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RUT BUSTER

Are you in a rut? Are you haunted by last year's problems? When was the last time your club introduced something truly innovative? Since you're in the golf business, your answers to those questions may be "yes," "yes" and "I can't recall."

Golf is filled with remarkably creative people who do not imagine new things nearly as often, nor on as grand a scale, as they should. Sure, we've seen the advent of soft spikes and on-line tee times; but what homegrown idea has made an impact at your club?

Innovation requires a slight nudge sometimes. Apple's Steve Jobs summarized innovation – a topic with which he had a tremendous track record – simply saying, "Innovation distinguishes between the leader and the follower."

Innovation is the act of creating new things that solve problems and meet needs in value-adding ways. In golf, innovation comes in the form of products, systems, processes and technologies that make a club easier to use, the course more fun to play and membership a greater value.

Innovation is about what and how. What should we do? How do we do it? Consider the following three questions to get started.

1. WHAT DO OUR CUSTOMERS AND MEMBERS WANT? They tell you every day. Listen and learn. And then find ways to meet their needs by creating new solutions. In most cases, what they want is not complicated, nor is it difficult to provide. Here are the basics on most members' lists:

- Attention... Especially important for women who seek validation of their rights at the club.
- Convenience and simplicity.
- Care and concern for children and families.

2. HOW CAN WE MAKE CUSTOMERS AND MEMBERS FEEL SPECIAL? The ways to do it aren't new, but their implementation might be.

- Know everyone's name. Customer relations software enables you and your staff to connect names and faces with shoe size, the types of golf balls they prefer and their children's birthdays.
- Host focus groups and invite survey participation.

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• Honor the senior members of your club. There is great value in the wisdom acquired through a lifetime of learning.

• Invite your youngest members to answer the question, "What would make our club even cooler?"

Once you've collected the information, consider new and different ways to implement your ideas. Show a bias for innovation – not simply for the sake of change but for the sake of keeping the club current and fresh.

3. WHAT DO WE NEED TO DO TO SET OUR CLUB APART? Encourage innovation in three ways:

• Organizational encouragement sets the standard and expectation for innovation. Leadership helps establish a culture of innovation. Organizational encouragement breaks down barriers and helps great ideas flow across departments and functional areas.

• Supervisory encouragement develops an innovative culture and empowers individuals and work groups to find new solutions to old problems.

• Group encouragement facilitates innovation throughout the org chart. Your dishwashers may have great ideas for making the kitchen work more efficiently. The mechanic may have the ideal solution for finding more tee times on busy days. But you'll never know unless you encourage creativity and show them it's valued.

Think with the future in mind. That's what innovation is all about. For example, what do the 20-somethings want from a club today? Health and fitness opportunities, sure. But what can you offer beyond a treadmill and an elliptical?

Can you help them load an electronic version of their training regimen into a bracelet that stores and tracks biometric information? Can you help them find other technological solutions that make using the club and playing the golf course more interactive and social? Do you support a virtual scorecard that allows them to post directly to social media so they can engage friends during and after their round?

We need to understand today's highly competitive circumstances. Most clubs and golf courses operate within a sea of sameness with very little market differentiation. Use innovation to set your club apart from its competitors. See that your innovation becomes a brand promise for the club. Be better and be different than your competitors. Are you ready?

Winston Churchill said, "Without tradition, art is a flock of sheep without a shepherd. Without innovation, it is a corpse." The best club leaders can shepherd innovation and gain advantage in the highly competitive landscape. **GCI**