

## BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

# Q: Where Do New Students Come From?

## A: Your Referral Network—So Give it a Boost

By David Gould, Staff Editor

Terry Miskolczi knows he gets a lot of new students from referrals. The Bluffton, S.C.-based Proponent Group member also knows the ideal “script” he would like a recommending student to speak from, if he could supply it.

“I would want them to say that my approach is to help a golfer of any ability discover their own best swing motion,” says the Canadian-born Miskolczi, “not to shoehorn them into a swing that is modeled on Phil Mickelson or Se Ri Pak or some other tour player.” Asked how often he thinks that message gets communicated along the referral network, Miskolczi answers: “Oh, probably never.”

Successful teaching professionals take pride in how positively they’re described in word-of-mouth communication among golfers. But there are steps and techniques the golf instructor could take to better understand the referral process and perhaps influence it significantly. The first thing teachers might learn is that referral-network marketing is treated like a science of sorts by certain industries or sectors. In some of those categories or industries the person-to-person aspect is more on the margins of the marketing effort—and it has to be jump-started by a lot of cold-calling and certain other aggressive tactics.

But that doesn’t matter—you could still learn a little something from other types of businesses that hope to benefit from referrals. In fact you may already be doing some of what they suggest, albeit on a random basis. More to the point, you may not realize how the various tactics directly affect the A-tells-B equation, in which B ends up taking A’s advice and booking a lesson with you. Ivan Mis-

ner, head of a California-based business networking group, recently wrote an article for Entrepreneur.com discussing the moving parts and inner workings of that web of chattering (and recommendation-giving) people that encircles your business.

“The good news,” writes Misner, “is that measuring success from referrals is actually quite easy. We know this

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because we’ve designed a networking scorecard for tracking referrals and the business that results from them.” If referrals help drive your success, he adds, you may want to develop a similar one for your own use. The “scorecards” involve recording who provided you a referral, what happened with it, how you followed up with the prospect and how you followed up with the person doing the referring. Did you send an email? A hand-written thank-you? Did you provide either party to the recommendation with a reward or incentive?

Some golf instructors are queasy about asking students to make recommendations—the incentive or reward factor makes that obstacle quite easy to get past. “Do I owe you a golf shirt?” or “Do I owe you a \$25 gift card?” is the question you’re asking, as you seek to find out whether current students are touting your services to newbies. “In networking, of course, people are all unique and situations

change,” explains Misner, “but if you track the results under different conditions, you’ll begin to see patterns that will show you how to better handle your network.”

The advice he gives is analogous to Ken Blanchard’s “Raving



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Fans" concept, which debuted 20 years ago with the 1993 publication of Blanchard's book by that title. Des Mahoney, a Proponent member who runs the Centennial Golf Academy in Oak Ridge, Tenn., tries to employ the Raving Fans concept in a bid to track referrals, believing "there are always certain people among your active roster who will do much more than their share of new-student recruiting."

What's odd about your raving fans is, of course, they aren't your only satisfied customers. In many cases they are students whose golf games are better thanks to your guidance and whose personalities happen to be very outgoing and extroverted. If you aren't quite ready to use the Misner tracking system on every golfer you work with, create a category of "potential Ravers" (people who demonstrate this personality type) and simply track their activities.

Mahoney, more or less by accident, discovered a recruiting tool that he originally thought of as a straightforward service to the individual lesson-taker. That tool is the follow-up lesson video emailed to student John Smith.

"In many cases the student will show it to friends or colleagues," says Mahoney. "It starts a nice conversation and leads to some phone calls." For that reason, a graphic with your contact information and perhaps a line or two to back up your branding would be appropriate to add to these follow-up videos. Again, if you only want to do this selectively (perhaps to students who work for major employers in the area) proceed on that basis and create a log to help track the recruitment results.

Both Mahoney and Miskolczi feel that the right type of programming should be matched up to incoming students who come to you via referral. "You have to be ready with the right product," says Miskolczi. His reasoning is that some referred golfers arrive with a toe-in-the-water mentality while others show up ready to take a deep plunge. If you are paying attention to patterns, you may even start noticing that referrals from some sources are gung-ho and referrals from other sources need to be nurtured along.

Something interesting occurs when a new arrival to the Mike Bender Golf Academy is asked, "How did you hear about us?" The answers to that question "are basically never surprising," says Cheryl Anderson, the academy's director of instruction. "Beginning with Mike's brand, which is on a national level, we've got strong reputations here and that generates a lot of referrals," says Anderson, herself a National LPGA Teacher of the Year honoree in 2006. For all that, how-

ever, the referral-and-recommendation pattern at the Bender Academy shows well-worn paths and also some unblazed trails.

"We had a meeting recently about some of those markets that don't show up on our database," says Anderson, who currently teaches the No. 1 female junior in the U.S., Nicole Morales, and has a rabid following among tournament-playing teens. "For example, I don't have any mini-tour players, including Futures Tour players, among my clientele—it's a group of potential students I haven't connected with." That sort of missing link could be lost in the shuffle, given the academy's lofty reputation and how busy its lesson book is. Lately, however, the impetus at Bender Academy is to target some of these less active or inactive categories and try to add new branches to the referral network already in place.

Lots of businesses that sell services locally rely on recommendations. Unlike a landscaper or chiropractor, however, the golf instructor is speaking to a community of fairly like-minded individuals. People with back problems or front lawns that need mowing are more the general run of society, not a self-selecting group with its own jargon, beliefs, etc. Therefore, along with the Raving Fans discussed above, there is another "big-megaphone" customer who naturally sends new business your way, and that's the low-handicap or scratch golfer, particularly the ones who travel to compete and get their names in the newspaper.

Anders Mattson, a Proponent Group member at Saratoga National Golf Club in upstate New York, has "organically" built himself a solid berth within the good-player network in his region. "That golfer is obviously someone who influences other people," says Mattson. "I get a ton of referrals based on being able to help that level of golfer reach goals that they've set." Lately Mattson has been thinking about the connection between what gets said in spoken recommendations from his network and what he says in the marketing message that's found, for instance, on the home page of his website.

"In my case, the message people seem to share informally is that I'm clear in what I communicate and my teaching isn't confusing," says Mattson. "That right there is a good first point to make in my favor." And, therefore, it's one worth echoing in formal venues such as the instructor's website and promotional emails. The end result is a valuable overlap between formal disciplined branding and the natural, voluntary, positive conversation that golfers spread through their networks.



**Cheryl Anderson at the Mike Bender Golf Academy is focused on targeting inactive student categories.**