

# THE GOLF COACH SELF-MARKETS, JUST BY ENGAGING WITH GOLFERS

By **Ian James**,  
RetailTribe CEO

It was 5 p.m. on a Friday evening in April and we were at a range where we had helped the director of golf design and promote a fun event. All 72 hitting bays were occupied by golfers taking aim at their targets. There were even players watching as they waited their turns. At the end of the event, members of the facility's management team were in high-five mode, saying again and again what a great success it had been.

I stood there with a question: *How many leads had this event generated, either for membership or participation in coaching programs?*

A couple of months earlier I was hosting a revenue workshop with an ownership group. One of the head professionals in attendance proudly told of a twice-monthly event he had run for women golfers—members as well as their guests—the previous season. It was full every time. The women had a blast each time. The event has been a big winner and it would be again this year.

I posed the question: *How many leads had this event generated, either for either membership or participation in coaching programs?*

You likely know the response I got, in both cases. It wasn't simply that the answer was zero, it was the fact that there wasn't even a process by which to engage any of the event participants, to encourage them to ask about membership and/or coaching. When challenged, both professionals said they "generally wait to be asked" about membership and coaching. Well, OK—but how are they creating the opportunity for people to step up and do the asking?

I used to visit Jonathan's Landing, down in Jupiter, Fla., quite often. The head professional at the time was Fred Harkness, and he was very easy to find. If Fred wasn't in a meeting or on the golf course, he was over at the range, walking



**Are your conversations with golfers leading to further instruction program bookings and new membership sales? Are you having enough of these conversations?**

the tee line. That simple act used to be seen as a critical part of a professional's or a golf coach's activity. Face-to-face time was of paramount importance to Fred's success, in his view. He used every encounter *to learn more about the golfer he was talking to*. The goal was to discover what was holding them back or what opportunity for growth they might display. In those conversations there were opportunities for a lot of "asking," by the people Fred spent time with.

Imagine how much opportunity there was to walk the line with 72 bays occupied! Think about the opportunity to engage with 36 relatively inexperienced women golfers every fortnight.

At RetailTribe, we market an online, digital customer-engagement solution. We're good at it, but, much more powerful than any web page we might design, or social post we may dream up, is the face-to-face engagement between a golf

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**"...there wasn't even a process by which to engage any of the event participants, to encourage them to ask about membership and/or coaching."**



Likes, Hearts and Thumbs Up are great, but how you do measure the number of consumers who “trust” you.

professional and a golfer. In fact, the unseen component of our solution is our library of “physical-engagement events,” along with the portfolio of promotion assets we have. Whether it’s a “Splash for Cash,” a

“Chip 4 Charity,” a “Par 3 Shoot-out” or what have you, we know that if we can put a real, live expert golf coach next to a golfer discovering a new opportunity, then it’s much, much easier to convert that golfer into a customer / student.

Brian Thelan of Seabrook Island on the South Carolina coast is a fairly new client of ours. Brian this year bested his Season Opening Equipment Bonanza revenue by 300 percent over previous years. One of his colleagues at another golf course wanted to know how RetailTribe had helped him do that—he asked for our number and called us. We were honest: Brian had done it. He scheduled, promoted, and ran the warm-up engagement events. He and his team engaged with golfers and demonstrated the value they could deliver. The PGA professional who was researching Brian’s success came to the conclusion that what Brian had done was “a lot of work for not very much” (!!!).

I suppose business success, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. Working with golf coaches who are employed by a company with three ranges in its portfolio, we walked the coaches through a plan of activities they could run over the ensuing three months to create new students for their programs. To paraphrase the response of this dozen or more golf coaches: “It’s not our job to market,” they said. “We coach. Management creates the customers.”

Working with a very large golf facility on the West Coast, I was shocked at how little pay the golf coaches earned. Yet, the response was, they didn’t want to embrace the marketing responsibility—they just wanted to coach.

