



## Business Golf – To Speak or Not to Speak? That is the Question

By Debbie Waitkus, *Golf for Cause*®

Take a look at your favorite golf magazine. The golf course ads present serene fairways, green expanses, beautiful scenery, and the quiet stillness of nature. Just looking at the pictures somehow helps us relax and recharge.

We flock to these beautiful environments sometimes to reconnect, sometimes to compete, and sometimes to generate business.



There is a tremendous emphasis today on business golf, especially for women who have been challenged with, “are you missing a critical business skill?” I’m often asked two different questions about business-golf: 1) How to do business on the golf course, and 2) when should you talk business on the golf course?

In fact, several weeks ago I was interviewed by a writer from *Golf for Women* magazine who was working on a story about business golf - How to Succeed in Business (By Playing Golf) - May/June 2005 issue. She asked me about on-course strategies, including talking about business on the golf course. “What do you do? What do you teach women to do?” My philosophy is

borrowed from my Econ 101 professor, “it depends.”

First off, in general, the big deals don’t happen on the golf course, but rather, the relationships are (further) developed on the course and around the game. Go back to the photograph of the golf course in your favorite magazine. Breathe in its beauty. Are you really going to drop a stone into the picturesque, still water and create ripples?

There are several theories about talking business on the golf course:

- 1) Never ever do it. The golf course is sacred territory. Golfers want to relax and not think about business while out on the course. Wait until the 19<sup>th</sup> hole to discuss business.
- 2) Break the round into three 6-hole segments. During the first 6 holes get to know your playing partner. Inquire about family, other hobbies, home town, etc. During the second 6 holes, dabble lightly by asking about his/her business, niches, goals, etc. Be a good listener. And during the final 6 holes, don’t lay on a big sales pitch, but explore some synergies as to how you might be able to help.
- 3) First date. Whether you are the host or the guest, feel out the situation. Each person is unique with his/her own behavior style,

personality, and golf skill. Be gracious and respectful of what you perceive his/her desires to be. If you are both comfortable chatting, then go for it. If you playing partner seems to prefer minimal conversation, then don't push. Get to know each other. Be wary of a lot of "me, me, me" conversation. When asked a business related question, I answer it. Most likely not in great detail, but I'll make a note of the inquiry as something to follow up with later. I certainly don't want to be disrespectful and not answer the question.

- 4) Go for it! Talk about family, business, school...in fact, throw in religion and politics. (My vision has just moved off the serene magazine advertisement of a golf course to a Type A mover and shaker with a cell phone that just won't quit.)

Clearly, this is not a complete list. There is a broad spectrum as to what works. Different approaches work for different individuals. And with more women on the links, the business-golf protocols are evolving.

An April 2002 attitudinal study of business executives by Starwood Hotels and Resorts Worldwide, Inc. in April 2002 entitled **From the Boardroom To The Back Nine: The Importance of Golf In Business**, showed that 43% overall and 63% of the women surveyed said that "some of my biggest business or sales deals were made on a golf course. At 43% overall, it's clear that the women's responses pushed that figure up. Statistically, women are closing more deals *on* the golf course than men.

This shouldn't be that surprising. Women, for the most part, love to talk. In fact, women speak an average of 30,000 words a day. Compare this with an average of 12,000 a day for men. Women can talk about anything, anywhere, anytime - golf course included.

According to Mark Merrill, this means that "men need to understand a woman's desire to have regular conversation... Men also have to learn to be good listeners. Women need to understand that men are more comfortable with grunting and solving problems than with opening their mouths with meaningful words. So be patient and make sure your expectations of each other are reasonable."

To speak or not to speak? That is the question. In a client-golf scenario, it's helpful to conduct yourself as though you're a great host or a gracious guest. How much (if any) business conversation is appropriate to forward the relationship or to be invited back? Regardless of how well you know your playing partners, pay attention to any signals they send out relating to their preferences in the golf environment.

Last summer, Diane, a banker, did just that. She was paired with Brian, a small business owner, in a business golf outing. On the very first tee, as they introduced themselves, Diane was pretty direct with Brian, asking him where he banked. Before leaving the tee, Brian informed Diane that he was there to play golf and enjoy the afternoon, not to talk business. Diane took note and they proceeded to have a great round together. Once they were done playing, she asked him to indulge her with just one question. It was a timely staged question that yielded

Diane a new client. She was respectful of Brian's wishes while out on the course, following up with him after the round.

Several years ago, I was playing golf with a mortgage broker, someone I'd known for several years and with whom I'd completed many transactions. I asked him a targeted question about a deal and he didn't respond. Thinking that he hadn't heard me, a few holes later I asked again. No response. Our only conversations that day were related to the course and our games. I phoned him the next day with my question. And, yes, he answered and the deal moved forward - no mention about having heard the question before.

Similarly, another business associate, Jim, loved to carve out time to work on his game. Jim opened my eyes to the concept that you can passionately love the game, talk about it incessantly, even if your skill doesn't match your enthusiasm. More importantly, what I learned from Jim was the art of the 19<sup>th</sup> hole. He never left a golf course without sitting down to talk business and without identifying our next steps.

Full blown business conversations on the golf course are not typical - in the clubhouse after golf, yes, but not during the round. Unless the pace of play is at a turtle's pace, there's rarely the opportunity to have a complete, meaningful conversation on the course. You can, however, expect to gain bits and pieces of information throughout the round. Some on the tee, some more while walking off the green a few holes later, and even more while you're waiting on the group ahead to hit.

Make notes on your playing partner's business card. (If you don't have his/her

business card, write on the scorecard and take it with you.) Jot down something about his/her personal life that you can follow up on after the round (19<sup>th</sup> hole, thank you note, or phone call). And be sure to keep a bundle of your own business cards handy in your golf bag.

Business golf. How much and when to speak or not to speak? Before you decide what's appropriate, back up and clarify the purpose of your outing. What's your objective? Who are you playing with and why? What are you trying to accomplish with your playing partners? What are their perspectives on mixing business with pleasure (golf)? What's the result that you're looking for? Is the golf course the right place to address the issue or is it the right place to plant some seeds?

There is one more angle to consider when exploring the extent of your on-course business conversation. Golf. The game is rich with traditions based on respect, fairness, concern for others, and care of the course. Evaluate your goals for your outing and incorporate these same traditions to your game and your business dealings to determine your comfort zone of how much and when to speak business or not to speak. *Turn Golf into Gold*<sup>®</sup>.

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