

*With a sluggish economy marked by rising gas prices and mass layoffs, how can the golf industry gain a share of Canadians ever-shrinking wallet and become more profitable?*

*In order to grow the game and bring in new converts to the sport, the Canadian golf industry needs to work together. It is through collaborating with each other that golf courses can save money and gain valuable insight into the golf industry. Cooperation is the key to success, as golf courses are realizing that the toughest competition is not the course*

*down the street, but other forms of entertainment and the amount of time golfers have to devote to the game.*

*After talking to a sampling of those in the business, from superintendents to golf club general managers, it is apparent that collaborative efforts are currently taking place. From sharing maintenance equipment and forming alliances to lobby government on political issues such as the banning of pesticides to arranging reciprocal tee times, let's take a look at the positive cooperation going on from coast to coast.*

# Stiff Competition

Why and how a collaborative effort is needed for the golf industry to succeed



## SHARING RESOURCES

Scott White, golf course and grounds manager at Donalda – a private club in North Toronto, can attest to the strength of cooperation between golf courses.

When the flood of the century deluged Donalda several years ago, the club was closed for a couple of months to recover from this natural disaster. Nearly 80 surrounding clubs in the GTA offered reciprocal tee times to Donalda's members, including private clubs, public courses and resort courses.

White says the same collegial relationship that's shared by many golf club professionals is also shared by superintendents.

"We are always sharing ideas, and equipment," he says. "I had a fellow superintendent call and tell me he was having trouble with his green speeds because it has been so wet this summer. He asked how my green speeds were and I told him we were enjoying some of the best green speeds I have ever had because we had tried some new stuff that was passed on to me by one of our interns who was down working at Augusta for a year."

White says he also regularly calls other superintendents to see how they are dealing with various pests, diseases or disasters such as flash floods.

"I've picked the brains of other superintendents to see how they are dealing with moss invasion and I had a concerned superintendent from around the corner call after a heavy rainstorm to see if we were okay."

"In turn, I offered him assistance once I found out that their bunkers had been washed out so severely that they had to close for a day. We also share information on everything from fertilizer to staffing issues and almost everything in between. I cannot give enough credit to some of the more experienced superintendents who have been willing to share with me their wealth of knowledge."

White even recently lent his rollers to his father, who is the superintendent at The Briars in Sutton, Ontario, to help him get his greens rolled in time for a member/guest tournament.

John Gravett, general manager at The Granite Club, another Toronto-area private club, also shares equipment with his neighbour Coppinwood Golf Club.

"We tend to share our aerifying equipment, so that we can each double-up on aeration equipment and get the process completed twice as quickly for our members," he says. "It's a great benefit!"

## RECIPROCAL RELATIONSHIPS

Breezy Bend Country Club in Winnipeg, a private club with 490 members shares reciprocal tee times with Elmhurst Golf & Country Club – a Donald Ross private club established in 1914. The initiative was spearheaded by Breezy Bend's general manager Cory Johnson and Elmhurst's general manager Julian Cusworth.

"The whole reason I approached Julian is because I had heard of reciprocal tee times going on in other provinces and thought we could enhance our member's

experience by giving them a little more variety in their golfing choice," explains Johnson. "As well, both facilities hold outside tournaments, so when our course is booked up our members have the opportunity to play the other course."

The two clubs have a formal reciprocal playing agreement that outlines how this reciprocity agreement works. Tee times must be booked a minimum of two days in advance and there's a maximum of two games per year, per member, and a maximum of one foursome per day. The agreement also allows for a reduced green fee rate of \$25 (normal fee is about \$60).

"We have been doing this for three seasons now and the feedback has been great," says Johnson. "Our members are taking advantage of it as well as his. We would consider expanding to other courses for added value to our members. It's beneficial to both club's bottom line through added green fee and food and beverage revenues."

Cusworth has taken this reciprocal agreement to other clubs; Elmhurst also shares tee times with Pine Ridge Golf Club, dubbed the number one private club in Manitoba by *SCOREGolf* magazine. Cusworth has also explored group buying by sharing their current product supplier lists. The two clubs have also shared current leases and expiry dates.

Both clubs have also benefitted from working cooperatively by sharing pieces of grounds equipment, borrowing between Food and Beverage departments, and trading pro shop stock from time to time.

*Having some fun at the NGCOA Canada - Southwestern Ontario golf tournament at the London Hunt Club. Of course this foursome didn't pass up the opportunity for a little business talk also.*



left to right: Colin Nesbit, Westview Golf Club, Ontario, Drew Moyer, Bear Creek Golf Club, Ontario, Bob Kilgour, Cardinal Golf Club, Ontario, Vince Kishimoto (horizontal) Regional Director, NGCOA Canada - Central Ontario.



