

Tapping the Tourist & Visitor Market

By Maurice Cutler

The quality and value of Canada's golf courses may be among the biggest secrets in the world of tourism, but that could soon be a thing of the past.

Forget the Mounties, totem poles, polar bears and the Rockies. A new image of this country that prospective tourists will be seeing in future will be golf courses and golfers, in the mountains, by the sea, and in the forests.

It's all part of an ambitious campaign to tell foreign and Canadian tourists when they travel in this country, not to leave home without their golf clubs. If the golf industry can get together on this, it is looking at \$1 million budget, half of which would come from the federal government's tourist development agency, the Canadian Tourism Commission.

The objective is to generate more awareness of Canadian golf by tourists. Market surveys have shown that golf is not necessarily the first thing that comes to mind when tourists are asked about Canada. There are even widespread misperceptions in the United States and overseas about Canada's level of sophistication, the climate and consequently the availability of quality golf.

In addition to dispelling those views, another aim of the current effort is to market golf "destinations" in Canada with clusters of golfing properties along the lines of the enormously successful Myrtle Beach and similar golf complexes in the United States.

Getting golf business from tourists in Canada, both foreigners and Canadians, used to be a hit and miss affair, despite advertising campaigns which may have shown a golf course briefly in the ad or TV commercial. The emphasis now is on putting golf front and centre in carefully chosen media aimed at prospective golf travellers, preferably before they leave home, persuading them to choose Canada as a golf destination.

Canada already attracts one of every three United States international golf tourists and that's without having a national golf tourism marketing program. However, while participation rates for golf are increasing in Canada, there does not seem to be the same rate of increase in U.S. golf travellers.

There is at least one big reason why this might change in the coming year or two.

Canadians may not like the present lopsided exchange rate with the U.S. dollar. However it provides an exceptional opportunity to attract Americans seeking inexpensive golfing holidays. Even Canada's most expensive green fees come in at not much more than \$100 U.S. The average would be in the \$40 U.S. range for excellent courses in all regions of Canada. Many Americans are not aware of just how much their dollars can buy north of the border.

This significant golf value factor could capture U.S. golfers who might not otherwise consider Canada as a golfing destination. And once they have seen what Canada has to offer they will be more likely to return. Canadians too are prime targets because they are deciding to stay at home rather than pay steep U.S. green fees, inflated by the unfavorable exchange rates. People from Ontario and Quebec who ordinarily might have gone to Myrtle Beach or Arizona might well consider Cape Breton Island or the Okanagan Valley instead for their golfing holiday.

On the Golf Trail

One idea being explored is development of golf "trails" in various regions where tourists can drive a route that features golf courses at regular intervals. These trails would also include tourist attractions that would be available to non-golfing family members while the golfer plays.

The current campaign is the first major national coordinated and cooperative approach to establishing golf as a niche travel product in Canada. Heretofore marketing efforts have been confined largely to the regional or local level or individual golf courses. The new national effort will involve government tourist agencies, local economic development authorities, hotels, tour operators, golf industry organizations and golf course owners.

The Canadian Golf Tourism Alliance is the umbrella group for Canada, working with provincial and regional golf organizations such as Golf Atlantic Canada, Golf Vancouver-Whistler to develop a golf industry strategy and marketing plan to promote golf as a major tourist attraction in Canada. The local operations would continue to market golf tourism in their individual locations on a regional basis, while buying into the national efforts.

The Alliance was created in 1997 by the Tourism Alliance in Western Canada, with assistance from the Canadian Tourism Commission. The CTC is prepared under certain conditions to match funding from the golf industry, directing federal dollars through the CGTA. The Alliance at present comprises more than 50 golf courses located in 13 golf regions across the western provinces, Quebec and Ontario.

The CTC supported the CTGA under its "Product Club" program, a three-year product development exercise. If the various golf industry stakeholders can get their act together, they may be able to get federal government tourism marketing dollars. They met in a two-day meeting in Toronto in May to develop such an approach. A preliminary action plan for promoting Canada as a golf destination was produced.

One aspect of the program is to identify golf courses that the Alliance considers are "export ready," providing a quality product and a means of selling it. An

estimated 75 courses have been identified already.

