

Trade Secrets



The Roberts file

C.A. Roberts grew up in Texas and played golf for Baylor University's college team.

He was awarded a bachelor's degree in finance in 1989. A friend introduced him to the American Junior Golf Association, and he wound up spending six years there in the marketing department.

Roberts joined OB Sports seven years ago. He spent two-and-a-half years in Portland, Ore., then moved to Seattle. He's now based in Scottsdale, Ariz.

Roberts on public relations

Use the media to help get the word out about your golf course

There may be no such thing as bad publicity, but getting coverage in the media can be a challenge for golf courses. C.A. Roberts, vice president of business development for OB Sports, has some specific ideas for drawing attention to your golf course. Here are his guidelines.

1. Be known for something

A course needs to distinguish itself from the rest of the pack. It can be the design, the architect, the maintenance, the restaurant, or just being the new course. OB Sports courses are known for their themes. Langdon Farms near Portland, Ore., features a restored barn that is now in play on the eighth hole. The clubhouse is a barn replica four times larger.

"There's too much product out there not to be known for something," he said. "Be careful to come up with the right theme for the right product. You're always walking the line between interesting and hokey, between stupidity and genius. You will either succeed or be laughed out of town."

2. Carry out the theme

The staff has to reflect the theme. At Langdon Farms, staffers wear khaki shorts and red bandannas. The theme helps courses develop local reputation and drives interior decorating and signage.

"They don't want to feel like they are dressed like a cartoon," he said. "It gives them a sense of purpose."

3. Give the staff a plan they can sell

Marketing a golf course isn't like marketing other businesses, like manufacturing. Plans that

worked in other industries don't apply.

The course has to be sold to many different kinds of customers. Those who attend group events are different from those who play at peak fee time on Saturdays or fill in the off-peak times during the week.

4. Generate buzz

"Market it like a movie," he said. Identify every possible person who might play golf at your course and create events that will bring them all out to the golf course at once.

"Count on word of mouth to drive it from there," he said. "We don't want to spend any more on marketing than we have to."

For new courses, Roberts organizes a grand opening week, with events for different target audiences each day. Hospitality Day brings in all the hotel contacts. Concierges and group event organizers can send business your way if they know your course.

5. Be genuine

"People have an uncanny ability to pick up on the phony smile of the director of golf," he said. "The media can smell a rat a mile away. If you are cooking up something just to get the press in, they will not only not cover you, they will blackball you the next time."

6. Develop ambassadors for your course

Target real estate and insurance brokers and golf vendors. "Those people are real talkers," he said. "We want to attract the people who will be great sales people for us."

At private clubs, determine fees that will attract the people who will sign up more members for you. "With the right price points, the first 40 or 50 members will be bell cows for you," he said. "The tone you set with your first members is everything."

—Christine Willard