*"We created this pavilion called Play Golf Ontario, so anyone who comes into the pavilion knows it is golf in Ontario, not Florida, etc."*

## COLLABORATIVE MARKETING

When it comes to marketing an idea, nine heads are better than one - or is that nine holes?

Shawn Steele, general manager of Prospect Lake Golf Course in Victoria, B.C., has been lobbying with the other nine-hole golf courses in the city for years to raise the profile of their specialized segment of the market.

"It is a fairly competitive atmosphere out here and amongst the local population we have more beginners and seniors in comparison to other golf markets," he explains. "We were looking for ways to leverage our position as a conglomerate to attract more of those demographics and help increase the profile of the nine-hole segment."

"In the Victoria area, there are nine 9-hole golf courses and another eight 18 hole courses. The difference is the 18-hole courses market themselves more towards the tourist and high-end market whereas we cater more towards the novice/intermediate, juniors and seniors."

Steele started this collaboration back in 2001 with a winter 9-hole golf tour.

"People would enter a draw by playing one of our courses from November through March," he says. "We would then do a draw at the end of the promotion for a trip to Las Vegas and a Callaway golf package. I coordinated this effort and we partnered with an external marketing company to help promote the initiative. Each club pitched in about \$300 and that covered the partnership with the external marketing organization.

We were able to raise the profile of the nine-hole clubs by saying we are still open for business in the winter."

A year later, Steele spearheaded another collaboration amongst the nine hole golf courses, partnering with the Big Brothers/Big Sisters organization. Dubbed the "Victoria 9-hole golf tour," the idea was to encourage more play in the spring – typically a slow time for golf participation on the island.

"We encouraged people to come out and play our golf courses on particular weekend days and there was a closest-to-the-pin contest," he says. "Golfers paid their regular green fee, and then paid a small sum on the particular closest-to-the-pin contest hole. If they were the closest to the pin on that day they would qualify for a hole-in-one shoot-out that happened at the end of the promotion."

"This promotion encouraged spring play, which is traditionally a slow period and it attracted people to the nine-hole courses on these particular weekend dates," he continues. "There was also an entry fee on the qualifying holes. In the end, we raised \$3,500 for Big Brothers/Big Sisters. No one got a hole-in-one, but everyone who qualified received prizes. It also raised the profile of all the golf courses involved and generated added revenue during a traditionally slow period."

## GOLF SHOW SPACE

The final example Steele shares is regarding sharing a booth at the Vancouver Island golf show.

"We split the cost of the larger booth so the focus again was on Victoria's 9-hole golf courses," he says. "The goal was to raise the profile of 9-hole golf clubs in general and in turn we worked together to share time in the booth and promote each other's course. That worked out well because we secured a preferred position with the booth, which helped generate more traffic."

"Cooperation is good," adds Steele. "Partnerships with the media and with charities are much easier when you go in as a conglomerate. The aim is to create a bigger splash through working together instead of competing against each other."

Vince Kishimoto, regional director of NGCOA Canada's Central Ontario chapter, knows a lot about the value of cooperation. He worked for a farm cooperative for over 24 years and currently oversees many cooperative ventures in his chapter, including the Play Golf pavilion at the annual Toronto Golf and Travel Show.

"As an association we run the Play Golf pavilion within the golf show," he says. "The reason for that is there are a lot of golf courses exhibiting from across North America and we want to focus on Toronto and Central Ontario golf for our members. We created this pavilion called Play Golf Ontario, so anyone who comes into the pavilion knows it is golf in Ontario, not Florida, etc."

"We are now considering changing our presentation once again to one that will feature Ontario destinations such as the new Toronto Highlands golf trail," he continues. "We will look at consolidating their individual booths into one regional destination they would share. We are looking at developing this for other destination areas in Ontario as well, such as Niagara, Muskoka, and Collingwood. On a cooperative basis, we would work together to have a regional representation."

"On a bigger scale we are working with the Ministry of Tourism to support this approach. They require movement travel with an overnight stay – so we would be looking at stay-and-play options at these courses."



left to right: Mike Tinkey, deputy chief executive officer of the National Golf Course Owners Association U.S., James Cronk, managing director of Play Golf and Greg Seeman, general manager of Wooden Sticks, Uxbridge, Ontario sharing some thoughts on the golf industry.

**PURCHASING POWER**

Peter Leyser, Director of Golfmax and Business Development, says on many levels, the NGCOA Canada brings together the golf industry for the better whether it's through grow the game strategies, advocacy or group purchasing.

