

Seeing Green

Golf Courses Increasingly Catering to Women, Families

Women are increasing their impact on Michigan's golf industry as the number of total golfers declines in the U.S. Michigan's retail stores, course managers and corporate leaders are making women a priority market.

The 2010 PGA's Golfer Portraits Study reports that the recession changed consumers' approach to golf. They have higher expectations, including a refocusing on more and improved family-centered services, programs and golf course facilities.

Several Michigan golf courses have recognized these trends and introduced marketing approaches and services to attract the woman golfer and her family. They have taken steps to be female friendly and top the

Detroit chapter established a second LPGA-USGA nine-week program for girls ages 7 to 17.

EWGA members are a potential market for golf facilities that want to increase traffic. A 2010 survey of EWGA members conducted by the PGA of America found that the average EWGA member plays 35 18-hole rounds a year and spends an average of \$4,533 annually on golf activities, equipment and golf-related travel. Based on an average of 165 members, each EWGA chapter generates more than \$550,000 annually in golf-related spending for their communities. That's a \$1.1 million market in Michigan alone.

As part of its mission, EWGA instructs

golf facilities on how to make golf more accessible and enjoyable for women by promoting criteria that lead to women-friendly facility certification (see sidebar).

Kevin McKinley is director of golf and ski operations at Treetops Resorts near Gaylord, a recognized EWGA women-friendly facility.

"Enrollment in our ladies golf schools is up 10 percent this year, better than the past three years," says McKinley. "The numbers of women playing unlimited golf plus the number of girls' golf trips has also increased. Plus, there are more women planning corporate golf outings than previously, which is probably why more women are playing in these events."

McKinley explains that Treetops' marketing strategy to focus on women is working. "Skiing vacations are for the family; why not make golf vacations something the entire family can also enjoy?" he said. "We work hard to make sure women feel welcomed here and that their needs are met. Our courses are both fun and challenging for women at all golf-skill levels. The resort

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Left: The Medalist golf course in Marshall features five tee boxes to accommodate golfers of all abilities.

Below: Ina Davis teaches beginning women golfers at Crystal Mountain.

list for women's business golf events.

Men have used golf to network with clients and make business deals for years. Women are now learning that golf is one of the best relationship-building tools for business and pleasure.

The Executive Women's Golf Association (EWGA), founded in 1991, is a national nonprofit organization whose mission is connecting women to learn, play and enjoy golf for business and fun. There are nearly 20,000 members with more than 125 chapters, four of which are in Michigan: Genesee County, Greater Grand Rapids, Kalamazoo and Metro Detroit. This year the





Sisters Sandy Mily (left) and Kathy Aznavorian own Fox Hills Golf & Banquet Center in Plymouth.

courses have at least two sets of tees for women, and carries from the forward tees are limited to 50 yards.”

In today’s challenging economic climate where participation in golf has decreased, the potential to grow the women’s market is a high priority for all areas of the golf industry. It’s still clear, however, according to the PGA report, that significant roadblocks to this growth remain.

One is course length. Lowell Weaver, general manager of another certified women-friendly facility, The Medalist in Marshall, recalls that when he arrived in 1999 “the course was too long for women. Since then we’ve added four new tees plus the championship tee, and we can accommodate everyone from the long player to the hacker to the new woman player. We hosted the Women’s State Amateur 10 years ago, and more women now perceive us as a very playable course with all the amenities, such as restrooms, on the course.”

Much of the participation fallout is linked to personal financial concerns and job insecurities, according to the National Golf Foundation, which reported the number of rounds played in 2010 was 475 million, down 2.3 percent from 486 million in the previous year.

While more than 50 percent of the U.S. population is female, less than 25 percent of total golfers are women. The women’s golf population has been at a standstill for years, with just as many women leaving the game as the number who start because of cost, time to play, family responsibilities and

their perception that golf courses are male oriented.

To effectively tap into the women’s market, representatives of Michigan’s golf industry are making the game more accessible and welcoming to the female player. Brad Dean, PGA director and head professional at Crystal Mountain Resort & Spa in Thompsonville, reports that 50 percent of the golfers who attend the resort’s schools are women.

