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GOLF BUSINESS

Branching **Out**

Makefield Highlands is growing its business and reach despite shorter-than-usual seasons



Hidden Treasures
Using bright ideas to reveal untapped revenue

The Right Communication
Mastering the golden rule so everyone can play nicely

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BRANCHING OUT

While other courses in its region struggle, Pennsylvania's Makefield Highlands has grown its business and extended its reach. Through strategy and direction, the public facility is defying the odds and racking up rounds and revenue despite shorter-than-normal seasons.

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HIDDEN TREASURES

From gift shops and tai chi to a Chili Open Scramble, course owners across the country are implementing bright ideas in an attempt to uncover buried bucks ripe for the taking.

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THE RIGHT COMMUNICATION

Do you communicate to serve others, or do you communicate to serve yourself? Take the right approach by delineating boundaries for your emotional side so everyone can play in the sandbox nicely.



Jay Karen
 CEO
 NGCOA

The mainstream business media seems to love writing negative stories about golf. To those of us in the industry, it can feel almost like they're celebrating the pain we sometimes feel.

Truth is, golf's complexities deserve a comprehensive analysis and discussion, but few, if any, mainstream outlets feel inclined to give the space to do it justice. Customer acquisition and attrition are impacted by macro and micro issues, internal and external forces, and that side of the story needs to be told for those outside the industry to truly understand the game's challenges.

But the fact is, we do have a customer retention

problem, and we must look in the mirror to see why. Any industry showing declining numbers should have its leaders taking a hard, truthful look at why it may be happening and not be afraid to talk about it in places other than behind closed doors. While we don't want to be enablers of the black-cloud-prone media, we have to do our best to make sure the stories are, well, fair and balanced.

Since I started at NGCOA last fall, I've been keynoting meetings of course owners and operators from Portland and French Lick to Atlanta and Amsterdam. When I state that we're in the hospitality business, but many of us don't even know it, I get a lot of head nodding. While I have encountered some amazing people at golf courses, I've also had many experiences that weren't so hospitable. And yet there is mediocre and bad service everywhere—at restaurants, movie theaters

and hotels to name a few.

Compared to those, golf is in an unfortunate position. If someone has a bad meal, they aren't going to stop eating out. Same for a bad stay at a chain hotel—they'll brush it off and stay at another. But if someone has an inhospitable or bad experience at a golf course, I believe it has a lasting and possibly permanent impact. This is especially true for the tire-kickers who aren't fully comfortable with the golf experience. It's an unfair burden we all bear, but one that should also drive collective action.

Contrary to media belief, Rome isn't burning. Maybe too many Romans have been emigrating away from the empire, but man, let's stop acting as though the empire is crumbling and is on the precipice of collapse. In my opinion, the size and health of the industry don't support fatalistic prognostications or headlines. Let us fine-tune the amazing game and business we have. We have all of the answers under our noses. There are a lot of super-intelligent people in our industry. We have a lot of relatively new people in leadership positions, and others who have been around a long time but are ready for change. We have thousands of course owners and operators, pros, superintendents and managers eager for answers and willing to do things differently. I think the conditions have never been better for us to pivot our primary attention from customer acquisition toward customer retention.

Golf is not going out of business, but we should act like it is. If we did, some of our customer retention problems could, and would, be fixed. **RB**

GolfBUSINESS®

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE NATIONAL GOLF COURSE OWNERS ASSOCIATION

MAY 2016 VOLUME 22, NUMBER 5

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Golf Business®, USPS #016-601, ISSN #10995943, (Volume 22, Number 5) is published 10 times a year in January, February, March, April, May, June, July/August, September, October and November/December by the National Golf Course Owners Association (NGCOA), 291 Seven Farms Drive, 2nd Floor, Charleston, SC 29492, (843) 881-9956. Golf Business is distributed free to qualified subscribers and is \$49 for 1-year U.S. non-qualified. Single copy and back-issue price \$10 in the U.S. and \$15 in Canada. U.S. funds only. For address changes, eight weeks' notice required. The articles and other information in this publication are advisory only and are not intended to represent the views, opinions, or endorsement of the NGCOA. ©2016, National Golf Course Owners Association. All rights reserved under International and Pan American copyright conventions. The publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited material. Reproduction in whole or in part without written permission is prohibited. Printed in the U.S.A. Periodicals postage paid at Charleston, SC and at additional mailing offices. Postmaster: Send address changes to Golf Business, P.O. Box 321, Congers, NY 10920-0321.





By Trent Bouts
Branching
Out

**Makefield
Highlands is
growing its
business and
reach despite
shorter-than-
usual seasons**

Bob Doria says it is the
Makefield Highlands
staff that makes the
difference in its success.



