that is changed," says McLaughlin. "The whole system at present says 'hurry up,' so it's no wonder we lose people. The idea is that our customers are on 'Plateau time,' so they can take it easy. We tell them 'we'll get you out there.' We tee people off every 12 minutes and we don't have to rush. There's no lineup at the first tee."*

At **Angus Glen**, after being set up with a golf car and going to the pro shop, a staffer will take golfers to the driving range and see that they get off the first tee on time.

Once out on the course, there are beverage carts on each nine which pass two or three times. They carry fruit, chocolate bars, coffee, muffins, sandwiches, pop, water, beer.

*"But they'll get the golfer whatever it is they want," says Kevin Thistle. "If you'd like a decaf and you're on the third hole, we'll make sure you get it."*

His staff, he said, enjoys saying: 'Yes, sir, yes Ma'am, right away.'

Michael Scherloski at **Brooklea** agrees with that approach. He says many of his staff who deal directly with customers *"have been with us for years and their skills are upgraded each year."*

And it's important that golfers are treated well says Scherloski because his operation faces competition not only from golf courses, but also from tourist activities in the resort community.

But service extends beyond the personal touches. The condition of the course is important: Well-cut turf, manicured greens, groomed bunkers and smooth tees are essential if courses expect to keep people coming back. And then there are the other physical assets such as the practice facilities - driving range and the like - and the banqueting facilities.

Scherloski described the **Brooklea** course as being "in immaculate shape" and said that this was an important element in providing full service to golfers.

*"We've also got an excellent practice facility with turf decks and practice bunkers and we have a fine club house and an extensive patio off the golfer's lounge."*

Jack Kane in **P.E.I.** echoes this approach: *"The courses are well designed and well maintained. They offer a variety of challenges, the scenery is sometimes spectacular the total experience is great."*

Good service is required from more than just the pro shop and clubhouse staff. Those working on the course must be as well trained as the staff in the pro shop and the restaurant and bar in making sure that the golfers' experience is a good one.

It's anathema to golfers when noisy machinery is running while they're on the tee or about to hit. It's even worse, it seems, when grounds people make a noise during putts - which always seem crucial.

Service is dictated, to a certain extent, by economics although Kevin Thistle at **Angus Glen** says even if your green fee is \$25 you have to *"kill them with kindness, so they will return."*

Obviously, service takes different forms in different places, but the movers and shakers in the grand old game believe that it is the key to survival in a world where competition for the recreational dollar is furious.

Jim McLaughlin put it in a nutshell when he told Golf Business: *"If you want to compete with other clubs, you'd better get in the game and provide service. The term Above and Beyond is our service philosophy at **Westwood Plateau.**"*

At **Angus Glen**, Thistle says a motto he uses is "Exceeding Excellence." But it isn't just a motto, it's a way of doing business, he says.

*"People who come to Angus Glen could have spent their money at a Blue Jays game or going out for a good dinner," Thistle notes. "But they chose to come to our course. So we try to make them feel like kings or queens for a day."*

Scherloski says his staff is trained in "**Brooklea Service**" because *"we're in the entertainment business"* and it's essential to treat people properly.

*"Each department head has his or her own training and orientation program. The manual on how to provide Brooklea Service is about two inches thick, depending on department."*

**PEI's** Jack Kane said that some years ago it was suggested that survival depended on location, location and location. And in golf maintenance it was drainage, drainage and drainage. *"Now survival is service, service, service."*

Recognizing that service is important, though, isn't the secret solely of the up-market or the experienced golf operators.

Norm Myers, a co-owner of **Beaver Valley** on PEI, says he knows the value of good service even though 1999 will be the first year the course will operate as an 18-hole operation after three years as a nine hole facility.

*"We provide as much service as we can because we know that if a golfer has a bad experience, he won't come back,"* said Myers. *"But our main goal right now is to keep the banks happy."*

Nevertheless, Myers sends some employees to *"conferences around the Maritimes and they come back and train staff."*

The Beaver Valley layout is within minutes of Crowbush Cove and Brudenelle, so

competition for the entertainment dollar is especially strong. Meanwhile, on the other side of the country at **Westwood Plateau**, McLaughlin says because there are many other excellent courses at not-too-far-away Whistler, for example. *"To satisfy customers we can't rely solely on the quality of the course. You must provide service and you are judged from the first phone call to the club until the round is over and the golfer leaves the parking lot. In order to succeed we have to be as good or better than our competitors."* Westwood Plateau hires about 100 new people each year, mostly part-timers, to augment the core of 150 employees in banqueting, the golf academy and the golf course. They're all given extensive training in how to handle customers. *"We train everyone in 'Above and Beyond' service, including those on the phones, the people who greet you at the course, the people on the course, the pro shop staff and the food and beverage employees."*