“That includes schools for women only as well as the schools that are open for everyone,” says Dean. “We consider our resort as family friendly, and women are an important segment of our market.”

Dean explains that both the Mountain Ridge and Betsie Valley courses are female friendly. The family golf program includes instruction, evenings dedicated to family play, and juniors playing free on specific days when accompanied by an adult. Demonstrating its support of women’s golf, Crystal Mountain hosted the Michigan PGA Women’s Open in June.

Ina Davis, PGA teaching professional, runs all the golf programs for women at Crystal Mountain. She understands that to tap into the women’s market, golf courses, golf professionals and equipment manufacturers must make the game more accessible and welcoming to the female player.

“I don’t make golf lessons a test for physical and emotional endurance,” says Davis. “I make sure that the instruction rates are reasonable and affordable for the local residents and that each student receives

Criteria for gaining Executive Women’s Golf Association certification as a women-friendly facility include:

- At least two sets of tees rated for women with USGA-approved handicap slope/ratings to accommodate players of different skills and differing swing speeds. The length of golf holes from various tees allows players to choose which tee will give them a fair opportunity to reach the greens in regulation. Tees should have the following range:

1. 4,200–4,800 yards per nine holes for first set;
2. 4,800–5,300 yards for second set (a third set of 5,400–5,700 is recommended).

- Ball washers and waste receptacles are located conveniently in relation to the location of all women’s teeing areas.
- Distance markers are provided on all tees and fairways.
- Forward tees are level, properly aligned to the desired landing area, have good turf conditions and are maintained at the same standards as all other tees.
- Clean restrooms are available at appropriate intervals on the course, such as every four or five holes.
- Inside customer service staffs for the golf shop and front desk have a consistent, equal and fair approach to all golfers regardless of gender, age or skill level.
- Women have equal access to tee times (time of day; day of week).
- Customer service staff includes women employees in multiple operational areas.
- Women’s leagues, lessons and programs are offered.
- Nine-hole rounds (or pay by hole) are available and reasonably priced.
- Facilities have easy-to-use tee time reservation systems to ensure no bias comes into play when assigning tee times.

individual instruction at the school by keeping the ratio to no more than four students to a teacher. I haven't seen any major increase in participation, but there's been a small, steady increase in numbers each year."

Davis says she tries different approaches to attract more women at Crystal Mountain and at the Bay Meadows course in Traverse City, where she also teaches.

"These include increasing participation in nine-hole leagues, because many women don't have four or five hours to spend on the course," says Davis. "These leagues fit into their schedule better, and they are very social. The ladies have fun. I also take new players on the course, giving them the actual experience of playing golf."

Davis instructs staff members where she teaches on how to make the atmosphere comfortable for women golfers. "I make sure everyone is helpful giving directions to the golf school or to the women's locker room before she even asks," she says. "I also want instructors to talk about golf at the student's level. Few of our beginning women golfers understand what 'hitting it thin' means. And we keep up-to-date with the golf equipment for women, making suggestions for hybrids and lofted drivers so our ladies can get the ball in the air and have fun with the game."

In the Petoskey area, Boyne Resorts offers nine golf courses and a discount to EWGA members.

"Women are 25 percent of our golf business," says Erin Ernst, public relations manager. "The number of ladies leagues has remained steady, but more women are playing business golf. They are participating more in corporate outings and using the golf course for business networking."

Kathy Aznavorian knows all about the business of women's golf. She and her sister Sandy Mily own and operate Fox Hills Golf and Banquet Center, a Plymouth golf facility their parents purchased in 1974.

"When we first got into golf it wasn't very popular, but we were in the right place at the right time, enjoyed the game's rising popularity and expanded the course and clubhouse," says Aznavorian. "Even with the good ol' boys' network, I've never allowed being a woman in the golf business to be a problem. In fact, my daughter is now on the company's sales team and I believe that this business can be sustained so it can pass on to the next generation."