This is a lose-lose situation for everyone. For the instructors, it means being trapped in a job where your earnings are restricted. Where, frankly, you’re not valued highly enough. Where your job tenure is fragile. For the golf facility, it means impacting far fewer golfers than they could. It probably means fewer golfers, playing fewer rounds.

Physical, face-to-face marketing by an expert is the most efficient form of marketing you will find in our industry. Imagine you wanted to get eight students into a short-game coaching program. How many emails would you have to blast out to get those eight people booked? Meanwhile if you ran, alongside your Saturday morning play, a Chip 4 Charity event, and engaged with 50 percent of the field individually for just five minutes, how many could you convert into a short-game coaching program?

### There are so many stories of win-win success

Bill Harvey, a golf coach from New Mexico, tells a wonderful story. He was trying to explain to the mother of one of his junior golfers that he was having trouble finding enough juniors to justify running another camp. Not to have her child denied the



For every hour you spend working, 6-10 minutes should be on active, face-to-face marketing.

opportunity for more game-improvement, the woman swung into action. “She took me by the hand to the swimming pool,” says Bill, “and one by one we chatted with each parent. We left 60 minutes later with a full roster of players for our camp.”

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Matt Clay, at Del Mar Golf Center in California, has built a large junior program by creating engagement activity with school principals, athletic-department staff and board members. I am betting that within Proponent Group there are literally hundreds, possibly thousands, of these stories of win-win success.

In all of these stories you will discover that one key facet of face-to-face marketing is its capacity for creating a relationship and establishing trust. Think about your online marketing as a sort of match.com. Use it as a chance to create that all-important first date—a trip to a local tavern where a safe drink can be shared, while both parties ponder whether this is a relationship worth cultivating.

Using online marketing to promote participation in a Chip 4 Charity event, with a golfer who is right there on-property, is the equivalent of that safe drink at the bar. It's five minutes of engagement with a golfer, in which you can demonstrate that you care about them personally, that you're an OK person and that

you know what you're talking about. Most importantly it is an opportunity to create a deeper relationship and to establish one-on-one trust.

For the golfer, it's not trust that you know about a golf swing. It's not trust that you can hit great golf shots, or even that you can explain how to play a golf shot. *It's trust that they can do something better and enjoy themselves, as a result of their engagement with you.* Then it's a trust that you can hear them and their requirements, fears, needs. It's trust that you really care.

Yes, you have the Internet, but you still need those "first dates." Every golf coach needs to be continually building and developing new relationships with golfers every week. At least 10 percent of the hours in any week should involve match.com-type dates, where the coach and the golfers meet—it's all the same except the cocktail is replaced by a golf club and ball.

Follow this concept and wow, does your marketing then come alive. **PG**

## It Works! (Value of the Teacher—Proven)

At the most recent Proponent Summit I highlighted the need for coaches to understand the financial impact on your facility's business. I asked if you knew how much a golfer was worth to your facility and if you knew how many you'd acquired or retained for your facility. I emphasized that this was critical to your future.

Etienne Olivier isn't a member of Proponent or a customer of RetailTribe but he has attended one of our Revenue Workshops, wherein we explore the same questions. Etienne runs an academy at a prestigious golf club in a gated community.

Last week he called me to describe a recent experience. He had received notice from the "community management board" that his rent was being doubled, effective May 1. He asked for a meeting with the board and at that meeting:



Etienne Olivier  
EOGA's Managing Director

a) With a flip-chart he asked them to calculate the average value of a new member to their club, using the calculation I had shared in my presentation;

b) Having established the value of a single golfer (a much bigger number than they had ever appreciated) he then listed each golfer he had introduced to the club through his academy in the previous 12 months;

c) He then multiplied that number of golfers by the value per-golfer, to showcase the value his academy, at a minimum, had delivered to the golf club.

**The result:** *Rental increase withdrawn, and the general manager instructed to work more closely with Etienne on new-golfer acquisition and current-golfer retention.* I wish you a fine start to your season, and every success.