

Golf Resorts

Planning above-par golf events

by [Adam Jones](#)

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For the golf enthusiast, the game itself is in many ways an ethereal experience. It is a refuge from the hassles of daily life. It is as much an internal test of concentration as it is an exhibition of athletic exertion.

And despite its well-deserved reputation as an often frustrating endeavor, one great shot in the most futile round of golf will often become a vivid memory that will inspire a player to give it another shot.

For golf event organizers, the game is much more practical. It is a captive audience for five hours. It is a relaxed and beautiful outdoor setting that encourages networking and fosters relationships on a more personal level than could ever be accomplished in an office or typical trade show environment. And it is an activity that a player will associate with the host organization long after the final putt drops in the cup.

Most important for meeting and event planners, the ethereal experience of the golf enthusiast and the practical objectives of the golf event can coexist in perfect harmony, provided the outing comes off without a hitch.

"The event guests have no idea how much goes on behind the scenes before the golf tournament, and they never should," says Roger Caldwell, president and founder of Mission, Kan.-based Great Golf Events, which plans golf events throughout the country. "If any component breaks down—if there is not enough food, if somehow a foursome was left out of the pairings—it doesn't matter who is at fault, we all look bad. It upsets me, it upsets the planner and it upsets the people that showed up because they don't feel like anybody cares about them."

Plan Ahead

According to industry veterans, one of the most important factors in hosting a successful golf event is to allow plenty of time for planning.

"I tell people to plan no later than 90 to 120 days out for most golf events," Caldwell says. "For smaller corporate events, you can plan with a little less lead time because in the corporate world, when there is free golf, they will come."

As is usually the case in the meetings and conventions industry, the larger the

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event, the more time needed to plan.

"Typically for the big groups, groups that are asking to take over an entire golf course, I'm booking for 2008, 2009 and 2010 right now," says Mike Griggs, head golf professional and tournament coordinator for Tucson, Ariz.'s Loews Ventana Canyon Resort. "So the larger groups start a couple of years ahead, but your smaller groups—groups of 30, 40, 50 people—they might need to book five or six months out."

With the general timeframe for the event secured, the next step is to select a golf course or golf resort in which to host the event.

"I think the event's location is No. 1, for sure," says Annette Bennitz, director of sales for ME Productions, a Florida-based event production and destination management company. "Always choose a location that will be fun and exciting, keeping in mind the level of golfer that the planner has. You could have a very challenging golf course, and if it is not a group of expert golfers, it might be intimidating. And vice versa, if you have a really good group of golfers, they are going to want to play on a tougher and more well-known golf course."

The size of the group is also a major factor in the decision process, considering the fact that the most a single golf course can host at one time is 144 players for a shotgun-start tournament.

"We get a fair amount of phone calls and RFPs where one of the requirements is that on one or more days, as part of their tournament format, a group needs at least two golf courses," says Jack Bickart, director of sales for Austin, Texas' Barton Creek Resort & Spa, which offers a total of four championship golf courses. "We have even had in the past occasions where we needed three or even all four golf courses."

Bickart adds that having multiple golf courses is a major selling point for smaller groups that are planning a multiple-day conference.

"Almost every group appreciates having multiple courses for the variety we can offer," he says. "If a group is going to have golf on more than one day, you can bet that they are not going to want to play the same course every day. Golfers like variety, and in our case, because our courses are so well known, especially our two Tom Fazio-designed courses, which are rated among the best nationally, the groups that come here are not going to want to play one course. They are going to want to play each of our famous courses."

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Utilize Resources

Once the site for a golf event has been determined, industry veterans strongly encourage planners to utilize the expertise and experience of the facility's staff in developing the event's details.

"The first thing I always want to know is how experienced the planner is with putting together a golf event, and a majority of individuals who handle that task are inexperienced with it," says Brad Kirkman, golf club manager for the Cheyenne Mountain Resort in Colorado Springs, Colo. "So it is very important for me to let the planner know right off the bat that we are going to take care of every detail and we are not going to miss anything. That way they can relax and enjoy the experience."

One of the best things a planner can do when putting together a golf event is to simply ask questions.

"There are no dumb questions," Loews Ventana Canyon Resort's Griggs notes. "Especially when you get a planner that doesn't know a lot about golf, they can be intimidated by the whole process. But just asking the people who really know how to do it should help make the event a great success."

