

A BLUEPRINT FOR MARKETING YOUR BANQUET SERVICES

Golf course operators are always eager to add non-golf revenue. Catered events can be an excellent avenue to achieve substantial extra income and can be very financially lucrative while seldom interfering with golf operations. In fact, there are many golf facilities that earn more from banquets than from golf. Ownership must first decide if there is a market for banquets at their location. This will be determined by demographics and a competitive analysis. If it is determined that there is sufficient demand and substantial dedicated public space included in the clubhouse or other event venue, then it is up to management to maximize that space.

The following is a blueprint for a marketing program for building banquet revenues:

1. ADVERTISING PLAN
2. PUBLIC RELATIONS
3. DIRECT SALES
4. DEMAND OR REVENUE MANAGEMENT
5. PRICING & PACKAGING
6. IN-HOUSE PROMOTION

1. ADVERTISING PLAN

The words marketing and advertising are often used interchangeably. Advertising is the most visible element of the marketing program. There are generally two categories or approaches to advertising, "shotgun" and "rifle". Shotgun advertising penetrates a large audience in hopes that large exposure

will result in brand awareness. A newspaper ad for wedding receptions in the business section would be an example of shotgun advertising as most readers of the newspaper are not planning a wedding. Radio, television, and general periodical advertising can be usually classified as "shotgun" approaches. When introducing a new facility, this exposure advertising is appropriate. Once a facility has established its brand, then "a rifle", or advertising to a particular audience, approach is preferred. Advertising golf specials in the golf section of the newspaper or for weddings in a wedding guide are examples of rifle advertising. Paid banquet advertising can come in several forms of media including print, internet, and broadcast.

Before choosing advertising vehicles, each banquet facility has to determine their possible sources of business, and then assign a marketing approach to each category of business. This may or may not include budgeting advertising dollars. The primary sources of business (SOB) categories for golf course banquets are:

- Weddings & anniversaries
- Social Events such as birthdays
- Corporate retirements, customer or employee recognition events, and holiday parties
- Golf events
- Funerals/Memorials
- Association meetings
- Club meetings and celebrations
- Civic groups such as Rotary
- Non golf sports events such as booster clubs

Most paid advertising should be aimed at private events such as weddings and birthdays. Other elements of the marketing plan can be used to address the remaining sources of business.

THE INTERNET

The Telephone "yellow pages" used to be where customers went to find out who offered a particular service. This was true in the banquet business until about 10 years ago. Today, the primary source for information is obtained through the

"web," and a professional, active web presence is essential to compete, especially for wedding business. The golf website should have a link to a separate web location for your banquets. An effective website should include:

A summary of your offerings with key words for Search Engine Optimization (SEO)

- A pictorial or video of the clubhouse
- Testimonials
- Packaging and pricing
- Easy contact information

Once the website is placed online, a plan to drive traffic to the website must be developed. The relatively new business of SEO is designed to get your facility placed at the top of the list when perspective clients surf Google, Yahoo, or the MSN search engines. Contracting a company that specializes in SEO is a good investment because they can recommend strategies and measure the effectiveness of your web program. There are many options, including pay-for-click, key words, or paying for lead listings.

Third party referrals are important to generate wedding business. Websites such as mycanadianwedding.com offer listings to venues for a fee. There are large variances in cost for these listings and your web analysis and customer research must measure the effectiveness of each site. Fortunately, the profit margin on one large wedding is almost enough to pay back the cost of one website listing and link. These websites are often sold in conjunction with a magazine so you must purchase both to get on the website. These sites have generated more than \$500,000 per year in direct wedding business to one of our operations and if the site offers a premium for a top listing, you should strongly consider it. Fewer inquiries will result from being buried at the bottom of a site.

PRINT ADVERTISING

Phone or Yellow pages: Display ads in the phone directory were once the primary advertising expenditure for banquet facilities but that is no longer the case. A simple

bold listing is usually exposure enough. A tie in to the company's web site may be packages with the listing.

