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THE STORY BEHIND THE STUDY

The story behind the study, *The Right Invitation*, is really very simple. The golf industry needs customers and the obvious group to pursue is women. They are underrepresented in the golfing population, they have money and in most families, they are the gatekeepers of how family leisure time is spent. They want to do things with their families and want to find activities that are safe for their children.

We learned a great deal about how to attract women and families at Province Lake Golf, the course we owned in Parsonsfield, Maine between 1996 and 2005. We feel we are in a position to pass that knowledge along to the industry. However, we realized that the industry would be more likely to listen to and adopt the suggestions we make if they are supported by a properly designed and executed study. We commissioned Jon Last of SPORTS & LEISURE RESEARCH GROUP to embark on this research, the result of which is *The Right Invitation*.

The study is very complete and contains a great deal of data to explore. We will soon develop a detailed "how to" guide for the industry. It will have lots of suggestions, many of which can be ascertained by examining the study. Since the complete list is long, we want to highlight what we believe are the most important areas and show how they address the constant mantra of why people, particularly women, don't play golf:

- 1) it costs too much
- 2) takes too long to play
- 3) is too difficult

First and foremost is tee positioning. It is critical to remove the intimidation factor by providing tees at the proper yardages for the full range of swing speeds. A facility can implement the rest of the long list of “how tos,” but if it does not provide a course that players enjoy and/or can compete on fairly, many if not most of the people it is trying to attract will not return. Properly designed sets of tees reduce round times and makes the sport much less difficult and more enjoyable.

Second, courses need to be more flexible in providing play options that address both time and cost such as 9 hole rates, pay by the hole and low junior fees that are part of a family play plan.

Third, provide the opportunity for women to meet and choose enjoyable golfing partners. This can be accomplished by having women’s leagues, women’s clinics, special interest events and family oriented golf events (childcare is critical for this activity). The study shows 50% of lapsed women golfers say they’d play more with more steady playing partners.

Fourth, childcare needs to be provided at a reasonable cost to customers who are playing golf or participating in one of the activities mentioned above. This is both a cost and time issue. The ski industry has recognized this for a long time.

Fifth and critically important, but missed by many, is choosing the right people for the facility staff, particularly in the pro shop. They must be receptive to and completely supportive of all the items mentioned above. Staff members who are not true believers can and will undermine all the positive programs that a facility adopts.

At Province Lake Golf, we instituted these changes over a period of two seasons. A key point on which we will have to manage the industry’s expectations is that these changes don’t have an immediate full effect. It takes a period of time. In our case, for a capital cost of approximately \$80,000 and annual marketing costs of \$20,000, rounds went up particularly women’s, juniors and family play, we had many more satisfied customers and our bottom line improved by \$200,000. We received recognition from national magazines for our family programs and the course has climbed to number 25 on Golf Digest Woman’s list of Top 50 Courses for Women.

Arthur Little & Jann Leeming