



Can a Little Golf Keep Your Business on Par?

January 18 2008

NEW YORK -- In the corporate world, golf and business go together about as comfortably as a line drive down the fairway. Companies love to treat important clients to a round of golf, and the key to this symbiotic relationship is that it's a great way to spend four hours with a client establishing rapport. That's an opportunity you probably wouldn't have while sitting through a two-hour PowerPoint presentation in the office conference room. Golf enthusiasts say there is no better foundation for a business relationship than a round of 18 holes.

"To me it's like a hand and glove. If you go to a hockey or basketball game, there's a lot of noise and you have a lot of distractions. With golf there's a lot of quiet time in between holes and there are plenty of opportunities to talk, so it's ideal for business," said Michael Andrew Smith, author of *Business-to-Business Golf: How to Swing Your Way to Business Success*.

Others credit golf with helping to advance their careers; they claim it's a great way to establish relationships and get to know colleagues and clients beyond the standard business acquaintance.

"The dirty little secret is that it really is an addiction. People plan their lives around when they can get on course, so it's amazing the power you have when offering an excuse for your clients to be able to go out during the business week--and it's an icebreaker," said Kel Kelly, CEO of Kel & Partners, a marketing firm located outside of Boston.

Kelly thinks golf has given her an advantage in business, as a woman dealing with men in the corporate world.

"If you can hold your own with a man on the golf course there's a level of respect that goes along with that," she said.

As the sport becomes more popular internationally, some companies use golf to bridge the divide brought on by globalization. In Scotland, where the game originated, there was a 20% increase in business tourism from US companies between 2003 to 2006.

"The globalization of companies has meant that they will often choose a destination and hold a meeting or conference there rather than just hold it at the headquarters in one region," said Mette Friis, Marketing Manager for North America for VisitScotland's Business Tourism unit. "It has definitely been a way for us to bring in international trips and packages."

It's easy to be intimidated by the links, especially if you're not a scratch golfer. But

executives say that when playing for business, the person with the best score doesn't always make a good impression. So if you want to spend a little more time on the green, here are a few tips to help bring you success in both business and golf.

Know the Rules—and Follow Them

If you haven't played much golf, then you should definitely consider taking a lesson or getting a book on golf etiquette, as experts say it's one of the most important aspects of the sport. If you don't know the rules, it's easy to make a mistake--and a bad impression--without even knowing it.

"Etiquette and good manners are very important and they say a lot about you," Smith said. "If you're standing behind someone putting and your shadow is over their line, that's not nice; if you take a big divot off tee, you need to replace the divot. If you walk by a mark on the green, fix it."

Even though you're out of the office, you want to maintain the same level of politeness that you would exhibit at work. Make sure your colleagues are playing by the rules as well; their behavior can reflect poorly on you. If you know a co-worker isn't exhibiting proper etiquette, Smith says you might consider a gentle reminder in case they really don't understand.

It is never acceptable to cheat, as most professionals see your behavior on the course as indicative of the way you will behave in business.

"If a person doesn't play by the rules when playing golf, chances are they don't play by the rules anywhere else," said Dawson Rutter, President and CEO of Commonwealth Worldwide, a chauffeured transportation company also based in Boston.

Smith said he once accidentally moved the ball when he was setting up for a shot. Even though no one he was with saw it happen, he told them about it and counted an extra stroke at the end of the hole.

"One out of the three people I was playing with didn't even understand what the penalty stroke was for," Smith said, "but I think it hit them that, geez, if this guy is like this in golf, maybe we can trust him in business—and I did end up getting their business."

Dress and Behave Appropriately

Just as your appearance makes an impression in the office, so it does on the course. Most golf courses have a dress code, so it's a good idea to invest in a nice collared shirt, wear ironed slacks and have a pair of golf shoes if you're going to be going out with your superiors or entertaining clients.

"You don't have to wear expensive brand labels but you should look clean and neat," Smith said. "If you feel self-conscious about what you're wearing than it's going to come through, and probably show up in your game."

You also want to be sure you have an adequate set of clubs and bring plenty of golf balls and tees so that you're prepared to keep the round moving, even if you lose a ball. Spending more than five minutes looking for a lost ball is unacceptable.

Don't Worry (too much) About the Score

Unless you're playing in a tournament, it's unlikely that you will need to play competitively with business associates. While you don't want to embarrass yourself, how well you play is not as important as following the rules, having a good time and keeping up a good pace.

"It is critical that you play quickly even if don't play well. I'll play with anyone that plays quickly," Rutter said.

It is normal to be a little nervous, but Smith said you shouldn't let nerves get in the way of your having a good time since most people only play to their handicap 20% of the time. Rutter said that although it's good to want to play well, you should never show your temper on the course and if you're going to do a little betting on the course, you have to keep it light.

"Low numbers like a \$2 or \$5 a hole are generally what's acceptable in a match where your with a customer," he said. "You don't want to play for a lot of money, and you never know—you could be playing with a sandbagger [a golfer who lies about his or her handicap, by saying they're worse than they are so they can win bets and tournaments] and then they end up winning a lot of money."

A Round of Golf Shouldn't be All Business

Although many business relationships are forged on the course, some golfers say you should never bring up business during the round. Rutter doesn't like to bring up business until the round is over. Smith and Kelly argue that a little business is acceptable as long as you don't let it become the sole topic of conversation. Just keep in mind that the idea is to learn a little more about the person you're playing with, and to give them an overall good impression of your character.

"The basic principle in golf is to play the ball as it lies—and that's something that's analogous to business; you accept what you're confronted with and you deal with it from that point forward," Rutter said. "No matter how bad a lie you get in golf or business you have to play the ball as it lies."

In the final analysis, politeness, honesty, and a relaxed disposition will help you to come out a winner in any round of golf--regardless of the final score.