

PASSIVE INCOME

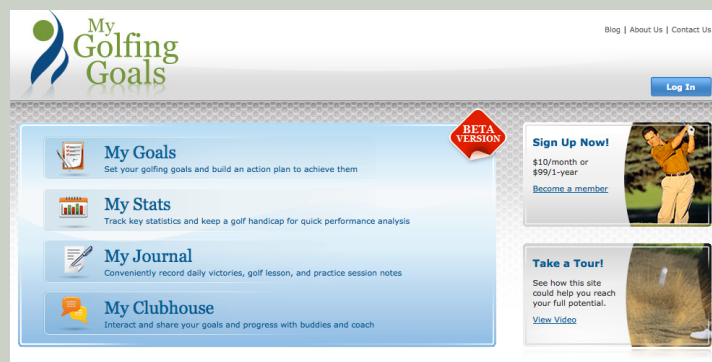
The Great Beyond: Capturing Clients Online Only

By David Gould, Proponent Group Editor

Born in 1894, the blues singer Bessie Smith performed in public at a young age and by 1915 was selling out small clubs and cabarets. But it wasn't until a decade later that Smith's earning power boomed—thanks to the new technology of phonograph recordings. If you've got a particular talent that a wide audience may be attracted to, you generally need technology to open a portal for you. Golf instructors have been studying the possibilities of online distribution of their skills for some time. Even the most in-demand instructor looks at his or her business and wonders if the only way to generate revenue is in the flesh, giving an individual or group lesson.

Within the ranks of Proponent Group members, there are several who have invested time and some dollars in trying to create the proper Internet delivery system for the services they usually provide in-person only. A member in Dedham, Mass., Bill McInerney, seems to be furthest along in this quest. Teaching out of an impressive, family-owned practice range called McGolf, McInerney has spent seven years constructing an online platform to coach golfers he hasn't—and won't ever—work with in person. Proponent members Stephen Aumock of Dallas and Josh Zander of San Francisco are following a path similar to McInerney's—although with somewhat less of a do-it-yourself approach. The teaching team of Pia Nilsson and Lynn Marriott are active in this area, as well. Through their well-established Vision54 company, they offer interactive coaching tools including online lessons.

If you attend next winter's PGA Merchandise Show in Orlando, you should find McInerney manning a booth emblazoned with "MyGolfingGoals.com," his branded website for coaching services generally but also for building coach-student relationships with cyberspace clientele. The navigation tabs on that site's current home page are: "My Goals, My Stats, My Journal and My Clubhouse"—the latter being a private social-media site that lets clients "interact and share (their) goals and progress with buddies and coach."



Bill McInerney spent more than seven years perfecting My Golfing Goals.



Stephen Aumock created Great Golf Academy's subscription service.

McInerney has labored hard with the software and programming of his site, but the functions he offers were all basically no-brainers.

"The services and opportunities I've built for online-only students are exactly what I've always done for my regular students," he explains. "What you'll see in digital form on the website are things I started out doing with pen and paper—lesson notes, goal sheets, statistics. Even the social media part isn't all-new. It's an echo of

the conversations between students of mine who happen to be friends."

In a red block on MyGolfingGoals.com you'll see "Beta Version," a tag McInerney looks forward to deleting in a few months when his major upgrade and relaunch finalizes. He admits that having a website in Beta for years is unusual, but points out that the site in its current version

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performs well. He also takes solace in how much pioneer-style effort has been required, given the lower-tech era in which he started.

"I figured all this out on my own," McInerney says. "I've spent over \$100,000 on graphic design and coding. Now there are people overseas using it—some golfers in Canada, too. I had no thought of making a profit—I only wanted to perform my job as a coach as well as I possibly could. Now I'm starting to see that it will be profitable, when I get emails just about every day telling me how many new signups (at \$99/year) have come in." McInerney and the investor/partner he recently took on sign up participating coaches to use their system. They have even been approached by a potential buyer interested in acquiring the proprietary software packed into MyGolfingGoals.com. "That wasn't something I was interested in—maybe sometime way down the road I would be," McInerney says.

To check the digital-delivery progress of instructor Stephen Aumock, you'll want to look at greatgolfacademy.com. Its current message beckons golfers with "something the world of golf has never seen before—the opportunity to be taught by PGA Master Instructor Stephen Aumock and other golf professionals in an environment that the golf universe has been missing." Aumock works with a technical partner on GreatGolfAcademy and has been e-commerce-enabled for several months. He says initial response to his web offer "has been lukewarm, but not cold." He promotes it mainly through Twitter, having built a Twitter following that now approaches 10,000 golfers. Aumock has worked on the e-instruction web project at the rate of one to three hours daily "for about a year" and adds that, cost-wise, he has "virtually no hard dollars invested in it."

One of the options for golfers who visit Aumock's site is to "Take a Free Lesson." When he made this available and tweeted about it to those 10,000 followers, Aumock had a slight concern about overload. "After just one tweet I had 12 people contacting me in the first couple of hours," he recalls. "There was no charge, of course, because I needed to initially test the process—I was able to look at their video and give them something valuable to think about and work on." He uses PayPal as his cash-transaction platform. He envisions some of the online lesson-buying as happening as a quasi-impulse buy.

"Golfers have their iPhones and Droids out on the course or the range with them, and it's no problem at all to have a buddy shoot video of three or four swings and send the file to me on the spot," says Aumock. "I'll be able to give a solid, useful answer based on what I see—even more useful when we get the software enabled for voice-over and telestrating." The latter function is expected to involve some heavier lifting.

The idea that one day "I can have the world as my client" is the impetus for Josh Zander to pursue web-based instruction. Zander is a Proponent Group member who teaches at the Stanford University golf complex and also at The Presidio in San Francisco—throughout the Bay Area his teaching reputation is stellar. He says he is launching a new website that will connect him to golfers far beyond his geographical base. "Like everyone in this profession, I've thought a lot about the fact that, if I'm not teaching, I'm not making money," says Zander. "How do you move beyond that—well, through technology."

Zander is expecting to create a clientele of golfers located just about anywhere who will pay on a subscription basis for a menu of teaching services. He is using Proponent Group sponsor SquaredUp to handle the bells and whistles elements—online lessons, video instruction shorts, social media and graphic design. If and when he is able to build the subscriber rolls toward critical mass, Zander expects to drop one of his six teaching days and use that day to do the bulk of his work with virtual students. "I've got a pretty long commute, so I'm even thinking of that benefit," he says. "And being off the tee for twice as much time as I am now means I'll come back fresher to work."

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