DEAD-SERIOUS PREPARATION—THEN A SPLASHY AND SPIRITED LAUNCH

by John Torsiello, *Staff Writer*

Mike LaBella and Rob Comerer made sure to conduct their due diligence before taking the big step of opening "Smash Factory Golf" at Ravenwood Golf Club in Victor, N.Y., outside of Rochester. Their entrepreneurial gambit has paid off in the form of a well-accepted and growing instruction business—in an area with a strong golf culture and quite obvious upside potential.

When they parachuted in, the two Proponent Group members brought some catchy branding and made it easy for golfers to find them and book lessons with them. Indeed, the first search result for "Rob Comerer Smash Factory" or "Mike LaBella Smash Factory" is a live booking page with blanks for typing in name and email address, plus other prominent, basic information on how to engage.

The east side of the city of Rochester, where a good deal of Smash Factory's prospective clientele is located, enjoys a high median income. It's home to an audience that's likely to respond to a high-quality golf learning experience, given its level of disposable dollars. "Our business model is based on offering a high level of training and coaching," says LaBella, "high enough to justify premium pricing. In creating our plan we've needed to look closely at supply, demand and discretionary income."

A key factor for the two Proponent members was this data point: In 2010 Rochester was ranked number 10 in a list of "Best Golf Cities in America" published on Golf.com. With a population of slightly over a million and only 4,000 to 5,000 of that population holding memberships at private clubs, the so-called Flower City seemed well-stocked with golfers who would have no natural source of instruction and coaching.

With some further research, the pair found that only half of all private facilities in their area had a dedicated instructor on staff. Translation: There would have to be well-heeled golfers serious about the game who were open to at least sampling what ready Comerer and LaBella brought to market. With the territory all mapped out, the last big decision involved their home base—Ravenwood G.C. seemed a pretty obvious choice.

Rob Comerer (left) and Mike LaBella did lots of homework before setting up their business and that has helped make Smash Factory Golf near Rochester, NY a big hit with local golfers.

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"Ravenwood is the top public course in the area and it's in a great location that has seen large population growth over the past decade," says LaBella. "The town of Victor has seen a 5,000-person population increase and the county itself has grown by 7.7 percent."

Then again, it's not the only game in town, so a bit more investigation was called for. LaBella considers it extremely important to research other facilities in any area where you plan on locating, as well as the potential growth of the area, and then determine your supply, demand, and potential-customer calculus.

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"Look at the volume of golfers, cost per round or cost of membership and compare that to other facilities and other instructors," advises Comerer. "See what their price points are and how busy their schedules are. Are they even able to maintain a full schedule?" He and his partner—each of whom can flash a resume loaded up with specialty certifications and impressive past employers— set an initial goal of providing an extremely high level of coaching for players of all skill levels. "The facility along with our price points were considered and we made sure that it suited our vision of our brand," Comerer says.

Speaking of the brand, with a name like the "Smash Factory" some prospective clients may think LaBella's and Comerer's teaching is all about hitting the ball a mile. But, as Rob points out, he and Mike have received positive feedback on the name, with no particular issue around one-dimensionality. "Most people have not linked the name to the technical term, 'smash factor,' unless they are really up on technology or watch a lot of Golf Channel." Nor would that really be a problem, in Comerer's view. "Given that smash factor is a derivative of ball and clubhead speed, it directly links to how efficient contact can be at impact, if the swing is fundamentally sound," says Rob.

They've done their target marketing, too. LaBella explains that 50 percent of his and Comerer's effort is focused on the avid player, 25 percent is on the "lapsed" golfer and 25 percent is on creating new golfers.

"Your student base is like the stock market," suggests Mike. "If you put all of your funds into one stock and it does not do well then you lose money. If you diversify and spread out into multiple stocks then you have a greater chance of seeing consistent returns." The majority of the pros' efforts in creating new golfers comes in the form of youth coaching sessions and clinics. "If we are able to get them hooked at a young age then we can create lifelong students," says LaBella.

The two pros focus on goal-setting and helping students work towards those stated goals. "If the performance targets are set appropriately, the client will always see results on the course," says Comerer. For prospective clients on the fence, he offers free swing assessments. This gives the newcomer a feel for his style and provides Rob an up-close look at the person's swing and their apparent ability level. At the conclusion of the assessment, the would-be client receives a bit of instruction and a potential lesson plan tailored for them. "Most of the time that assessment is not the last time I see them," Comerer says, with a degree of satisfaction.

The weather in the Northeast can, of course, put a hold on golf for long periods. But LaBella believes there is potential for decent revenue during the winter months. He and Comerer will offer more group instruction coupled with functional movements in the gym that assist with the golf swing. "I would love to consider a warm-weather location for the winter," says Mike, "but with family constraints I do not mind staying up North teaching in the winter."

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The Smash Factory is developing partnerships for the winter season that will help grow its clientele, as well as offering new programs adapted to winter-season needs and activities. LaBella and Comerer are also looking to grow their business at other courses and clubs, having already set up a second Smash Factory Golf location at Eagle Vale Golf Club, located in Fairport, N.Y. Said Comerer: "Mike and I both want to make sure that any future partnerships will allow us to grow our clientele, as well as bring new opportunities to the table for our partners."

Comerer is having, no pun intended, a blast at The Smash Factory. "I truly enjoy having the opportunity to help others," he says. "Seeing pure enjoyment as a student hits a great golf shot is very gratifying."

The pros' long-term goals include being at two facilities that meet their business plan and vision, being consistently busy in the winter season, adding staff, and working toward becoming a nationally recognized academy. After just a couple of years in their adopted hometown, they're off to a rousing start. PG

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