"We've seen a 15 percent decrease in revenues since 9/11," continues Aznavorian. "The problem is that the overhead for a golf course is hard to shrink because the lawns

still need to be mowed and trees maintained. Gov. Snyder helped some when the state's (Michigan Business Tax) was removed."

Fox Hills is now an Audubon-certified sanctuary, and managing projects based on the natural environment is a primary focus.

"Today there are more golf courses operated and owned by families, and the game itself is more family oriented," says Aznavorian. "Maybe being a good steward of the land is a reflection on our motherhood experience."

According to Jon Last, president of the Sports & Leisure Research Group in White Plains, N.Y., after extensive research the golf industry now realizes that paying attention to what women want when they play golf will have a significant impact on the industry's growth. For instance, the PGA's Golfer Portraits Study indicated that men and women golfers age 30 and under are less apt to consider golf their favorite sport but they do appreciate the opportunities present in social and business golf. They would also play more if the game took less time.

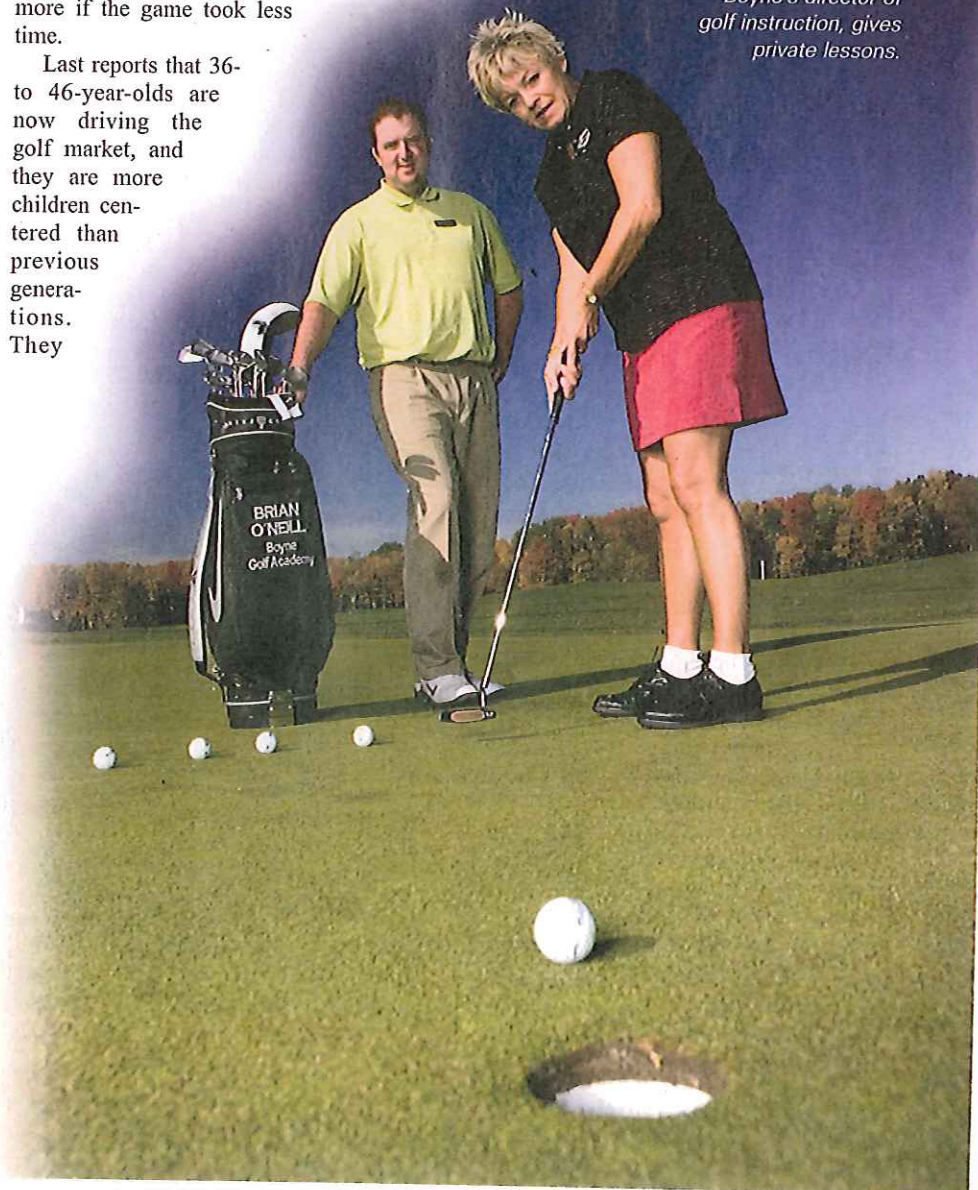
Last reports that 36- to 46-year-olds are now driving the golf market, and they are more children centered than previous generations. They

