

New Avenues to a Searchable Presence Online

New commercial websites with instructor profile pages have joined the PGA and LPGA sites as searchable resources for golfers. Will these sites turn into business-builders?

By David Gould, Staff Editor

Here's a surefire way to win a bet with a non-golf person: Claim that you already know the five-word answer an instructor will give when asked: "How do you bring in new students?" Your bet is that the teacher will say, "Mostly by word of mouth." That is pretty much universal, mainly because word-of-mouth has driven a lot of business through the decades. We get that golf is a social game and we've seen how word travels fast about the quality of a course, a new putter on the market or a local instructor.

And yet the effect of the Internet on word-of-mouth must now be reckoned with. Alex Weber, co-founder of the startup website GolfMDs.com, summarizes this new normal with a single declarative statement: "All searches begin online."

His assertion has some merit. GolfMDs.com was launched in 2013 in part because golf instruction had no Angie's List or Yelp.com as a digital means of peer-to-peer, word-of-mouth commentary. The closest the Internet had come to a searchable database of golf instructors is what you find at PGA.com and LPGA.com. These were natural sub-pages for the two organizations to construct, given the contact data they started with. And each of them does rank very high in Google searches based on phrases like "find a golf instructor" or "find a female instructor."

By their nature, however, the PGA and LPGA sites have a static quality. GolfMDs.com—and now the more recent startup in this category, Swaggle.com—move beyond the passive format of geographic listing and try to create a win-win for golfers and teachers alike. For these commercial sites, large volumes of traffic and the engagement of the golfers who visit are the formula for success—it's about delivering a satisfying user experience and helping golfers in great numbers solve their various problems.

That starts with building a national database of teachers, each showcased on profile pages that are chock full of specific information. Backing up the profiles are objective reviews by golfers who have actually worked with the particular coach. It should be said that one function of these services is a booking engine (with a secure-payment tool) and it's the gateway through which a golfer gets access to add their review.

That seems important. In these times of merchant protest against Yelp.com and its tendency to bruise reputations using a seemingly irresponsible process, no startup wants to antagonize what would be the core asset. Colton Bollinger, a principal in Swaggle.com, which went live in July, says golf lesson-takers seem to be different from, say, those people



GolfMDs is quickly ramping up their website to include detailed search functions for all teaching pros.

who stay in budget motels and get satisfaction from writing long, scolding reviews of them. "The one statistic that has stood out to me is that out of all our instructor reviews to date, 99.5 percent have been positive reviews with a 5-star rating. The remaining half-a-percent were 4-star ratings," says Bollinger. He acknowledges that the sample size—about 3,000 lessons so far booked through Swaggle—is small. His point is that existing students will tend to be raving fans, and their observations will hold a lot of weight because they are based on specifics and cover a fairly long arc of time. But there's another influence to consider: In general, going for golf lessons is more uplifting and fun than having a

plumber replace your bathroom toilet. As a result, the word-of-mouth online for lessons could and should have a different flavor than other review sites.

This brings up the matter of testimonials appearing on the teacher's personal website. Weber sees only minor effects from them. "For starters, the number of eyeballs those testimonials reach is very small," he says. "But mainly it's a matter of consumers not seeing real credibility in them, because they know the comments can be filtered and edited by the person who owns the site."

The founders of Swaggle and GolfMDs each speak emphatically about instruction's untapped potential to grow as an industry and in some ways carry golf on its back as the game seeks to serve more people. "The golf equipment sector markets in a massive, constant way—instruction doesn't, at least not so far," says Weber. "Meanwhile instruction has more potential to affect the business. All that's needed is to bring together the loose collection of teaching professionals onto a single platform." Consumers are consumers, in his view, and their interest in working with a golf coach is currently impeded.

"Think about it—people are looking online for someone they are going to marry," Weber says. "They use Internet search for everything else, too, as long as its organized so they can compare and contrast, look at photos and video, read reviews. That's absent for golf." Nor is it for lack of interest, he hastens to add. "Only 12 to 15 percent of golfers take any lessons," notes Weber, "but over 80 percent are interested in taking lessons—then there are those 10 million Americans with so-called latent interest in the game. They need a compass to navigate by."

Use of smartphones is habitual and habit-forming, that's pretty obvious. Among people who study trends in mobile technology, there is great power to the seamless way in which an idea or a wish triggers a handheld search, then the reading of peer comments, then quickly leads to some type of purchase. "The emergence of mobile tech and social media are intertwined," says Kevin Benedict of the global analytics firm Cognizant. "The two phenomena will continue to play off each other." Unless people like Benedict are wrong, the effect of TripAdvisor, OpenTable and other review sites on lesson-taking will be significant—that includes growing the revenue volume for teachers. Look for a time not long from now when decision-making about where to go for instruction will look more and more like decision-making about rental cars, restaurants and motels.

Doug Holub, a Proponent Group member at a public course in Fairfield, Conn., buys into this. "Of course it makes sense that people would evolve as far as how they go about choosing a golf instructor," says Holub, who recently filled out his profile page on GolfMDs.com. "All of us have con-

verted to that method for other things we select and schedule." Holub has been wondering if his icons indicating certifications are persuasive on golfers viewing his profile. One of his first activities after completing the GolfMDs profile was to browse other coaches' pages on the site. "I found myself comparing certifications and trying to assess how much that would mean to people—my bling versus their bling."

Not as much as one might expect, according to an attitude survey that GolfMDs has used in drafting its business model. "We polled golfers looking for the top four factors they wish to use in evaluating a golf instructor," reports Weber. "In order of importance, they said they look for consumer reviews, then location, then pricing and finally the teacher's experience and certifications."

This past golf season, veteran instructor Kandi Comer experienced her normal, steady flow of phone calls from longstanding clients wishing to schedule a date and time for the next golf lesson. However in 2014 she also brought about 35 new private students into her stable—many of them were nothing to her but a name on a computer screen until they first showed up on the tee. "The trend is building for people to do a search and book lessons online," says Comer, a Proponent Group member based at Old Trail Golf Club west of Charlottesville, Va. "It's been amazing to me

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how comfortable the younger age group is with doing that."

Comer recently began to notice that she would mention the names of students to her colleagues in the Old Trail golf shop and get blank looks every time. "These are golfers who come on-property without ever calling me and without calling the main number or walking up to the counter. I thought they must have been referred to me by the golf shop but they found their own way, through these new tools." Comer seems to embrace them all. She sends videos via her YouTube account and her Twitter feed, posts clinic news on her Facebook page, fills out all the online listing profiles (with photograph, which is critical) and even has a Yelp account.

"Using the Internet in every way possible to build business is a habit we all need to get into," says Comer. "You discover all these different ways of getting your message out and if you stick with it you get results."

That's a summary of the current marketing landscape deserving an enthusiastic review—complete with five stars.