

USING GOLF AS A SALES TOOL

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This article will explain how golf can be used as a tool for business-to-business salespeople. Playing golf has the advantage of an extended amount of downtime in which conversations can be conducted. It also has the advantage that the buyer is with the salesperson for a minimum of four hours. However, contrary to popular belief, not many sales are closed on the golf course. So then what happens on the golf course? Golf allows the buyer and seller to build relationships which includes gathering personal and business information as well as identifying business issues or concerns the buyer may be having at the moment. Therefore, it is not about the golf but about building a unique history with buyers that cannot be replicated easily by other salespeople. Thus, it provides a unique four hour sales call.

INTRODUCTION

Doing business on the golf course is not a new concept. However, the myth is that salespeople go to the golf course to close deals. Well that is not exactly the correct perception of businesspeople and golf. In fact a salesperson is less likely to close a deal (get the order) on the golf course than in the office during a regular sales call. So is golf really a tool that can benefit both the buyer and seller? The answer is a resounding YES! Despite the fact that some industries, like pharmaceuticals, have banned the use of golf as a means to entertain in order to obtain commitment to use a specific product, for many business-to-business industries the use of golf still provides a means to assist in the selling process. The key learning's of this article are that you need: a minimum level of golf skills (consistency in striking a golf ball), an understanding of etiquette, and a plan on how to use the time with the customer most efficiently.

NECESSARY GOLF SKILLS

In order to use golf as a selling tool a salesperson needs to have **some** golf skills so that they do not slow the play down and irritate the people golfing with them and behind them. What

would be reasonable skills to have? The ability to strike the ball consistently (that is not whiffing or dribbling the ball a few feet at a time) is a minimum. The average golfer today will strike the ball over 100 times during a round (18 holes). Considering that most golf courses have a Par of 72, this means the golfer averages between 1 and 2 strokes over Par for each hole. The fact that there is a difference in skill levels between the buyer and seller is not really of great concern (except for the speed of play) because the use of handicaps can equalize the game. For example, if the buyer typically scores around 90 for 18 and the seller scores around 100 then the simplest thing to do is for the buyer to give the seller 10 strokes per 18 holes. Determining which holes the strokes are applied can be determined by the golf course you play. Since every golf course rates each hole of difficulty, the seller would receive a stroke on each of the 10 hardest holes. On the remaining 8 holes they would play even (no strokes given).

Understanding Golf Etiquette

Since golf has often been referred to as a game of honor and integrity, it important to make sure golf etiquette is maintained. So what does a golfer need to know in order to not look foolish

on the course? The three areas that are most important are proper dress, personal behavior, and care of the course. This article will give a brief (not complete) review of some critical etiquette issues in each area.

Proper Dress and Equipment

The attire that is worn by each individual is a reflection of respect and good taste. Whether the course is private or public the attire is the same. For men, weather permitting, they can wear either trousers or knee length shorts and a collared (short or long) sleeved shirt. For women, weather permitting, they can wear a knee length skirt, knee length shorts or slacks and a collared shirt. If golf shoes are worn they need to comply with the courses requirements of either soft spike or metal spike (most are now soft spike). If no golf shoes are worn then the shoe must not have a heel of any kind.

The minimum equipment is a set of golf clubs for every individual, golf balls (enough so that you do not run out before the round is over), golf tees, something to mark the ball on the green and something to repair ball marks on the green. A golf glove is optional as well as a hat or visor.

Personal behavior

This area of etiquette is designed to reduce the possibility of injury, distracting others, and presenting a professional image. When a person is preparing to hit the ball, each person in or near the group needs to be quiet and out of their line of sight (behind and off center). Since golf is 90 percent concentration and 10 percent skill, the lack of distractions is important.

If a ball is struck and it is heading toward another person or group, you need to yell "Fore" as loud as possible to warn others of an errant

ball.

Language is also very important when playing business golf. You are not playing golf with you "buddies" and thus telling inappropriate/off color/ethnic jokes can be offensive to the potential customer and should not be told. Also included is the misuse of language in general. The omission of obscene or vulgar language is recommended along with the use of inappropriate slang.