In 2015, weather closed Makefield Highlands Golf Club in Yardley, Pennsylvania, for 87 days—roughly one-quarter of the year. That’s the bad news. The good news is that over the course of the other 278 days, the facility hosted nearly 44,000 rounds. “We’re an anomaly,” general manager Bob Doria quips.

Makefield Highlands anticipates a return on its recent capital investments within five years.

3 Key TAKEAWAYS

- 1 Weather closed Makefield Highlands for a quarter of 2015, but the public course still hosted 44,000 rounds.
- 2 The course flourishes under GM Bob Doria, who has applied his own experiences to the direction of the facility.
- 3 Being township-owned allows Doria to invest in a longterm approach to success, achieved through several initiatives.



No kidding.

In February, unseasonal warmth allowed eight days of play and 566 rounds. On one Saturday in March, Doria filled 192 of 198 places on the tee sheet. “Pure gravy at that time of year,” he laughs. “It was insane.”

No kidding.

When Doria shared some of those numbers with a fellow general manager from a nearby facility, his colleague was incredulous. “You’re doing how many?” the GM shot back. “He couldn’t believe it,” Doria says.

But, of course, he wasn’t kidding.

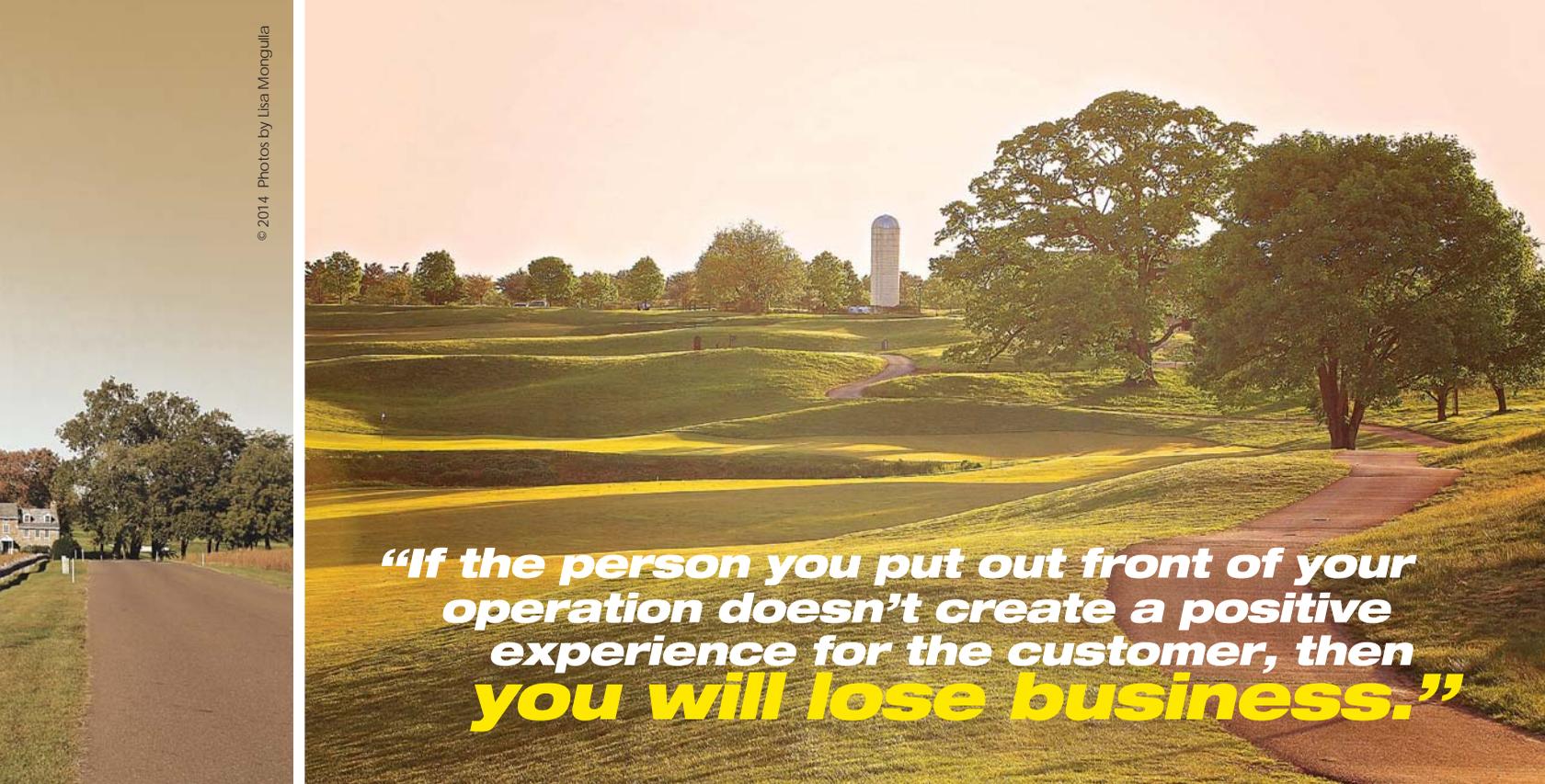
Makefield Highlands, an 18-hole, links-style public facility located on the state’s eastern flank by the Delaware River, may be an anomaly in that it is so busy. But that success is no accident. Instead, in an age of sleek slogans where the promise often exceeds the product, it suggests that Makefield Highlands is actually honoring its pledge of “redefining public golf.”

