

Instruction Is Just a Means to an End

PUSHING BEYOND CUSTOMER SERVICE, TO “CUSTOMER VALUE”

by Ian James, Retailtribe CEO

A recent *Wall Street Journal* article took aim at our industry, saying how bad golf is at keeping players from quitting. If casting blame is your go-to response to such accusations, feel free to get indignant and point fingers. Or maybe you're among those who would shrug and simply point out that golf is a difficult game. If that's true, we probably need fewer clubs, fewer courses and, what — fewer coaches?

Another contingent would argue that club management is trapped in a box of heritage and dusty tradition. Others decide to blame the teachers, moaning that golf instruction has failed new beginners by leaving them short of the skills needed to break 95. Let's move beyond all that and take a clear-eyed look at both management and coaching.

We can start by encouraging golf managers and coaches to read “Unlocking the Generational Codes,” by Anna Liotta. This book explains the causes of customer behavior across the four generations that currently spend discretionary dollars: Traditionals (born 1927-45), Baby Boomers (1946-63), Gen-X (1964-1979) and Millennials (1980-1999). Liotta's book is as good a tool as you'll find for opening minds to the changes golf needs to make.

As you read along you'll find yourself connecting the golfer behaviors you see every day to the codes Liotta reveals. Traditionals, for example, honor commitment, loyalty and service. Their five-hour rounds at the same tee time every week with the same three friends reflect their commitment and loyalty to their group. Whatever the misery they experience with their golf game, they'll be back next week. (Ah, the perfect member.)

This group will say the younger generation is in search of instant gratification. They're right, and you can't change them. For Gen-X, the expectations of enjoyment from life — never mind five hours on a golf course — are much higher. They expect to get a return they can measure in terms of pleasure or benefit from that use of time. Not enough enjoyment? They'll find something else to do.

Let's be clear: The gap between learning the rudiments of the game and being able to venture onto the first tee, 350 yards from a green, surrounded by water, at the end of a fairway plagued with bunkers and framed by trees, is a big one.

Those who take up golf and find their way onto a course also feel constrained by traditions and “etiquette.” They arrive seeking fun and instead are

forced to endure round after round of misery, with the cold comfort of the occasional good shot.

“Never mind, it builds character” — we've certainly heard that one. But Gen-X and Millennials aren't inclined to spend major chunks of time building character, week after week. Nor are today's Boomer females, as they enter retirement. For

decades these women have juggled responsibilities — managing a home, bringing up a family, and being at least the second-line breadwinner, if not a career climber. They've had more than enough character-building. They're ready for relaxation and enjoyment.

The term “Customer Value” is our context for all this. It's a principle embodying what we've long thought of as “customer service,” but it extends well beyond that. If golf operators and managers truly understood Customer Value, they'd have picked up on social trends and brought new variations to the ancient game. They would be placing a much greater focus on nine-hole, 40-yard events. They would offer plenty of short, par-3 fun. They'd let golfers start from wherever they felt comfortable, and if necessary toss the ball out of bunkers. They would design 4-hole scrambles for fivesomes, and so on. As for priorities, they would have treated this programming with the same importance as their monthly stroke-play competitions.

Topgolf offers proof-of-concept that hitting golf balls can be fun. It should serve to motivate management to think about the Customer Value our



By amazing coincidence, Anna Liotta is the daughter of a traditional PGA Professional. She understands our market.

new and occasional golfers are looking for. The result would be new plans and new programming that delivers sufficient Customer Value to keep people coming back for more, more often.

“Golf coaches have failed to help golfers make the leap.” I’ve heard this from a very senior Club Management Association leader, who goes on to say that instructors have lined their pockets running introductory programs that don’t produce golfers who can enjoy themselves out on the golf course. He’s right.

The leap from Get Golf Ready to full-on recreational golfer, able to actually enjoy taking on a traditional 9-hole or 18-hole challenge, is immense. We know that. *So why is there no well-defined route from Get Golf Ready to the metaphorical top of the mountain?* Look at golf coaches’ websites and I doubt you’ll find even a hint of a true pathway from incompetence to enjoyment.

What the newcomer to golf encounters are introductory programs, then a chance to participate in clinics, and an offer to buy a series of lessons. There is no express promise of fun activities on the golf course. Where’s the professional’s schedule of programming to keep the developing golfer interested, to provide him or her with fun and enjoyment?

In fact how many coaches take responsibility for retaining their learners in the game? I don’t mean take an *interest*, I mean take responsibility. How many produce a monthly report that shows the number of rounds in 2016 their 2015 Get Golf Ready graduates are playing? How many track their learners over the years on a Customer Management chart? How many learners of yours lasted longer than 24 months in the game? What’s your conversion rate, from learner to activated golfer?



What’s your target conversion rate?

When I talk to coaches about their careers they’ll tell me how many players they’ve coached, how many lessons they’ve given, how many golfers they’ve introduced to the game and how many champions they’ve coached.

These answers indicate a marketing proposition that is obsessed with grip, stance, posture and the giving of lessons. It ignores the true metrics: How many rounds have you generated? How much revenue have you added to the industry?

How many golfers have you activated? Again, what about that conversion rate?

Coaching is a means to an end. An important means, for sure. But if it doesn’t achieve that desired end, it’s a proposition without value. The *Wall Street Journal* article is telling us we’re failing to get to the “end.”

Obvious? Then listen to how many coaches moan about how few of their older golfers want coaching or lessons. Some even post comments like that on Facebook. Let’s be clear: “Lessons” is not a Customer Value. “Coaching” is not a Customer Value either. Why would anyone want to buy it? If you really cared about the customer you’d investigate the Value they were looking for. Deliver that, and not only will we reduce our losses at the front end, we’ll get more golf out of everyone!



The ski industry is good at creating different challenges for different skill levels, ensuring everybody has fun.

Golf club managers and golf coaches share responsibility for the failures the *Journal* article highlights. Neither party has evolved its understanding of the customer, of the Customer Value that's got to be delivered, or of the tracking of the customer on an activation scale.

So, find some time to read Anna Liotta's book, then create your pathway, and create a schedule of fun events and activities, all the while evolving your understanding of your own daily activity until all of it becomes that "means to an end." Take responsibility for the end, which is the activation—or, when things don't click, the loss—of every single customer. **PG**



"We don't actually care about the golfer's grip, stance, posture or swing plane. We care about how many memberships, visits and rounds this will lead to."

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Coaching works

Big reasons to swing on plane



**And golfers will buy a whole lot more from you,
worrying less about price.**