Care of the course

Golf courses are very fragile and expensive to operate and maintain in order to allow each player to play without unexpected course malfunctions. Thus each golfer needs to be aware of ways they can help make the course fair to the players that follow them. The first place to start is for each player to replace their divots in the fairway, fix the ball marks on the green and rake the club marks and footprints in the sand traps. If any of these activities are ignored then the players that follow might have their game disrupted if they find their ball in a divot or footprint in sand. Since the ball must be played where it lies then this situation may cause problems for the golfer. If there is a ball mark (a depression in the green) between the ball and the hole, this may interfere with the put and cause it to be missed. Any and all of these situations may add strokes to the player's game. Some courses provide a mixture of sand and grass seed on each cart for the golfer to use in divots.

Each golfer needs to replace all divots created by them and repair their ball mark (on the green) and one other (since some people do not repair their marks) as well as rake the sand trap after use. When on the green a golfer should never step between a ball and the hole.

All of these issues create a hardship for golfers that follow your group if not done. In addition, if a cart is being used then it needs to follow the course rules (path only, 90 degree rule, or open use). If open use or 90 degree rule is allowed, then the cart must not come within 30 feet of the green or near a sand trap. Both of these areas can be damaged by a cart and are expensive to repair.

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Four Hour Sales Call

If you consider that an average round (18 holes) of golf takes between 4 and 5 hours, this provides a salesperson with the buyer that is away from distractions at work and telephone interruptions. All of these assist in providing an ideal atmosphere for building relationships. However, salespeople need to be conscious that the buyer wants to enjoy themselves and are not interested in hearing a “pitch”. So how can a salesperson use golf as a sales tool?

The answer is dividing the time on the course into three stages (just like a sales call). The three stages are: Information sharing-personal; Business issues discussion; and Moving the sale forward. In each of these three stages it is important for the seller to remember the content that is to be covered in each section as well as the length of time to focus on each.

Information Sharing-Personal

The first stage is to gather and provide information so that the people involved can start building a relationship. So when is this done? Typically, this kind of conversation starts during the time before the golf starts. Typically, this kind of conversation starts when each person arrives at the golf course. How long do you gather and share information? A rule of thumb is that the first six holes (over an hour) is

appropriate for gathering and sharing personal information. However, that can vary based on how well the person is known to the salesperson. If you have not known the person very long or just met, then more time will be spent since you need to gather and share more information. On the flip side, if the person is known well, then less time will be spent because you already know much of the information and only need to get updates since your last meeting.

What kind of information exchange is appropriate? In general the goal is to find common ground (Acuff 2001) with the person and the easiest way to accomplish this is to find out about them as a person. Things like where they were raised, where they went to school, what interests do they have, hobbies, favorite activities, family, organization, favorite teams, organizations etc.

Thus in the course of gathering information, you will be expected to share some of the same information about yourself. This enhances the sense of conversation between people and fosters a more relaxed situation.

Business Issues Discussion

Again, based on the circumstances, somewhere around the seventh hole you need to start shifting your questions and discussions away from personal information and guide them toward the customer’s business. It is important not to be abrupt and stop discussing personal issues and focus only on business issues. One way to accomplish this is to interject a business question or two before you are ready to completely shift the topics and also have a few personal questions you can ask as you are transitioning to the business issues.

As with information sharing, this phase needs to last about six holes or over an hour (around the 12th hole) so that you are able to find out enough

to make sure your product/service would be of value to them. Without problems or issues very few buyers are willing to change.

Some of the topics that can be discussed so that the buyer is free to give you information without fear of being sold to are: identifying current vendors / suppliers; business issues that concern them the most; current solutions to issues that they have encountered; identify any problems / opportunities. Additionally in the later parts of this phase the seller may want to start working in brief discussion of the products you sell (it is important to not overwhelm the buyer with product information. What is important to happen is that the buyer is aware of what you have and you have just planted a seed. As with growing any plant- one cannot harvest it just after planting, so there should no attempt to sell them here. A few of the benefits that others have received might be appropriate her but it should just be informational-not persuasive.