aren't the Xers or the boomers, and they hold different values than either generation.

"This age group feels strongly that times are less safe for their children than it was when they were kids," says Last. "They also don't consider themselves as entitled to life's rewards as did their parents. And finally they have a new definition of community, one which is more family centered."

"In another study, women were more positive about those golfing opportunities that offered family golf, social leagues around the workplace and beginner-specific golf courses," says Last. "Recommendations to expand the golf industry are

*Brian O'Neill,
Boyne's director of
golf instruction, gives
private lessons.*



particularly appealing to women, such as holding group lessons, creating forward tees and offering child care at golf facilities. The social aspect of golf is the value women bring to the game. They want to have a good time, be with other friendly women and play the game without competing."

The Michigan Women's Golf Association is one example of the many organized women golf leagues scattered throughout the state.

"We started our league 25 years ago and play courses in Midland, Grand Rapids and Traverse City," says Barbara Porter, association president. The application for membership requires a maximum 40 handicap, and entry fees usually cost about \$60, which includes the greens fee. "Our members enjoy the friendly competition and the camaraderie playing with other women," Porter says. "The golf courses enjoy revenues."

Inforum, formerly known as the Women's Economic Club, has been active in

Women On Course is another national organization that puts together events across the country for women to play in special outings. It also emphasizes having fun and enjoying the camaraderie as a major part of each event. Two events will be held in Michigan, one of which is in Brighton this August.

Retail sales for women's golf apparel and equipment continue to reflect the state's economy. Pete Line, human resource executive at Carl's Golfland, Bloomfield Hills and Plymouth, notices an extra enthusiasm from customers anxious to purchase new equipment this year. "Both locations are doing well, and our website continues to grow," says Line. "Sales in women's apparel and equipment remain steady."

"Revenues were down for the last three years for women's golf clubs and accessories, but 2011 looks like it may be up 5 to 10 percent," says Chris Coffman, sales rep for Nike footwear and equipment in southeastern Michigan. "Having world-class



Jon Last of Sports & Leisure Research Group says women value the social aspect of golf.

players like Suzann Pettersen and Michelle Wei representing us makes it easier to market the Nike brand."

Nike women's apparel, on the other hand, had better results. "Nike golf apparel for women showed no reduction in sales during the recession," says Nancy Howles of Lake Orion, Nike women's apparel sales representative in southeastern Michigan. "Nike is not deep into fashion. Our approach is to stay with the basics, especially for pants and shorts. The tech fabrics we use cross over from the office to the golf course, and women appreciate that."

-BY RUTHAN BRODSKY



Left: Carl's Golfland on Telegraph in Bloomfield Hills.

Below: Treetops Golf School for Women.

promoting women in business in the metro Detroit area for more than 40 years. Now with chapters in western and mid-Michigan, the organization promotes golf outings that create business opportunities for women.

"POWER Golf brings together women who are at the top of their game in their respective professions to network, build relationships and make a commitment to helping career-minded women in Michigan succeed," says Judith Welch, vice president of the west Michigan region. "Our golf events raise money for Inforum, raise money for charities and give women a chance to network and do business on the golf course. The numbers participating in our outings increase each year."