Golfmax is the purchasing program of the NGCOA Canada. Leyser notes that some courses are saving up to \$25,000 per year through this purchasing program.

"On behalf of our members, we go out and negotiate discounts, savings, and rebates by utilizing the purchasing power of 1,300 golf course members," explains Leyser. "We have over 60 suppliers that we have partnerships with, complete with everything that you need to run a golf operation, from food and beverage to maintenance and irrigation equipment to scorecards and commercial insurance. We negotiate best price national account pricing for our members."

"That is an example of how we are bringing together the industry, which helps their bottom line, especially at a time when the cost of doing business in this industry is increasing with fuel charges, and pressures such as the government permits to take water, and property taxes but you cannot increase your revenues at the same pace."

"Golf courses need to look at their bottom line, and expenditures are a big area," he comments. "This is one way you can save with the same suppliers you are already purchasing with."

Leyser says the NGCOA Canada has just under \$80 million in purchases going through the program annually. "It's the largest buying group in Canada for golf courses," he says.

**A UNITED VOICE**

Glenn Goodwin, worked for the Toronto Star for 32 years, and never envisioned getting into the golf business, but he decided to found the Greater Toronto Golf Association to give amateur golfers a premiere tournament. Thanks to collaboration with his former employer and General Motors, he brought this dream to fruition.

"I created the event to provide added exposure to men and women's amateur golf," he says. "We are the number one country in terms of the participation rate for golfers, but member clubs are having difficulty finding members, not because people aren't playing, but because there are more public players."

Glenn talks about being motivated to do things for the good of the game and to grow the game. "If golf relies on available entertainment dollars then the industry needs more information about itself to make the decisions necessary to move from talking about working together to doing it. Growth and development in the game can be seriously impeded by ego and politics."

**ALLIED GOLF ASSOCIATIONS**

When it comes to advocacy, 1,000 voices are better than one and golf is no different than other industries in seeing the value of collaborating when it comes to lobbying the government. NAGA (National Allied Golf Associations) is a national golf organization comprised of the Canadian Golf Industry Association, Canadian Golf Superintendents Association, Canadian Professional Golfers Association, Canadian Society of Club Managers, Canadian Professional Golf Tour, National Golf Course Owners Association Canada and the Royal Canadian Golf Association, dedicated to improving all sectors of golf in Canada. Formed in 1999, NAGA's objective is to work cooperatively together as industry leaders ensuring a strong future for golf in Canada.

At the provincial level the Ontario Allied Golf Associations (OAGA) was created for this purpose. They recently took on the hot topic of pesticides. Before Bill 64, "an Act to amend the Pesticides Act to prohibit the use and sale of pesticides that may be used for cosmetic purposes," received Royal Assent on June 18, 2008, the OAGA helped gather 1,316 signatures, which were submitted to the Ministry of the Environment in support of exceptions for golf courses. Specifically they are using expertise and the Integrated Pest Management Accreditation Program (IPMAP) as an important part of the exemption.

This is a cooperative effort between the various golf industry associations in order to combine their efforts towards more successful advocacy. Working on this project is Teri Yamada, managing director, Communications and Government Relations for the RCGA, Jarrod Barakett, superintendent from Deer Ridge Golf Club in Kitchener, Ken Cousineau, executive director, Canadian Golf Superintendents Association and Vince Kishimoto from the NGCOA Canada.

Other provinces have created informal associations between the various golf industry associations to stay informed about what is happening in their focused areas of interest and to advance the interests of the business of golf.

**STEP BEYOND GOLF**

Golf PEI is a prime example of how different industries working together can benefit. Golf course operators work together with accommodation partners and the government to market golf. The PEI tourism industry is worth \$354 million and \$100 million is from the golf industry. The group's objective was to create brand awareness and they targeted golf guides, trade shows and magazines. They worked together to decide where to focus their energies; golf courses had a presence at consumer golf shows, accommodation partners at the larger trade and travel events and the government through bigger market opportunities. They worked together to avoid duplication of spending marketing dollars twice. Their success has been clear in establishing PEI as the number one golf destination in Canada. Barry MacLeod, executive

director, indicates they have now made a strategic shift to target international opportunities and to convert their brand awareness into sales. As their web site says: *There's no doubt, things have come a long way for golf on PEI. From the sidelines to frontrunner, Golf PEI is living proof of what a group of committed Islanders can do when they put their minds to it.*



So, whether lobbying the government or sharing best practice ideas with your fellow club manager or superintendent, one thing is clear: cooperation in the golf industry is the right choice as it makes everyone's job easier and benefits a



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