

Prestonfield Golf Club: Tackling Dwindling Membership

Prestonfield Golf Club is set in a former deer estate within two miles of the centre of Edinburgh. The course is a challenging one and the Club offers a warm welcome to golfers of all abilities. However, in the decade between 2002 and 2012, membership more than halved leaving the Club's future in serious doubt.

The Issue:

In 2002, Prestonfield Golf Club was thriving with a healthy membership of 650 full members. By 2012, this number was below 300. The Club feared that if it did not address the issue of dwindling membership then the Club would have to close within five years.

With twenty-four golf clubs in Edinburgh alone and upwards of 50 more within an hour's drive, the business had become highly competitive. Like most Edinburgh clubs, Prestonfield had dropped its joining fees, resulting in a severe reduction in income from this source. This led to a budget shortfall of more than £150,000 which had to be covered from bar profits, guest and visitor fees. To make matters worse, the Club had lost local tee and hole sponsorship in recent years, as local businesses suffered from the economic recession and its aftermath.

Another problem faced by the Club was the impact of Groupon discount deals and bulk booking arrangements. Groupon was reducing the Club's earning capacity by providing access to highly subsidised golf at premium times rather than the quieter times the Club would have preferred.

The Solution:

The Club began its recovery process by forming a Marketing Committee. Members were contacted to ask for volunteers with marketing experience, and at least six individuals offered their assistance and formed the Committee. The group is overseen by a Marketing Convenor who reports to the Council at its regular monthly meeting. All Committee members have specific roles and responsibilities in relation to marketing of the Club and its facilities. They and the Club Committee members all provide their time and expertise for free. The Club was also approached by the Scottish Golf Union (SGU), which offered the assistance of a marketing specialist

At a Glance ...

- Prestonfield was facing harsh competition from other clubs in the area, and losing members and sponsorship.
- The Club formed a Marketing Committee of volunteers to tackle the problems.
- The SGU provided help in the form of a golf marketing expert from the U.S.
- Successful initiatives have included reduced fees for younger members, an enhanced package of member benefits and an Open Day.
- The Club is also marketed through Edinburgh Golf and the golfing press.

“ An outside view almost always has surprising results. ”



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from the United States. This expert gave the Council an enlightening talk on how to recruit and retain members, and provided on-going support and assistance as the Club developed its marketing initiatives.

Prior to this, Prestonfield had offered any member who recruited a new member a £50 bar credit. Instead, the marketing expert recommended offering a 20% discount for two years for both the new member and the recruiting member. The Club was apprehensive but took this suggestion on board and reviewed and enhanced its members' benefits package accordingly, with positive results.

Numerous other initiatives were implemented with the purpose of attracting new members. For example, the Club joined "Edinburgh Golf" - a cooperative of thirteen local Edinburgh Golf Clubs offering reciprocal benefits to members. Other initiatives have included a highly successful Open Day, and a Ryder Cup Challenge. New caterers have been appointed and the Club provides food and beverages at highly competitive prices to attract more visitors.

The Challenges and how they were Overcome:

There were initial objections from some members of the Council and the membership as a whole to marketing the Club in the ways suggested by the US expert. However, when the Club highlighted the difficulties and explained that two other clubs in Edinburgh were closing due to financial difficulties, it became easier to secure agreement to the plans. As a result, the marketing initiative was passed at the Club's 2014 AGM.

Next Steps:

The Club intends to continue with its marketing initiative for at least another two years or until full membership is reached. The Marketing Committee regularly seeks new ideas on how to generate more visitors and guests. A marketing company has now

been appointed to support the committee in its activities, and is working to get local businesses, such as B&Bs and hotels, involved in sponsorship.

Discussions about marketing opportunities have taken place with Edinburgh Golf and the golfing magazine Bunkered, and the Club also plans to utilise its large database of visitor contact details, offering them the chance to join or play at reduced rates at times that suit the Club.

Impacts:

Prestonfield Golf Club recruited over 150 new members in 2014. A particular area of success has been the recruitment of people aged 30 or below – in 2012 there were only six members in this category. By reducing its prices for this age group, the Club was able to recruit at least sixty-eight new members aged 30 or below in 2014.

“ We analyse our monthly reports and know how many new members we recruit each month. ”

The Club is still recruiting new members and lost only eighteen over the past year, instead of the typical annual loss of more than thirty in recent years. Member retention is now a particular concern and focus of the Club.

Tips & Advice:

The Club's Captain has shared some of his lessons learned. He advises to learn from the SGU: take on board all that they offer and don't assume you know best for your own club. "An outside view almost always has surprising results."

A final word from Prestonfield Golf Club:

Prestonfield Golf Club is justifiably pleased with the results of the Club's campaign and with the speed at which the results have been seen. The Captain summed the experience up as "Excellent. We will continue to work with SGU colleagues on an on-going basis and meet with them regularly".

Based on surveys and follow up interviews, the UK and Ireland's Golf Home Unions have identified and showcased examples of "what works" in golf club management in a series of case studies. The focus has been on clubs that have been successful in achieving more players, more members and stronger clubs. The intention is to share information and guidance on effective practices in business planning, customer service, membership, and women's and girls' golf. For further information about this and other case studies and for further support, please go to www.golfcasestudies.businesscatalyst.com.

