

## First Encounters of the Productive Kind

# SUCCESS WITH NEW STUDENT ASSESSMENTS GENERATES BUSINESS

by David Gould, Staff Editor

The word “assessment” has been unpopular around clubs because it spurs thoughts of special charges for surprise capital expenditures. But on the instruction side—at golf academies, golf clubs and standalone ranges—a recent emphasis on New Student Assessments (NSAs) is turning out to be highly positive.

Longtime Proponent Group member Kandi Comer, based at Old Trail Golf Club in Crozet, Va., says the NSA option “opens a door for people who have been sitting on the sidelines but wishing to try golf

instruction.” These folks are excited by the no-charge (or low charge), testing-based NSA concept “because it doesn’t create the feeling of a commitment on their part,” Comer believes. “People sense that they still have an ‘out,’ if it doesn’t seem like a good fit.”

And, like clubfitting before it, the skills evaluation in an NSA satisfies a golfer’s curiosity about what is working pretty well for them and what isn’t. According to Rob Strano, a Proponent member with a Golf Channel Academy site in Destin, Fla., people are excited to see the finished NSA document and “find out where their journey as a player is going to take them” once they get started on a coaching-and-practice regimen.

“Most people think we’re just looking at the swings and the strokes, but the report is extremely detailed,” says Strano. “Their pre-shot routine is closely observed, even though we never say, ‘Show us your pre-shot routine.’” Gathering these nuanced



New Student Assessments tempt golfers who may be on the fence about giving instruction a try.

details includes placing a ball and telling the golfer to go about hitting a 130-yard approach as though they had just driven their golf cart 230 yards, stopped and pulled a club.

And indeed, within an NSA report from the Strano group there will be many fine distinctions. The golfer will hit a wedge from light rough 15 feet off the green to a pin that’s 20 paces from the edge, then hit that same club from five feet off the green to a pin that’s five paces from the edge. “What we may end up reporting is that they can control the ball with a wedge in large spaces but they can’t control the ball with a wedge in tight spaces,” says Strano.

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Since the NSA experiment began this spring as a Golf Channel Academy promotion, participating golfers have been won over in very high percentages. Four coaches interviewed for this article—Comer and Strano, along with Brian Jacobs of Rochester, N.Y. and Scott Wickham, with

multiple locations including Riverview, Fla. —have produced an eye-opening success rate: In just the first few weeks of NSAs, no fewer than 25 out of their 28 NSA golfers have signed up for coaching programs. Across a larger sample size, the conversion percentage is said to be about 75 percent, which is still extremely good.

Proponent member Scott Wickham opts for a variation on the zero-cost NSA theme. He collects a \$100 fee for the assessment, but allows the golfer to use that money toward purchase of a coaching program. “The committed golfer is our target audience for coaching programs,” says Scott, “and the NSA promotion seems to attract just that type, which is great for us.” He reports that two of his five assessment people are females in their 40s and early 50s while three are males, in the age range of 25 to 42. It’s also not uncommon for NSA clients to be younger executives who have been advised to learn golf for the business advantage it can provide.

It’s interesting that New Student Assessments, as a sharply defined product and aggressive strategic initiative, only emerged after a major investment of advertising resources was poured into the market by Golf Channel and GCA. Analytics showed that the ad campaign was sparking strong interest, but actual bookings at Golf Channel Academy locations weren’t occurring at the rate that should be expected.

“Golfers were being driven by our ads to the websites of GCA academies,” explains Lorin Anderson, president of Proponent Group and executive vice president of GCA, “but they were becoming confused at all the options available at academy websites. Rather than booking an initial session with the coach, they were clicking away from the site without taking any action.”

Studying this pattern,



**A New Student Assessment is a great, non-threatening way to begin a long-term, student-teacher relationship.**

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the GCA team in Orlando sought a reliable way of capturing the interested golfer as he or she perused an instructor’s site. The idea was to give someone who hasn’t yet met the coach or visited their academy an obvious first step toward working with that teacher. Knowing that the lifetime value of a golf student can run into the thousands of dollars quite quickly, the marketing group became intrigued by that no-charge angle. “Giving away (or significantly discounting) the first piece of chocolate in order to sell the entire box” became an apt analogy.

Comer sees the NSA as an intro product with a fine inner logic to it. “Some people never take that first golf lesson because they don’t know what to ask for,” she says. “They’ll often end up saying ‘I want you to fix my slice,’ but the fact is they are in the dark about what their flaws are and what their potential is.” Once they’ve learned about NSAs, things change, she

believes. “They see that a full-on assessment is going to take place, which will get them past the awkwardness of not knowing what they need.” In addition, she has seen NSA sessions lead to additional NSA revenue, thanks to old-fashioned word-of-mouth recommendations.

Alternatively billed by Proponent member Brian

Jacobs as a “1-Hour Swing and Skills Assessment,” the NSA as he practices it will sometimes begin with discussion of a golfer’s self-evaluation. “I had an NSA client tell me he knew his own game very well and wanted to get that corroborated by me,” says Jacobs. “I ended up telling him he was way off in what he believed, concerning his strengths and weaknesses.” Very soon a deal was in place for Jacobs to coach this player on a \$500-per-month plan for six months, with four private lessons per month plus other services. “He said to me after a couple of sessions, ‘You are blowing my mind with what you’re teaching me.’ This particular guy was a tinkerer, but he has talent and he is on his way to being an excellent ball-striker.”

Rob Strano advises any coach with a skilled, high-energy teaching staff and a bells-and-whistles learning center to take a fresh look at these assets through the eyes of an NSA customer coming on-property for the first time. “Once a new person comes into our academy, they will generally want to establish a relationship with us,” says Strano. “People want a home base for their learning and their growth as golfers, along with the expertise and moral support a great academy offers.” Translation: Get them in the door, do the assessment and then turn on the charm.

Obviously, an assessment of physical fitness and flexibility could be part of any regimen that evaluates a new golf student. Same can be said for checking the appropriateness of their golf equipment. At Scott Wickham’s academy in Florida, NSA clients are offered the chance for an in-depth fitness/flexibility appraisal, but it’s not by any means required. Same goes for a



**Golf Channel Academy New Student Assessments include an opening interview and post-assessment written evaluation including a suggested plan based on the golfer’s resources and goals.**

thorough clubfitting session—available but optional. “Even the steps and components of the NSA are somewhat up to the student,” says Wickham. “We don’t put every golfer through the exact same assessment process.”

One trait Wickham watches for—and will discover in select cases—is an unusually high “aptitude” in a very specific skill category. “I did an NSA not long ago with a 25-handicap golfer who was pretty amazing in the distance-control part of the putting assessment,” Wickham recalls. “I was able to tell this gentleman he was darn close to a PGA Tour level in his ability to judge distance and speed and strike the ball with correct force.”

Recalling what we said earlier about word-of-mouth advertising for NSA sessions, it’s obvious there is no weekend golfer on the planet who would not want to immediately run and tell his friends about an initial assessment result like that one. **PG**

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