Clearly, something is working. Doria will tell you that it’s his staff—of as many as 85 in peak season—that makes the difference. “I just set the strategy and direction,” he says. “If I didn’t have people on staff that are willing to follow, then none of it would work.”

But there are plenty of bosses whose “strategy and direction” have driven good people and businesses off the cliff. The fact is Doria’s approach is informed by life experiences outside golf’s traditional mold. The industry is full of people in it because they love the game. But Doria learned the value of a dollar and how to grow a business long before he ran a golf course.

Money was sometimes tight growing up in a family that owned bowling alleys. “Put it this way, it was a big deal if I ever got a dozen golf balls at Christmas,” Doria says. Mowing lawns for pocket money, his first set of clubs was a hodge-podge plucked over time from the “leftovers barrel.”

Eventually, his equipment improved and so did his play. Doria spent two years on mini-tours in the 1980s be-



“If the person you put out front of your operation doesn’t create a positive experience for the customer, then you will lose business.”

fore coming to terms with the fact that he “couldn’t make a living at it.” So, he went into the insurance business. Starting from scratch, he drew heavily on his father’s philosophy that “if you weren’t the one waving your arms and jumping up and down on the table, then you weren’t being seen.” Today, that’s called marketing.

Over time, Doria did it well enough to build a consulting firm that paid him a six-figure salary. He sold the business in 2001 and, recently divorced, found himself at a loose end. Another tilt at a professional playing career soon convinced him, once and for all, that he “just wasn’t that good.” Next thing, nearing 40, he was slinging bags onto the back of golf carts in Las Vegas for “11 bucks an hour plus tips.”

It was there that Doria saw what first impressions really mean to an operation. The money was little more than pocket change, but Doria knew his work was worth a lot to the ongoing success of the business. “If the person you put out front of your operation doesn’t create a positive experience for the customer, then you will

lose business,” he says simply. That’s customer relations.

Doria decided to throw himself into the golf business or, more accurately, the business of golf. “My business just happens to be golf,” he says. But it didn’t happen overnight. Despite a degree in logistics, his experience as a player and his success in small business, Doria “literally had to start all over.”

It took 30 months for Doria to earn his PGA of America credentials, but he soon proved himself very good at his new career. Within a few years, he was winning awards from the Philadelphia PGA Section. In 2008 and 2010, he won their President’s Plaque for his “extraordinary and exemplary contribution” to player development and growing the game.

In 2003, Doria lost his father, who had been a pillar, but in 2006 he gained another. “I remarried to a great woman, Lisa, who allows me to be successful,” he says. “Without her support and understanding of the long hours, I would not have been able to be successful in the golf business or at Makefield for that matter.”

In 2009, on a PGA Ambassadors Program trip to Jamaica, Doria fell into conversation with Mike Attara, president of what is now known as Spirit Golf Management. The company ran Makefield Highlands on behalf of the local township, and Attara thought Doria would be a good fit at the helm. Doria was familiar with the course. He was working not too far away at the time, even sending “secret shoppers” over to get a better handle on the competition. He knew enough to believe he could make an impact.

One of Doria’s first steps was to create a director of instruction position and make a concerted push to teach juniors. Now, seven years later, some of those youngsters are adults playing full-fee golf at Makefield Highlands. “They come here because this is where they learned to play,” Doria says. “I’ve got guys coming back who are now in corporate America. They bring colleagues or send them here to play because they have an affinity with us.” That’s brand loyalty.

Doria concedes that being town-

ship-owned allowed him to take a longer-term approach than some “mom and pop” operations where there is often a greater urgency for return on investment. “But if we’re not growing the game, we’re not perpetuating our own existence as an industry,” he says.

In addition to juniors, Doria also actively promotes couples’ golf with “nine and dine” events so spouses can play and mingle together on course and in the clubhouse. Initiatives like that have helped him resuscitate “dead zones on the tee sheet.”

