



GUIDING GOLF CLUBS

Mike Orloff has become the “go to person” for golf operations in Australia, New Zealand, the South Pacific and South East Asia. When it comes to knowing what is going on in the golf industry and who has the knowledge to run a successful golf operation, Mike has become the go-to person.

So how did a golf professional from Los Angeles become one of the most sought-after golf industry professionals in Australia? For Mike, it started through his passion for golf as a teenager and then built through various roles and promotions. In 2000, he was tapped on the shoulder to head to Australia to manage two golf properties for the American Golf Corporation. At the time, the American Golf Corporation was the largest golf management company. They had recently taken-over the management of Robina Woods and Paradise Springs (now Palmer Gold Coast and Palmer Colonial) on the Gold Coast and needed someone to improve their performance. He

WORDS ANDREW WHILEY

was soon recognised by a rival golf management company and was recruited to the General Manager role for Clubcorp, overseeing multiple facilities and assisting in strategic direction in Australia.

Now based on the Gold Coast of Australia, Mike consults to golf clubs and businesses in the region, as well as presenting, facilitating and educating the industry through various workshops. He is also a long-term lecturer for the PGA of Australia's International Golf Institute, based on the Gold Coast.

Mike also established Golf Industry Central. This website was primarily created to become a marketing platform for his consulting services. However, it has now evolved into a leading golf media channel where regional and international news and information resources are read and utilised by golf industry professionals in Australia, New Zealand and internationally. Now celebrating its 10th anniversary earlier this year, the company was recently honoured by receiving the Queensland Golf Industry Supplier of the Year for 2017.

After a recent visit to New Zealand, Mike spoke to New Zealand Golf Magazine and talked about the issues that affect both New Zealand and Australian golf clubs.

What are the biggest challenges for golf facilities today?

Time and time again, I see the challenge to make significant cultural and operational changes, so golf clubs and facilities can move forward. We see some great stories of commercially run properties with no boards, making great entertainment hubs out of golf clubs that have been failing. It takes vision and openness to shift the entire property into a new paradigm which provides a new, sustainable model. Boards and members often get in the way of this happening.

Boards are bogging down the process in most cases, and many GM's are not able to nudge them in the right direction. The general market has been changing and wanting something new, but many clubs are still trying to provide an old product.

You educate many young people coming into the golf industry. What career advice do you give them?

I still remember being the one sitting in a classroom listening to speakers, and now I'm the one teaching the new generation. My best advice for young people coming into the industry is to first be clear on what their personal career goal is. I'm very much into having a 'vision'. The industry is looking for more people who know how to generate the numbers and not be someone who is solely an administrator and bean counter.



I always ask the question: “First, may I see your strategic plan and what is your vision?” From there “Why are you doing your marketing? What is the purpose?” I’m surprised that a high percentage of the time, a club won’t really know why, just that they are supposed to! And the strategic plan is out of date or tucked in a cupboard!

Many clubs have a very static website and social media presence, and they don’t track results of any campaigns they run. I appreciate that clubs may not have the internal resources to do it themselves or the funds to pay for it. So instead of trying to do too many things, they need to focus on a couple of marketing efforts they can do very well.

So clubs need to create a marketing budget?

It’s a business, so of course they do!

Marketing isn’t just sending newsletters and emails; it’s made up of everything you do at the facility. It’s anything from how the phone is answered, how to make bookings and then out to the external marketing – I call it the Inside Out Marketing approach.

I’d look at a split on how this is devised. First, would be how much to spend on general communications, branding and service. This may be a set amount per annum and based on 3-4% of total revenue. Now, this would factor in a staff member that looks after marketing or be outsourced to a company.

The second component would be marketing dollars based on a business case, i.e.: if you want to hold an event, what is the event worth? How many people do you need? How much is it to run and what’s the amount for marketing expenses for advertising and collateral? In this case it’s a Return on Investment (ROI) approach.

Believe the old cliché “you need to spend money to make money”. I see many clubs putting on events and not giving enough marketing support to make it successful. In many cases, they don’t even know how it went and members didn’t know it was on! If I have a good business case and it means spending \$500 but we project a result of say \$2000 return, is it worth doing?

Many clubs restrict themselves in growing revenue by not spending funds to do great things.

Learn as much as you can about all aspects of the operation. You don’t have to be a CPA, but you do need to understand how numbers work and how to read the story in the numbers you are producing or the numbers given to you.

What does a successful golf club look like?

A successful club of any type is one that has strong governance processes in place. A club really needs planning for the next 5 plus years with a board that is holding to the plan and not changing course each time a new board is elected.

Strong communication and accountability are at the heart of this. Board members need to understand the role of the board and the role of the manager.

A club with a clear vision will move forward and build a sustainable model. Having the right people on the team is paramount, as well at the day-to-day level.

Are golf clubs marketing correctly and connecting with their audience?

The clubs that understand who they are, generally do well in the marketing and communications sector. The problem many have is they don’t understand who they are, and more importantly, who their audience is. We’ve created a full price battle based on the golf course experience only. We’ve forgotten how to create the ‘club experience’ of which golf is only a part, albeit a big part.

Key tips for a golf club that wishes to grow the game?

First, we must define “grow the

game”. How do we measure this? You need to have very clear objectives to start with and then create measurable strategies to achieve them.

The culture of the club must be able to support these changes. If it’s a big enough priority, then you will find a way to achieve it. Too many clubs hide behind excuses like “We can’t do that because we don’t have the funds” or “The board won’t allow it”.

How has the golf marketing landscape changed in the time you have been here?

Technology is so much more at the heart of managing the ongoing marketing efforts today, but devising a good marketing plan still needs to be done a bit more “old style”. It’s important to fully understand the specific goals that are trying to be achieved with your marketing. A marketing plan needs to devise ways to increase revenue and improve retention of recurring clients, such as members. Too many facilities are going through the motions, not really knowing what KPI’s to track. They have a website which is not designed with a purpose outside of being a brochure.

The same goes for social media. Clubs are on Facebook but with no plan on what to do and what outcomes to track. We must plan our marketing with the end goal in mind.

What do you find when you see existing marketing at facilities? Do many clubs have a marketing plan?

What questions do you ask golf facilities to get them thinking of marketing effectively?