Customer service is essential to a successful golf operation. A large part of customer service is creating a seamless experience for your golfers. The staff are trained, the proper systems and procedures are in place, and your facility runs like a well-oiled machine. Whether you operate a nine hole, rural golf course, or are part of a large resort style facility, you can make improvements in the experiences you deliver to customers, and this in turn will improve your bottom line.

LOYALTY IS KEY

It seems logical to assume that satisfied customers will be loyal, and will provide a large share of your business. However, it turns out that satisfaction is a low hurdle for both loyalty and share of business. In 2006, Business Week reported that 80% of customers who defected described themselves as “satisfied” just before leaving. How is this possible? With respect to golf, in most markets, customers have many choices as to where they do business. Although golf course owners and operators want to believe their course is unique enough to successfully compete against their competitors, in many cases these differences are too subtle to create a sustainable competitive advantage.

In reality, customers will seek to repeat pleasurable experiences and avoid negative ones. This is not so much about the score golfers achieve on your course, but rather the quality of the experiences you deliver from the moment they arrive in the parking lot to the time they leave your facility. Golf course owners and operators are in the customer service business and their biggest challenge is that some days their service is great, and other days it needs significant improvement to create a “WOW” experience for customers.

In other words, service delivery is not consistent throughout the company, and there is no process in place to systematically improve customer experiences or measure the impact of customer service delivery on loyalty. You can begin to build a sustainable competitive advantage based on superior customer experiences that will grow your business in 2011. The following are some steps to make this happen:
BUSINESS ADVISOR

Your goal is to convert as many Passives and Detractors into Promoters who almost always provide the major share of your business, and are likely to tell other potential customers they should golf at your facility.

CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE MAP

If your Net Promoter Score is closely tied to sales, how can you improve it? I recommend developing a Customer Experience Map that depicts all the touch points you have with your customers and then measuring your performance on each of these. At the Golf Business Canada Conference & Trade Show in Quebec City, I suggested breaking your business into at least the areas shown in the diagram, and then measuring your performance on the touch points in each area.

I would recommend no more than 30 customer touch points in a single survey. Your survey should be no longer than 8 minutes or you risk respondent fatigue and early termination of the survey. The diagram shows examples of areas you could investigate. I suggest using a 10-point scale where 10 represents excellent, and 0 represents considerable improvement required.

For practical purposes you should ask the “Willingness to Recommend” question for each business segment at the same time as you ask customers to rate your performance on the Customer Experience Map. Before developing your survey respondent list, conduct a simple analysis on your customers to determine which ones do the top 50% of sales, the next 30% and the bottom 20%. Let’s call these Gold, Silver and Bronze customers respectively.

Your survey sample should contain as many of your Gold and Silver customers as possible as these customers drive your current sales. Also include Bronze customers who have slipped from being Gold or Silver in previous years. If you have a list of past customers include them as well, as most of them are now golfing at your competitor’s course.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

The next step is to analyze the results from the survey. Once you have calculated your Net Promoter Score, determine what percent of your customers are Promoters, Passives and Detractors. Is your Net Promoter Score similar for each business area i.e. Clubhouse, pro shop, course etc., or are they quite different. This will immediately identify some areas of strengths and weaknesses in your overall business.
The next step is to look at your average performance ratings for each customer touch point. What areas did you score the highest in, and in what areas is your performance lowest? This will identify some specific areas of strength and weakness. You must then dig deeper into your data, group all your Promoters, Passives and Detractors together and compare how you rated your performance on the Customer Experience Map. You will likely find Promoters give you higher ratings than Passives and Detractors. In addition there will be some areas that Passives and Detractors give you drastically different scores on certain experiences than Promoters do. These areas deserve your special attention. To identify the experiences that matter most to your customers, you need to do some statistical work and correlate their willingness to recommend you with the performance scores they gave on various touch points on the Customer Experience Map. This procedure will produce a ranking of customer priorities that sheds additional light on your performance scores.

Are you scoring high in areas that matter most to customers? Are you relatively weak in some important areas that drive loyalty and the "Willingness to Recommend" for your customers? Once you have a ranking of customer priorities look again at how Promoters, Passives and Detractors have rated your performance. To make progress in delivering a consistently superior customer experience you will need to focus on all the top customer priorities, not just activities you are comfortable with. If you consistently focus on the top priorities, not just activities you are comfortable with, you will need to focus on all the top customer priorities, not just activities you are comfortable with.

As part of the improvement process, measuring your performance on the Customer Experience Map, and identifying your Net Promoter Score is not a market research project. These measurements need to be used as navigation tools to guide you in improving the experiences customers have with you. To begin this improvement process you need to engage your employees. Everyone needs to believe it is their job to delight customers, particularly in the areas you have identified that are most important in terms of willingness to recommend.

Once you have determined your first Net Promoter Scores, and measured your performance on your Customer Experience Map, you need to schedule a "Customer Alignment Workshop" with all employees who have customer contact and if you feel it would be beneficial, include staff who do not directly deal with customer service. During this workshop you will present the results of your survey, with a focus on your initial Net Promoter Scores, and the performance ratings you received overall.

Demonstrate how these ratings change when you compare Promoters to Passives and Detractors. Once employees understand these initial results, engage them in discussing the implications of your findings and making suggestions for improvement. I suggest creating one or more teams with responsibility for a specific area of the customer experience. It is crucial that you monitor your progress with a sample of customers to determine whether you are improving in the selected areas and whether you are maintaining excellence in other areas.

By following up with golfers, this will again set up opportunities to tell customers what you have learned, how you have improved, and what areas you plan to work on next. I guarantee customers will notice this, and begin to reward you with the extra business you have earned.

**LONG-TERM GOAL**

Improving customer experiences with the goal of earning increased business is a long-term journey that requires commitment and occasional course corrections as new information presents itself. As you strengthen the experiences customers have with you, this will become your most valuable asset. There will be many opportunities to leverage this equity to attract new golfers and grow your business.

**THE IMPROVEMENT PROCESS**

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