Planners can make the process a lot easier from the beginning simply by knowing how many golfers to expect for the event and what the event is meant to accomplish.

"The biggest snag for a golf event is almost always the number of participants," Kirkman says. "It is important to find out a pretty solid number of how many players the planner is expecting, and then we are always trying to find out what exactly the planner is hoping to accomplish so we can help them choose a format that allows everyone to have a good time."

There are several types of formats for golf events, and the one a planner chooses can go a long way toward helping them accomplish their goal for the golf event. For example, with a charity event, the goal is to simply get as many people to participate as possible and allow them to have fun. For other events it is important to pair specific players together, pairing a sales person with their clients for a customer appreciation event, for instance.

Getting Everyone Involved

Golf is becoming increasingly popular these days, with more and more people, especially women, beginning to take up the sport. While this increasing interest in the game can help build attendance for golf events, it adds potential problems in the execution of the event. For example, beginning

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golfers are often intimidated or embarrassed by their lack of ability, while good golfers can become frustrated by having to wait while less-experienced players slowly make their way around the course.

There are, however, ways to make sure that all golfers, good and bad, enjoy their golf experience.

"More and more we are seeing planners request golf lessons as something that happens before attendees tee off," Kirkman says. "For instance, a group might purchase our golf instructors for an hour, and the instructors will just go up and down the driving range helping those individuals that may be fairly new. Or perhaps there is someone who is slicing it extremely and our instructors will give them a five-minute tip, and all of a sudden they are hitting the ball straighter than they were before. It is not a rebuilding session as much as it is a quick fix so that the players can go out and have a better time."

Barton Creek Resort's Bickart adds that often times he will suggest having a golf clinic for beginning players while the rest of the participants are out on the golf course. Following the concurrent tournament and clinic, the group can carry the golf theme into a cocktail reception set up next to a putting green.

"We have opportunities at our resort, and I think many golf resorts can do this, where we can do a cocktail reception relatively close to a putting green, and we are seeing a high percentage of groups participating in this kind of a golf activity," he says. "I think it gives people that are not real comfortable with being out on the golf course—maybe they are new at golf or maybe they don't play at all, but they have played putt-putt—a chance to participate without having to get out on the course."

The Wow Factor with Tour Pros

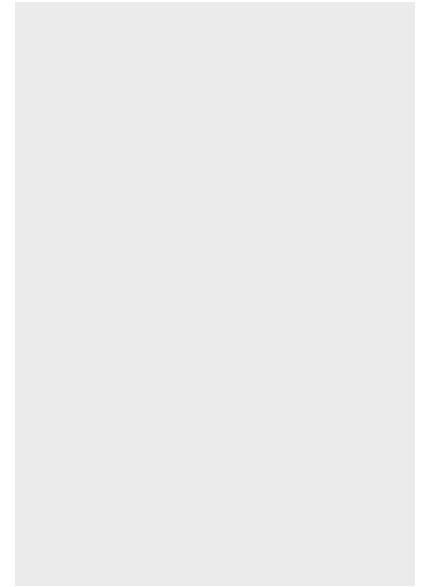
There are a number of ways in which planners can make their golf event stand out among all the other golf events their attendees will participate in throughout the year. One of the best ways, if the budget allows, is to invite famous golfers to join the group.

"Groups are only limited by their budget," Griggs says. "I have a group that is talking about having David Leadbetter [a celebrity golf instructor] and Rich Beam, who won the PGA Championship a few years ago, out here for their event."

In fact, with enough lead time and a large enough budget, just about any tour pro can be enticed to join in a golf event. Aside from seeing the joy on the faces of their star-struck attendees, planners will also enjoy the fact that their

participants will remember the event every time they see that tournament pro playing on television.

"We have experienced groups that might ask us to bring in a half-dozen PGA Tour pros, which is very doable with the right amount of planning and, obviously, the group has to have the budget to be able to do something like that," Bickart says. "And actually, one of the best experiences that I have ever had with a group that we brought in were LPGA (Ladies Professional Golf Association) Tour players. They were there for the practice day and offered tips to the event participants. They were assigned to foursomes and played with the participants. They went to the receptions, hung out and knew the themes of the company. The bottom line is, the guys that played in the tournament said that they preferred having the LPGA players with them because they just seemed to get it; they were very personal and had a great time."



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