

Simulators didn't link up with golf course business -- Biggest Mistake

by Marcia Pledger/Plain Dealer Reporter

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Peggy Turbett/The Plain Dealer

Todd Ingraham, owner of Bunker Hill Golf Course, talks about club house renovations designed to handle year-round parties in the room with six golf simulator machines.

The Company: Founded in 1927, Bunker Hill Golf Course has been owned by the Ingraham family since 1940. The Medina company employs 95 people during golf season.

MY BIGGEST MISTAKE ... AND HOW I FIXED IT

The Mistake: I'm the third generation to run this golf course. My grandmother ran it from the 1940s through the '70s. Then, my father expanded and improved the course tremendously during the '80s and '90s.

When I took over, I focused heavily on marketing, courting more events and outings. One idea to bring in new guests proved to be extremely costly and time-consuming. My biggest mistake was adding golf simulators to our business without foreseeing how the machines would fit with the course long-term.

Even though we added two floors to our clubhouse to accommodate the idea, my focus was too narrow. I started thinking about the addition as a separate business. Part of the problem was that I started a separate company with a former partner in 2001 and didn't put much thought into the possibility of it not working out. Also, we designed the space poorly around a huge bar, limiting its functionality.

It became a winter operation, but not by design. It never crossed our minds that in this market, people wouldn't immediately think they could still practice on golf simulators during the golf season when the weather was bad. Instead, they tended to wait outside for the weather to improve.



Plain Dealer reporter Marcia Pledger writes this weekly feature about the obstacles small business owners must overcome.

To reach her:
mpledger@plained.com or
216-999-4813

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Our marketing concept was, "Forget the weather. Play here all year." I really believed that people would gravitate toward the simulators on rainy days. We projected a lot more revenue.

How They Fixed It: In hindsight, we probably should have taken a more critical look at design. One machine is on the second floor where there's a bar and a restaurant, but the others are basically out of sight -- and out of mind.

Had we put more thought into it, we could have put the simulators at the other end of the property where they could have substituted for a driving range, which we don't have. We also would have had more room for parking.

At \$50,000 apiece, we had to recoup our investment. The first thing we did was combine the two businesses a few years ago. Then, last year, we remodeled and started marketing the venue differently.

We dismantled the large bar, created a small service bar in the corner and filled the middle of the room with tables. Now we can get 80 to 100 people in the room.

We started marketing with radio and print ads and started attracting wedding-related events, birthday parties and anniversaries. Most new business comes from word of mouth, though. We've had "Wine, Women and Golf" clinics and fund-raisers such as "Pinks on the Links."

Men tend to use the simulators mostly for practice. But the biggest growth markets are women and kids. They don't have to worry about speed of play or golf etiquette with the simulators. It's a comfortable way to play. Now we're even planning to use the screens for games like Wii.

If you have a seasonal operation and you plan to expand, make sure you weigh all sorts of possibilities.

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