Moving the Sale Forward

Again, based on the circumstances, somewhere around the thirteenth (13) hole you want to start shifting your questions and discussions away from the business issues and start guiding them toward wrapping up the conversation and figuring out how the next step. This phase can last through the rest of the game and even into the 19th hole (bar/lunch afterwards).

The topics that are appropriate now fall into the category of reminding the customer of issues they mentioned or how they solved them and a bit about your benefits. It also might be appropriate to trail close (to see how interested the customer is). Something like, "How would you feel about looking into new ways of addressing some of your issues?"

On rare occasion, it even may be appropriate to ask for the business order or for a commitment

to buy. Again, trying to close a deal on the golf course is a myth that needs to be exposed. Less than 10% of business opportunities are closed while golfing. What is more common and useful (if there is interest on the part of the buyer) is to close by setting up a meeting in the buyer's office for a future date.

Suggestions How to Make it Better

There are several things that can be done to improve the quality of the time you spend with the potential client. Four crucial caveats to consider are alcohol, betting, throwing the game and course selection.

Alcohol (especially beer) has been associated with golf for a long time and for most friendly golf games it is a time to let loose and relax. Thus alcohol consumption is accepted and sometimes expected so what are you to do? The answer is 'moderation'. Remember that this is not like playing with your buddies. Therefore, it is alright to have a few beers during the round but nothing to excess. This is true for two reasons: first, excessive alcohol can impair your golf skills and second, excessive alcohol reduces your inhibitions and increases the likelihood that inappropriate behavior and language will result. Neither of which endear you to the potential customer.

Gambling or betting on the golf is another issue that is synonymous with this game. So, what is appropriate behavior for the salesperson? The salesperson should not invite the customer to bet however, if the customer initiates the bet then it is OK to accept. However, there are several caveats that should be mentioned.

Make sure you know what the bet is (which one of the thousands of golf betting games: see www.thegolfexpert.com/golf-on-course-betting.php).

1. Let the customer set the wager amount
2. Make sure you have enough money with you to cover any losses

Do not throw the game and let the customer win

Selecting the Course to Play

This is a critical factor in that you do not want the course to be too hard or too easy for the player's skills. Since the salesperson who invites a customer to play golf is expected to pay for the experience, it is a good idea to select a course that does not allow cell phone use while playing. The no cell phone policy by courses is a way for the salesperson to get the customer alone without constant phone interruptions, while using the course policy to be the villain who restricts the phone.

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One point needs to be made that is different from everything in preceding discussion. The issue concerns women and business golf. Many women do not engage in business golf for a variety of reasons. However, if they do not play they are putting themselves at a great disadvantage compared to the male counterpart. By not participating, women miss out on building a unique relationship with the customer. In addition they have missed the opportunity to get to know who the customer is and what they value.

Ladies, learn to play golf so that you may participate and level the playing field. Your skill level does not need to be that of the men, you just need to be an average player so that you do not slow the game down. The use of handicaps can allow any skill level player to compete with another player of different skill level. Use the concept of handicaps to make the game as equal as possible for all concerned.

As one final thought, if at all possible play from men's tee. You can ask to the others to add a stroke for par 4 & 5 holes and explain that by teeing off from the men's tee it will speed up play. This is important for several reasons.

1. You do not want to be seen as different (by teeing off from a different tee)
2. You miss out on conversations at the men's tee (while you are waiting to tee off after the men).

CONCLUSIONS

Business golf is an opportunity to get a buyer alone for four hours and begin or strengthen relationships. It provides a unique history with the client that cannot be replicated by other salespeople. It provides an opportunity for the salesperson to not only gather information but it also allows for observation of behaviors that will be critical for understanding how the customer thinks, approach adversity, makes decisions, and approach risk.

The key to a successful business golf outing is not the sale but the creating or deepening of the relationship while having fun. Never let your skill level keep you from participating and always be positive and encouraging when playing golf with a customer.

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