

THE DELICATE ART OF HANDLING THE IRATE CUSTOMER



Unlike a retail merchant who sells to a transient clientele, the golf professional's livelihood depends upon keeping his stable clientele happy. As a result of this dependency, the professional can ill afford to mishandle an irate member; in fact, he must do all he can to prevent the problems that cause member frustration.

Joe Moresco is a veteran professional, a former president of the Metropolitan PGA and is currently professional at Woodmere CC in New York. He's also an ace in the art of handling irate members. Moresco's experience has taught him that above all the professional must keep open the lines of communication between himself and the membership. The following incident describes how Moresco handled the common problem of a lost club.

"I was sitting in my office when I heard this commotion in the shop," says Moresco. "One of the members was shouting at my shop manager. So, I walked out and asked him what the problem was. 'You lost my five-iron,' he screamed in my direction. Knowing the member well, I walked over and led him into my office. I shut the door, then sat down at the desk, opened the drawer very slowly, peeked inside and slammed it shut. 'Son-of-a-gun, I

Professionals cannot afford to lose customers by mishandling an irate member. Here are some sound and proven methods for soothing angry clients

by DALE SHANKLAND

could've sworn it was in there,' I said. This broke the tension. While he was trying to stop laughing, I said, 'Don't you realize how silly you've been? Why would anyone here want to take your club, especially when they have access to brand new stock?'"

Lost clubs are a problem to the professional only because inevitably he or a staff member will be accused of misplacing them. The accusatory club member fails to understand that the responsibility of keeping track of the clubs is his, not the professional's. To prove it, and thus obviate this kind of accusation, the professional must keep records that detail what services are performed for the member. For example, Moresco, if pressed, will literally show that his charge covers cleaning

and service, not storage. When the member sees the written proof, more than likely, he will realize that his accusation is unwarranted.

Sometimes, a player may not be satisfied with the facts on paper, and will continue to accuse the pro or one of the staff members of losing the club. "In that situation," says Moresco, "I'll then explain that every Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday we go through the whole storage area searching for lost clubs. This means every bag in the place. I've done this for the member, and the club still didn't show up. Back he came, shouting, 'You're liable.' When this happens, I just go ahead and give him another club. It isn't worth winning the argument, because as a businessman, I lose. I can make him pay for a new club, but that's rather like grabbing pennies and letting dollars drop.

"I've even gone so far, where the member was really persistent, to pull out my wallet and to pay for the club. The reaction to this gesture is, 'Oh, Joe, you don't have to do that.' 'But where's it going to come from other than my own pocket?' I respond."

A common cause of lost clubs is a cluttered storage rack where a member keeps all his favorite clubs. Moresco

continued

CUSTOMER *continued*

points out that this practice is not practical for this reason: "Every time a bag is pulled down off the rack, one of the clubs falls down and usually gets put back in the wrong rack or a neighboring bag. My solution to this problem," says Moresco, "was to ask the members to store their loose clubs and umbrellas in their lockers."

Mishaps in billing is another source of irritation to members, and one for which the professional may often be blamed. Moresco uses a system that eliminates the most common problems, such as being billed twice or being billed for an already-paid bill. His system is called duplicate billing: when the initial purchase is made, the member fills out the standard club IBM card. Most clubs stop at this point, but Moresco orders these cards with carbon duplicates (they cost a little more). Once the card has been filled out, the hard card goes to the member via monthly billing from the club, the duplicate is filed in one of 52 cubbyholes in Moresco's office. If a member screeches in because he's been billed twice, Moresco can easily pull out the card to find out why. Moresco also uses the IBM cards to record cash and charge sales. The "cash" sales cards are kept in separate envelopes in the cubbyholes.