League play has also helped significantly. A 5 p.m., Monday league that began with 24 women now averages 80 players and guarantees \$3,500 in golf and cart fees, “plus another \$1,000 to \$1,500 in the restaurant,” Doria says. “But a lot of women don’t play if it’s too hot, too cold, too windy or if it’s raining.” So he collects their league fee up front and builds flexibility into the format.

The 100 or so registered women league players have a 17-week season in which to play their quota of 12

league outings. Doria uses a phone app so competitors can opt in or out of a particular week up to 24 hours before play. Competitive and social divisions lend further options.

The club has its own men’s league of 48 two-man teams and an industrial league with 16 six-man teams. Those leagues account for about 15 percent of revenues and have established such a reputation that Doria has had to reject multiple requests to host others. “We just can’t accommodate them,” he says.

Making the Right Hire

Some of the principles Bob Doria applies running Makefield Highlands Golf Club were inherited from his father. “But I also read a lot and I steal shamelessly,” he laughs. “I find something I like and then see if there’s a way we can use that concept.”

Doria is also willing to knock on doors for answers. Continually impressed by the positive and professional service he received at his local Chick-fil-A, Doria called the owner. “What makes you better?” he asked.

The owner agreed to meet and over several hours led Doria, step-by-step, through the company’s approach to hiring and training. “Now

when a customer says thank you, our staff will say ‘It was my pleasure’ instead of ‘You’re welcome,’” Doria says.

Doria says he hires on the basis of attitude more than aptitude. “If a person is friendly and smiling, then I can train them to do what we want,” he says. “Another thing I learned from my dad was to treat your employees like you treat your customers. We respect our employees, and that’s why they are all-in. We’re an open book to them, so when we have to say no to something they understand why.”

Retaining good people when their positions are part-time or seasonal can be tough. But Doria

instituted a program that allows the club to hire back each March many of the people they let go in November. Every staff member is evaluated at the end of the season. The best are invited back. Those with shortcomings who show promise are given a 60-day plan on what they need to correct.

Retirees and high school or college students make up the bulk of the club’s 70 or so part-time and seasonal employees. “Because they’re happy here, they refer people they know who will meet our model,” Doria says. “I’m proud to say that we have more requests for positions than we can handle.” — T.B.

The golf course, designed by Rick Jacobsen, opened in 2004 and has always had “good bones,” Doria says. “But nobody knew this place existed because there was no money going into marketing.” So Doria bought air time on Inside Golf TV, a regional cable program that screens 30-minute shows on courses. He paid for several shows, but has since enjoyed discounted pricing because he helps out the producers.

“They sometimes call us because they know they will get good content at short notice,” Doria says. “I make it as easy for them as I possibly can. I have everything lined up so they don’t have to waste time trying to work out what the story is or how they’re going to tell it.”

Doria has also expended energy, not just money. When the course landed a U.S. Open Qualifier last

**“If we’re not growing the game,
we’re not perpetuating our own
existence as an industry.”**



year, it was the culmination of “three years of politicking” (aka, jumping up and down on the table). “That’s how you get recognized,” he says. “If someone in our area is going to play golf, I want them playing here. It’s about creating competitive advantage, then making sure your customers are aware of it.”

Even small tweaks can create an edge. When Doria went to Makefield Highlands, tee times were running eight minutes apart. His secret shoppers had reported five-and-a-half-hour rounds and disappointment as a result. Shifting the intervals to 10 minutes and promoting four-and-a-half-hour playing times with notices in the pro shop

and on golf carts reduced round times and increased satisfaction.

Keeping the club fresh in the eyes of returning customers is also important, Doria says. He’s grateful that the township—which works with Doria and Spirit through a golf committee—allows room in budgets for capital improvements. The club recently replaced its televisions and updated the bathrooms. “That sort of thing doesn’t go unnoticed by customers,” he says.

Last year, the club also invested in a new tent-style facility for weddings and groups, and expanded its kitchen capabilities. “The original kitchen wasn’t designed to do much more than hot dogs,” Doria says. “Now,

we’ve hired an event coordinator, so we’ll see how it goes.”

If “it” goes as expected, Makefield Highlands will see a return on the project that cost between \$500,000 and \$600,000 in less than five years. Doria will do what it takes to make that happen.

“I’m here 10 hours a day, even when we’re closed in winter,” he says. “I’m behind the counter or I’m meeting customers. I’ll run the first tee for a few hours. Any operation takes on the personality of the person in charge.” That’s leading by example. **TB**

Trent Bouts is a South Carolina-based freelance writer and editor of Palmetto Golfer magazine.