### **Training is broken down into four segments:**

1. A new employee orientation session that lasts about two hours in which the philosophy of Westwood Plateau is stressed.
2. A full eight-hour-day session called the Ultimate Host Program. It teaches everything about the needs and expectations of guests, the tools the employees will need to get the job done right, including having a positive attitude, learning how important first impressions are and achieving uniformity in guest treatment. Special emphasis is given to handling difficult situations and telephone manners. In the first two sessions all employees are included from greeters to waiters to ground staff. At many courses these workers are treated as three separate entities.
3. A session on job-specific skills for on-course workers, the pro shop and food and beverage. Some employees are shadowed and there's some role playing. In this session, workers are challenged to ask themselves 'Can I go Above and Beyond what might be considered normal service?'
4. First aid and emergency procedures.

McLaughlin adds: *"When we hire people we are, in fact, looking for attitude. And that's not just in the greeter, we hire the most engaging people we can find."* He says the whole exercise is based on the belief that: *"You're either going to provide service or the competition will leave you in the dust."*

At **Angus Glen**, Kevin Thistle says: *"Everyone I come into contact with is paying my salary and I want to make this a memorable day for them."*

Thistle, sounding much like his counterpart McLaughlin across the country, says: *"I hire more on attitude and appearance than on experience at a golf course. Enthusiasm is contagious."*

And training is also a big part of the process at Angus Glen.

*"Our Staff undergoes thorough training,"* says Thistle. *"We 'shadow employees' to weed out those who don't fit the template of Angus Glen staff."*

In Thistle's view people are attracted to golf courses by **three factors**:

1. Service - *"We ensure that staff us willing to go the extra mile."*
2. The quality of the course and its condition.
3. The pace of play and amenities such as the clubhouse, pro shop, locker room and the terrace.

The course, says Thistle, is always in A-1 condition and as for the locker room, it's a dandy. Each person gets his own oak locker for the day. Towels, mouthwash, deodorant, hair gel, shaving cream, razors, shampoo, conditioner and soap are provided.

If you happen to be playing in a tournament, *"we've already personalized a bag tag with the starting time and the hole where you start, if it's a shotgun,"* says Thistle. *"The tag would say, for example, Bob Smith, hole 15 and the time if it's a double tee."*

And when it comes to tournament service, Ron Ehlert at **Elbow Springs Golf Club** in Calgary is in the midst of an experiment with a tournament co-ordinator. The co-ordinator ensures that those arranging tournaments deal with just one person whether the subject be price, the golf or the meal.

*"At tournaments there was always a bit of confusion and tournament organizers, who often didn't know much about golf or courses, would have to deal with a number of people. Now there's a single contact, which serves two purposes. It ends confusion and there's usually more follow-up which leads to repeat business the following year."*

Ehlert says it will take a year or two to determine whether the experiment is a success. But in the meantime he's making people happy, with 6,000 tournament rounds at Elbow Springs last season. And that's just weekdays. They don't hold corporate tournaments on weekends.

Another area of servicing is banqueting and just about every course will tailor menus to meet the needs of tournaments, ranging from the "sauce you use with your steak to the salad dressings you prefer."

And there is a profit centre in beverages, snacks and meals apres golf.

**Westwood Plateau**, like **Angus Glen**, has first-class dining, which encourages people to drop into the patio for lunch whether they have played golf or not.

*"Can you imagine a more relaxing place than a terrace overlooking the 18th green? I can't,"* says Kevin Thistle.

At **Brooklea** there is both year-round dining and special-event catering, including the ubiquitous barbecue that just about every course operates. Great food is served at the **P.E.I.** courses, including **Beaver River**, whose restaurant can seat about 50.

### **So what of the future?**

Let's listen to Jack Kane: *"There are five or six schools in Canada, including Holland College in Charlottetown, that offer golf management courses that cover the whole gamut of golf course operations. The people on these courses can't*

*help but augment your staff significantly and provide better service to golfers. I think the schools and the graduates will be nothing but a major benefit to the industry."*

The last word to Jim McLaughlin: *"When the golfer leaves Westwood Plateau and drives away we want them to be thinking about the next time."*

If that happens, Above and Beyond service has done its job.