But greater marketing efforts are needed, including additional market research and development of partnerships with the golf industry and other industry sectors interested in marketing golf.

The hope of the May meeting was that the joint marketing campaign could be launched by mid-November. Before that can happen more research is needed into what the consumer wants and the impact of other competitive tourist activities.

What's also required is a master data bank of names of prospective golfing visitors for a direct mail campaign. The Canadian Tourism Commission would be jointly responsible with the CGTA for developing a campaign outline and the "image" of Canadian golf that would be used.

Regional Efforts

One of the key aspects of the strategy would be developing a national awareness campaign for Canadian golf in the United States. Cooperation is the key. Golf course owners have to put aside their regional competitive instincts to promote business in the region. Myrtle Beach demonstrates that if you market the area, everyone benefits.

And unlike previous efforts, this campaign is designed to provide benefit to all courses, not just the big upscale resorts and high green fee operations.

One of the more active regional efforts to attract golfing tourists or touring golfers is being made in the Atlantic provinces.

Prince Edward Island is a notable example of how the tourist industry identified the opportunity and successfully capitalized on the growing tourist market. That growth has also stimulated greater golf business in the other three Atlantic provinces under the aegis of Golf Atlantic Canada.

Golf Atlantic Canada was formed about four years ago, but didn't take on its present more focussed form until the fall of 1998 when Grant MacRae took over as executive director. MacRae was formerly the head of Golf Prince Edward Island.

The four Atlantic provinces are now more formerly committed to the concept of a regional umbrella organization to supplement their own tourist development programs.

Market research has shown that only about 10-12 per cent of visitors to Atlantic Canada golf while down east. So there is considerable potential for growth in

attracting those who don't bring their golf clubs.

This year Golf Atlantic Canada has a budget of \$400,000. It will be targeted at golf-related magazines rather than general interest publications or newspapers. Golf-related consumer shows would be used rather than general travel shows. There will also be an effort to tie in golf with other tourism products.

MacRae told Golf Business Canada that the overall objective is that all golf properties will benefit, even though the higher-end courses will be used to sell golf as a tourist product in the region.

"We certainly have our icons down here, be it Crowbush Cove on P.E.I. or Highland Links or Belle Bay on Cape Breton. We will certainly focus on them in order to sell the quality of the golf product in Atlantic Canada. "When golfers come here, they will want to play those types of courses. But, skill-wise, they will probably find that lesser-known courses will suit them better. People are not going to come to play on just one or two quality courses which may be too difficult for them. They'll want to play on courses where they can have fun from a scoring point of view. There's a natural spin-off for those courses after the tourists get here.

"Our job, primarily is to get the tourists to come to the region," he said. Provincial and local golf groups have a role in making sure that the smaller golfing properties enjoy the benefits which will flow from the efforts of Golf Atlantic Canada.

Apart from the marketing efforts of organizations like CGTA and Golf Atlantic, individual golf courses can help themselves by pursuing aggressive marketing projects. This can be done alone or as part of a local golf market development program involving other courses.

"At the very least, courses should make sure that their brochures are available at local hotels," Jeff Calderwood, NGCOA executive director says. "One very effective marketing tool is establishing a relationship with the concierge or desk staff, with the offer of free golf games if they refer visitors to your course.

This approach is followed in the Canadian Rockies at Fairmont Hot Springs by owner Don Seable. Fairmont, about 150 kilometers from the U.S. border, has an arrangement with hotels in the region that refer customers to the resort golf course.

"I treat them like a travel agent," Seable says. "They do the tee time booking and collect the green fee in return for a 10 per cent commission."

An Emphasis on Print Media

Seable says his marketing focus has changed from radio and television to print media, particularly golf and travel publications covering an area as far away as 400 miles. The advent of the multi-channel universe, he says, has meant that television ads do not get the attention of potential visitors.

"Our advertising emphasizes the family vacation attractions of the area. This provides activities for the non-golfing family members and we can attract families and groups rather than just golfers," he said. Effective advertising and the current favorable exchange rate for visitors has produced a 25 per cent increase in business this year.

Arnold Porter, co-owner of Royal Woodbine in Toronto and two other area courses talked about the problems for individual courses to market their properties in distant areas.