At Northern clubs the hassles of travel bag covers can also be a source of irritation to both professional and member. When members return, after their winter exodus, Moresco's staff will take the travel covers and empty out the main pockets. "Inside usually are shoes and sweaters," says Moresco. "I'll put the stuff in one of my shopping bags with the member's name on it. Then we clean the bag and put it back on the rack. We used to just go ahead and send everything down to the locker room. Not any more. Shoes would wind up in someone else's locker, because the locker room attendant was out, or get misplaced between the storage area and the locker room. The very next weekend someone would be in screaming that it was my fault. These days we hold onto the bag until the member comes in, then give it to him. If there was a club missing when he got back, we'll inform him of that also. We still get asked to keep travel bag covers. We decline by explaining that it just isn't practical; we just don't have the space. I cer-

tainly don't mind performing all the services, but I don't believe in babying the members into a situation where they are totally dependent on the professional. I'd need a staff the size of the Pentagon to get by."

A lesser problem than those mentioned previously, but one that could get out of hand if left unattended, is defective merchandise. This is usually taken care of by replacing the item.

Related to the problem of defective merchandise, Moresco explains, is that of the member not following the manufacturers' cleaning instructions, as in the case of a garment that should be dry cleaned and not washed. If the member returns a particular garment once or twice Moresco readily replaces it. However, if merchandise is continuously returned due to the same problem, Moresco then will explain that the manufacturer's policy won't allow replacement because the instructions weren't followed. This explanation will often alleviate the problem.

Late deliveries have been a chronic problem for the professional. This year it is much more severe because of material shortages and exportation of golf clubs. Many professionals anticipated these delays by warning members to get in their orders early. Moresco, again, went one step further. He anticipated late deliveries and also anticipated members' reactions to the delays.

"I'd block off my lesson book on Saturday morning until 11:30, explains Moresco, "and would be here to greet all the early birds. When they came in for balls at seven, naturally they would start a conversation. I deliberately brought up the subject of late delivery, relating my situation to their businesses, so they would get a better understanding of the problem. The results were great. Instead of hearing, 'Where are my woods?' I heard, 'Did my woods come in yet?' I built an alliance between myself and the members and made the manufacturer the bad guy."

Misunderstandings can arise between the professional and his members solely because of a lack of communication; perhaps the member doesn't appreciate the busy and demanding schedule a professional has to follow. In Moresco's case, the misunderstanding came about because of the holdover policy from Moresco's predecessor. "If a person made an ap-

pointment for a lesson at 1:30, he would take it for granted that his clubs would be waiting at the range when he arrived. Inevitably his first question was, 'Where're my clubs?' followed by, 'Why didn't you have them sent over?' I cleared matters up by explaining that because of heavy schedules, the bag is left unattended too long, and, therefore, could be stolen."

Another potential source of member irritation resulting from a lack of communication is the old question, "Why do you only play with the good players?" Moresco's solution to soothe potential ruffled feathers was to post a notice in the men's and women's locker rooms, which read: "Dear Member: I would like to play with as many different members as possible, especially the higher handicap players. Please get a group together and enter the names on the sheet below." This simple, honest message successfully headed off a potentially acute source of member irritation.

Generally, many irate member problems stem from a lack of communication. It's this barrier that Moresco has broken. At the start of each new season, a letter from Moresco goes out to the membership. Briefly, it reads as follows:

"Dear Member: For the better enjoyment of your golf in the forthcoming season, I would like to reacquaint you with some of the various areas in which we give service.

- 1) When taking lessons, please see the caddie master and ask that your bag be sent to the driving range area. Please do not assume that your bag will be there when you arrive.
- 2) Have you lost a club recently? Do you know the procedure? Please do not tell the caddie, the caddie master or the cart room attendant. Instead report the loss to the professional or his staff.
- 3) Are you planning a trip to Florida? Please let the professional staff know a day or two in advance, so we can help you pack your bag. Please remember that the club is closed on Mondays."

The letter goes on further, detailing all the areas that could be potential trouble to both professional and membership.

In the many years Moresco has been plying his trade as a golf professional he has discovered that eliminating the communications barrier eliminates the irate member. □