

# Professional service

Some clubs might think of dispensing with their PGA professionals in order to cut costs – but this is done at a club’s peril, as they can be pivotal in attracting new members to a venue, as **James Lee** details

As **golf clubs** have struggled through economic difficulties in recent years, many have made cutbacks and an obvious place to save money has been on the PGA professional.

However, several clubs have found that their PGA professionals have made a real and tangible difference to their bottom lines, and clubs should perhaps think about using them differently, rather than removing them, if they are not contributing sufficiently.

The recent England Golf survey, for example, found that golf clubs with a clear commitment to junior golf, either with regular coaching or a dedicated junior organiser, were significantly more likely to have increased their junior membership.

And according to David Colclough, the PGA’s head of member education, PGA pros can make an impact when it comes to the recruitment of new members, access funding, retention of existing members, developing links with schools and the community, and with marketing and communications.

“The PGA professional is three times more likely to be the primary point of contact at the golf club than anyone else on site. Therefore in reviewing the golf club membership experience, it seems sensible and important that clubs undertake this in conjunction with their PGA professional,” he said.

Leyland Golf Club near Preston, for example, has introduced a series of initiatives, including a variety of flexible packages offering affordable playing and inducements for complete beginners to take up the game. The success of the venture, with head PGA pro Colin Burgess playing a leading role, has been lauded by the Lancashire County Golf Partnership.

Iain Lancaster, the county development officer, said: “This is an excellent case study. We are very impressed with their set-up and

*Lee Andrews, head PGA professional at Mid-Sussex Golf Club. The club grew its beginner membership category from zero to 300 in just three years*



forward planning which we feel is a blueprint for how clubs need to think and operate to drive their business.”

“Membership numbers started to

drop and in one year we lost 100,” recalled chairman Norman Graham. “When we were down to 500 we had to do something to reverse the problem.

“We researched other clubs as far away as Surrey and many of them told us about their flexible membership schemes which we thought were a good idea. When we asked some of our players why they were resigning the majority said they felt that they weren’t getting value for money.

“That’s the problem we looked to address along with our age profile which was dominated by over-60s. We only had two in the 20-30 bracket.”

The club embarked on an ambitious plan to restore its fortunes by introducing membership categories to suit all genders, ranging from 20 and 40 rounds a year to run alongside the regular five and seven day sections.

It also targeted beginners, particularly juniors and females, by offering cheaper entrance fees.

There are two-year academy memberships which allow women to play without handicaps with existing members. That section grew to 80-strong with 50 regularly playing in Sunday competitions to facilitate people who work by last year.

There is a 60-strong junior presence, with 10 free places for girls overshadowing the national average of two per club. Two Sunday morning coaching sessions for younger members

are held under the tutelage of Burgess.

The clubhouse dress code has also been removed, and the club has reduced the senior subsidy.

Similarly, in just three years, head PGA professional Lee Andrews, joint general manager Andrew Smith and a team of four other PGA professionals at Mid-Sussex Golf Club have turned a club with zero beginner members to one where there are now nearly 300.

Andrews explained how the turnaround occurred: “We broadened the club’s offer to complete beginners and casual visitors by creating three new memberships: ‘Academy’, ‘Practice’ and ‘Off-Peak’. By taking the trouble to explain to existing members our thinking and how they and the club would benefit, we got them onside which proved critical,” he said.

“The £450 Academy product provides £100 of lessons, £350 of golf set up as 30 opportunities to play nine holes, free golf monthly clinics and free buckets of balls for the club’s own driving range. For £75 our Practice membership allows use of the range where they can play off grass as well as mats, play the beginner course and use the chipping and putting greens. Off-Peak offers golf after midday in winter and 1pm in summer, with full access to

monthly competitions, as part of the Golf England requirement is to see players with handicaps, not just players.”

Andrews’ next action was to set up a shorter version of the main course for the beginners with a much higher version of ‘par’, and tees / starting points that are much nearer the green, starting from the fairway; it is now sponsored by the local Porsche dealer.

At just 1,085 yards long, the par 35 course is getting beginner ladies playing. “As beginners, ladies are easily inhibited by players behind them and so on. So the short course lets them start well out of other players’ way, get the hang of playing on a proper course and do ‘nine holes’ in around two hours. We also have a shorter three-hole course with holes of 50, 75 and 100 yards just for the beginners,” Andrews said.

This radically different approach to getting people into the game is working well. In three years Mid-Sussex secured 68 Academy members, 112 Off-Peak members and 109 Practice members.

Two golf clubs with dramatically improved memberships – in both cases the non-traditional profile of females and juniors, and in both cases so much of the recruitment work was thanks to the club’s PGA professionals. **GCM**

## Golf clubs encouraged to participate in Europe’s biggest pro-am

Golf clubs are being encouraged to tee it up in this year’s Lombard Trophy and capitalise on the feelgood factor the PGA tournament can generate.

The popular pro-am format, which last year attracted entries from more than 750 clubs, has become a staple on the schedule for many clubs and this year will again climax with the grand final at Gleneagles’ PGA Centenary Course.

In addition to adding excitement to the golf club’s early season medals and Stablefords, which determine the amateur partner of the host PGA pro, the Lombard Trophy also sparks wider interest among the members and local community as they follow the club’s fortunes in Europe’s biggest pro-am.

And with the 16 winners of the regional finals going through to the grand final at the Perth resort of Gleneagles one member of each club is set to really enjoy the proverbial trip of a lifetime as they tread in the footsteps of Europe’s Ryder Cup heroes who shone so magnificently in 2014.

Andrew Snoddy, PGA tournament director for the Lombard Trophy for the past two years, is hoping the lure of a potential Gleneagles appearance will attract new entries for the event.

“The Lombard Trophy is a special event in a number of ways and always attracts a positive response from the clubs that take part,” he said.



“Very few members ever get the opportunity to represent their club in a national event and having the chance to tee up with your host PGA professional in a regional final and for the lucky 16, a grand final, is a golfing highlight of a life-time.

“Clubs also report a number of positive spin offs from the interest it creates within the club through to wider coverage in the local media.

“With an £80,000 professional prize fund the amateurs really get a sense of playing competitive tournament golf and to experience just how rewarding and challenging that is.

“It often generates a lifelong friendship between the pro and amateur and we hope as many clubs as possible enter in 2015.”

Cornwall’s St Kew, represented by PGA pro Richard O’Hanlon and 17-handicapper Andy Jones (pictured), lifted the Lombard Trophy in 2014.

For further information contact the PGA tournament department on 01675 468380