"It's not easy because as you get further away from your location it gets more expensive to market your course," Porter said. "It's tough to do it well which is why we formed the CGTA to band together with others in the golf industry to do it from afar."

A CGTA vice Chair, Porter said the golf industry has to "turn around the export-import problem that we have. There's a tremendous lack of knowledge of the quality and value of the Canadian golf product. A lot more Canadians go south to play golf than U.S. visitors coming up here."

He said the hope is to avoid overlapping or duplication with provincial, regional or marketing campaigns.

"All of those local or regional efforts have limited budgets and focus regionally. They should continue to do that. What we can do with Canadian Tourism Commission leverage is to 'Brand' Canada. The first thing you have to do is to get the people thinking of Canada and then the regional marketing approach supplements that. We will be splitting our industry dollars up both regionally and nationally so it all fits together quite nicely, I think."

In the Toronto area, Royal Woodbine works hard to increase the 20 per cent of its business which comes from outside of Ontario, 11 percent from the U.S., 5 per cent other Canadians and 4 per cent offshore North America.

"One of the most important things we do to attract tourists or visitors is to work with the hotels very closely," Porter said. "For example, we put on a golf tournament for the concierges of the significant hotels in the greater Toronto area. We make them very familiar with our location by organizing familiarization trips of the golf course. We also provide them with information that can be used by the concierge and the front desk.

"We have gone into in-room telephone advertising in a few hotels, with direct links into our pro shop. We've also done something with a hotel kiosk system that provides a map of the area locating individual advertisers with a direct phone right there at the kiosk. Because of our proximity to the airport, we felt it was worthwhile to put up some billboard advertising in the airport terminals. We've also done some television promotions through some of the golf shows that are seen on the Golf Channel and on TSN and Global across Canada. So our facility gets promoted through that media and in places like the RCGA magazine and other national golf publications.

"We haven't done any direct advertising ourselves in the United States but we'll be doing that through the CGTA effort," Porter added.

Some of the most active players in marketing to travellers are major Canadian resorts like Deerhurst in the Muskoka resort region of Ontario. "We are likely more used to aggressively promoting our product to the tourism market than individual golf clubs may be," Laura Kennedy, Deerhurst's manager of Communications told Golf Business Canada. Deerhurst Resort features two on-site 18-hole golf courses; the original Deerhurst Lakeside, a challenging Par 65 suitable to golfers of all abilities, and the Deerhurst Highlands, which is consistently rated as one of Canada's top courses.

"Our biggest market potential is the Greater Toronto Area so we make sure to get our message there primarily, while reaching out to other markets, such as the United States and Europe, through more co-operative advertising ventures, Ms. Kennedy said. "Many publications, like "Golf & Travel" (US) feature golf advertising features that present more economical advertising coverage than stand-alone ads. Providing inclusive packages is a natural for us, with our vast array of on-site facilities. "International and domestic golf travelers want a great golf experience combined with good dining, entertainment and other vacation experiences. Our "Two for Tee" accommodation package includes rounds at both of our two courses and has been very popular." Special golf publications like the Toronto Star's "Golf" magazine, golf publications like "Score" magazine, Toronto Life's "Golf Guide" and others provide awareness to your target market, she said. Deerhurst also works with local, provincial and federal tourism agencies and participating in their co-operative promotional programs such as the CGTA initiative. "We also work closely with the media to maintain a high profile image and participate in key golf travel shows," Ms. Kennedy added.

Stephen Johnston, who heads KPMG's golf industry practice says that if golf in Canada "is properly serviced and properly marketed to tourists, the benefits will include increased rounds at all courses, higher green fees and filling shoulder seasons".

He says the potential for getting golf business from tourists is "huge." He says it requires private industry and the Canadian Tourism Commission working

together to develop an effective marketing program.

Increased awareness and sales tactics should increase Canada's share of the U.S. golf travellers market, Johnson says.

"However, there is a need to assess the current golf experience in Canada including the related infrastructure. In order to be successful, Canada's strategy should incorporate tourists' expectations."

Johnston cites recent demographic trends which show increasing participation in golf. This will provide a significant potential for attracting tourists both Canadians and foreigners, he says.