Wedding Magazines and Guides: Wedding magazines are usually tied into a website. If their website is not listed prominently on a web search, find out why. **Newspapers:** Consider advertising in the social or wedding announcement pages, but keep in mind that younger people are reading newspapers less and less.

Business publications: Chamber of Commerce, Visitor, and business publications may be effective venues to attract business.

Broadcast: Radio and TV can be effective shotgun approaches. TV can be expensive, and with the advent of satellite TV, local cable ads have less penetration. Production costs should be included in an advertising buy. Radio is effective if the demographic profile lines up with your prospective client. Radio stations often barter for air time so why not offer free golf or lunch certificates in exchange for air time or do a "free" wedding promotion with the on air host.

2. PUBLIC RELATIONS

This is "Free" advertising. The course should assign one person for "PR," and this may take the form of news articles or stories on weddings or golf or may be a promotion of a staff member. Regular groups should put in announcements of upcoming meetings. Networking events also fall into this category. Wedding announcements are also a good way to get mentioned in the local newspaper.

3. DIRECT SALES

Part of a well rounded marketing plan should include an organized effort to personally contact possible banquet clientele. This usually starts as an attempt to maximize the corporate market so start with local chamber and phone book listings. These are usually cold calls, either by phone or personal visit as emails are not effective on first calls. Find out who books events within the organization; it may be the administrative assistant, the HR department or sales department. A "sales blitz" of the community can be undertaken by the entire staff to kick off

this effort. Often a client may not book for the company but may belong to another club unaffiliated with their employment such as a booster club for the local school. It is important to train sales personnel on the basics of closing a sale. Finally, don't forget to contact and rebook past events.

4. DEMAND OR REVENUE MANAGEMENT

A date is a perishable commodity and if a date is not sold, it is gone forever. The banquet business is a service that sells time and space. Saturday evenings, especially in the summer, are in high demand. Assign minimum dollar amounts for each high demand day and train the sales staff on managing demand. A good sales person should be able to direct a client to the best time for their event. Smaller parties should be sold on shoulder periods and premium pricing should be considered for Saturday evenings. Management must constantly review demand and regularly adjust minimums.

5. PACKAGING AND PRICING

Packaging: With limited time and space, why not sell more than food and beverage? Invitations, music, flowers, decorations, wedding space, chair covers, and cakes are all items that can be added to the basic bill. Package them with the food and beverage and create an excellent value and convenience for the prospective client. Be sure to mark up the package and add the customary service charge. Develop wedding, birthday, golf and holiday packages, each customized to the needs of the client. It takes attention to detail, but adding these services can add 25% to the banquet department profit.

Pricing: The Banquet business can be very competitive. Do a competitive analysis and find out what services at what costs your competitors are charging for each source of business. Use a secret shopper such as a marrying age employee to test the competition: know your competitors better than they know themselves! Be competitive and flexible with the pricing. Don't lose a low demand Monday night event over a couple of bucks.

6. IN HOUSE PROMOTIONS

Do the 30,000 golfers at your course know that you offer banquets? Use on course signage, GPS systems, and tournament contacts to promote use of the banquet facilities. Employees are an excellent source of business so why not set up a referral bonus.

MEASUREMENT

Sales personnel should be trained to ask every inquiry "Where did you here about us?" At the end of each year, a summary of results of this question will determine what payback was received for each advertising and marketing element of the plan. Most catering software programs will produce this information. In addition, measure the number of inquiries and how many are converted into sales. A 20% conversion rate is usually a good benchmark of effectiveness however this will vary, property to property.

The banquet department can be an excellent profit center. There has to be sufficient demand in the local community. If the market analysis indicates an opportunity, then ownership should consider adding banquet space either with an addition or a tent pavilion. Once the commitment is made, develop, implement, and measure a marketing plan to reach the banquet revenue potential.



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