

FOCUS ON OPPORTUNITIES

People keep asking the same questions: When is the economy going to improve? Are we headed into a recession? When is the housing market going to turn around? When are gas and food prices going to come down?

Frankly, no one knows the answers to these questions, not even experienced economists – so stop worrying about them. Instead, focus on your facility and address your strengths and weaknesses. How is current business? How can it improve? What is management doing to better your business? Seek growth opportunities for your facility. Focus on your micro world, and let policymakers and governments worry about macroeconomics.

When the economy is booming, managers tend not to look at their operation as closely as when the market is slumping. During difficult economic times, cutbacks happen here and there in various areas of the business. Fewer crew members, a smaller marketing budget, fewer pesticide applications, no new equipment. Yes, expenses are one side of the business equation, but generating revenue is another – membership drives, special deals, giveaways, outings, leagues, events. There are many options.

Consider what's worked for you in the past and what hasn't, and analyze your short- and long-term business plans. For those who've been in the industry many years, think about what helped you through the recessions of the '70s (1973-1974, oil prices and unemployment), '80s (1980-1982, inflation) and '90s (1990-1991, the Gulf War and tax increases). Can what you did successfully then be applied to the current market? Or, did you determine what not to do during a recession back then?

It's obviously difficult for golf course operators to improve business significantly in the current economy. But the bottom line is that a successful golf facility comes down to two things: course conditioning and service. Simply put, those two aspects of an operation are going to carry a facility through difficult economic times. Many people say above-average service doesn't cost anything, and it's just a matter of stepping it up a notch. A successful business starts with employees who go the extra mile to make customers – regular and new – feel welcomed and appreciated.

During a time when many golf facilities are reducing expenses or erecting for-sale signs, be aggressive and think seriously about investing in your course. Maybe it's a greens renovation, or a complete redesign. Maybe you're able to do it all at once, or perhaps you'll progress nine holes at a time. Funds, ownership's goals and golfers' input will help determine the scope, but a renovation could give your business the big boost it needs during a sluggish period of economic growth. If you can pull it off, it's a great time to do it. An investment in your course now could pay off tenfold when the economy takes off in the right direction. Then, you can ride the wave of increased business while your competitors scramble to catch up to you.

And if you can't manage to spend a decent chunk of change renovating your course, hone in on the details of your facility and the little things that cause golfers to return to your place. Refurbish your signs and tee markers. Purchase new flags. Spruce up the areas around the clubhouse. Hire a photographer and promote your golf course as an oasis from stress. Survey your players and find out as much as you can about their likes and dislikes. Use your e-mail database to promote specials and offer incentives. Do simple things such as provide free tees and ball-mark repair tools. Most of all, find out why customers don't return after they've visited. Remember it's much cheaper to keep a customer than acquire one.

Last but not least, remember that without great course conditions and attentive customer service, you won't be successful – regardless of the state of the economy. **GC**