

WHY WILL ROBINS, JOHN PERNA AND A FEW OTHERS ARE RIGHT

By **Ian James**,
RetailTribe CEO

Some of you—mostly those based at golf facilities in the northern U.S.—are about to start your season. I would like to dedicate this article to helping you make 2017 a particularly profitable season, and a year in which the recognition of your importance to your golf facility is significantly elevated.

For me this has been a winter of study. I've attended coaching and teaching conferences around the world. I've read as much "best practice" material as I can find. At academies in the warmer climates, I've spent nearly 40 hours just sitting and watching. I've visited well over 100 coaches' websites and scanned thousands of their Facebook posts.

If you've attended some of the same conferences I have then, in my judgment, you will be better equipped to deliver a better client service and better equipped to discuss the golf swing. However, you will *not* be better equipped to create more customers, more revenue, and more impact.

Why not? Well, you are being drowned in education and ideas that drive you to be a better manager of programs and lessons. But the route to more revenue and greater impact is to be a better manager of customers—from the cradle of their entry to the game to the grave of their departure.

But, if you attend Proponent events, you've heard voices offering the secrets to profitable management of customers—John Perna and Will Robins are two such voices (I'll refer to their views in this article). They are, unfortunately, being drowned out by the overwhelming noise of those who can help you design a junior program or give a good lesson.

If you listened hard, Tony Martinez at a PGA conference also gave the Robins/Perna message – "Manage customers and you'll



John Perna (left) and Will Robins are two Proponent Group members giving great advice to their colleagues.

make a great living," Tony said—but again he was one among many other speakers, the others being intent on having you stress the technical, and its supporting technology.

The prevailing, and very dangerous, message is this: "If you build it better, then they will surely come." But if you want to make a healthy living from the golf industry, whether you have the glossiest, most prestigious academy, or have a few square yards to trade from on a range, you will make this the year when you *get better at managing customers for profit.*

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There's nothing like a miss-hit golf shot as evidence of a requirement.

Do *not* look for leadership from the golf industry when it comes to managing customers. You are going to have to collectively, as Proponent Group members, find ways to amplify the best-practice examples you have, and to bring in others whose specialization is delivering value to customers for profit.

Lorin posted the NGF annual review in the Proponent Group forum. Here's some analysis from within that article.

"Driven in part by escalating competition and rising costs, independently-owned courses are increasingly hiring professional management companies to run operations. This trend is part of an ongoing effort to improve customer service levels, enhance course conditions, and add technology and amenities while implementing best practice initiatives. Management companies that run multiple facilities often can provide economies of scale, helping independent operators save money on major purchases such as course equipment and other turf maintenance supplies."

If I could take the liberty of translating that statement: Management companies can build it better and

cheaper. Therefore, they give you the best chance of survival because they allow you to offer better for less. It's another version of "build it better and they will come."

Will Robins has a better approach for golf coaches

I listened to a Will Robins podcast that was the direct opposite of this thinking. He said, and I paraphrase:

Don't build anything. Play with your golfers. Learn about what they need. Discover what they want. Make a case for your ability to deliver it to them. Sell it to them. Then build what you need to deliver it.

What Will is doing, and I apologize for any possible misinterpretation, is setting out the notion that we should first spend lots of real face time with our customers ahead of anything else. Someone described this as "old-fashioned thinking in a world

where we've been promised a digital revolution as the panacea for revenue growth."

Old-fashioned or not, the principal that Will is following is that *the customer is the asset, and our job is discover what value they want or need*. He is also making the case that you are quite capable of responding to the customer's needs and delivering the desired value.

Some of you may be about to rush off and create an online survey to "discover your customer's needs." Online surveys are useful. RetailTribe provides them for our customers. But when it comes to discovering what need you can fulfill, there's nothing like a face-to-face communication with a golf club in hand, and a



Why fish for Trout where there's only Carp?

miss-hit golf shot as evidence of a requirement.

Creating leads for your business

So, if you're at this point in the article, and you quite like the idea of making 2017 a record year, then here are two strongly recommended actions you should undertake, each week at a minimum.

- 1) Schedule yourself to play 9 holes with three different golfers every week; Over a seven-month season that will be 84 golfers you'll be able to learn more about, discovering their needs and wants.
- b) Every week of the season schedule a skills challenge that coincides with a busy time at the club. Over a four-hour period you ought to be able to highlight opportunity for improvement with 16 to 32 golfers.

Yes, you're playing golf, but really you are

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qualifying leads. What Will takes for granted, because it's a natural gift he has, is what to do with each of these golfers you now have the opportunity to engage with. That, to me, is a process here that Will follows automatically. To learn more about that process visit www.retailtribe.com/proponentfunnel.

John Perna: different but also right

It was a slightly different approach to Will's that I saw John Perna present at the first Proponent conference I attended. Up on stage he stated how he tapped into a commonly held need among the parents of teenagers. John had identified that parents were quite willing to invest in coaching in search of a golf scholarship for their child or children.

Whereas Will, in the podcast I listened to, and in the material I've read, states that you can 'farm' from a pool of customers by understanding their *array of needs*, John has a solution that calls upon him *to look for customers with a very specific need*. Both are great examples of being customer-led.

While in Will's example you must develop the skills described in the link above, with John's proposition you need to become really good at fishing

where your chosen fish are. In other words, anyone who wants to market a very specific solution needs to invest in marketing where there are lots of customers with that very specific need.

What really stood out for me, when listening to John, was how he described his financially unrewarding experience as a golf coach selling programs and lessons—doing things the customary way—compared to the spectacular rewards he's earned from fulfilling a customer need.

The key to a better year

If you carry on selling programs and lessons you're consigned to the same future as those selling tee times. You had better get very good at working harder for less.

Some of you can quite legitimately see a financial future where you're reaping the rewards of coaching an elite golfer. But it's quite possible to make an even more financially rewarding "now," if you can find a way to identify needs that many customers value.

The start of that process is spending some time with golfers who are not yet customers. Don't wait for them to come to you. **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 new season, and every success.