

## **Bridging the generation gap: “Growing golf” through an action learning activity**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper describes an action learning simulation designed for a Professional Golf Management (PGM) program housed in a College of Business of a public university. The PGA Golf Management University Program, a 4.5- to 5-year college curriculum for aspiring PGA Professionals is offered at 19 PGA accredited universities nationwide. The program provides students the opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for success in the golf industry through extensive business studies and internship experience. The action learning activity is titled “D Player Challenge.” The purpose of the activity is to bridge the generation gap in terms of building customer relationships via effective communication, coaching and teaching, decision making and leadership skills. The experience is designed to make learning interesting, relevant to real world business management and marketing practices, and memorable to students and outside participants in a personally satisfying manner. The “D Player Challenge” provides an opportunity to match two generations, millennials and boomers, in an experiential activity taking place on a golf course.

Keywords: generational differences, customer relationships, learning activities, golf

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## INTRODUCTION

As tough as the economy has been, one industry continually attracts new participants annually. The golf industry reports an average of 3.7 million new participants each year from 2006 through 2010. On the other hand, another 4.7 million have opted out annually (R. Graves, 53-54). Retention, unfortunately, is the industry's major challenge to "growing the game." Knowing the customer is a key core strategy for the industry. One important customer segment, and one with both leisure time and money, is what most experts refer to as the "baby boomers" generation. Penetrating that boomer market, for example, is different from penetrating the millennial segment. Boomers continue to read newspapers and direct mail. Millennials hardly ever read traditional print materials. Boomers prefer face to face communication, whereas millennials are more comfortable texting, tweeting and emailing. If the golf industry is to grow the game, millennials will need to be skilled in building customer relationships with boomers.

## GENERATIONAL COHORTS

Although there are at least four different generations (i.e., silent Pre-1946 and Gen X – 1965-1980) that must work together today, the two who are most different are the millennials (1981- present) and baby-boomers (1946-1964) (A. Hershatter, M. Epstein, 212; K. Myers, K. Sadaghiani, 226; R. Sherman). Millennials (aka Gen Y) are described as the high-tech generation and are more comfortable in a highly digitized world (A. Hershatter, M. Epstein, 223-224). Other characteristics millennials have include: demand meaning in their work, team players, and accepting of diversity (A. Hershatter, M. Epstein, 212-213). On the negative side, they have been depicted as excessively reliant on technology, self-important, impatient, and disloyal. Boomers are currently the largest and wealthiest generation. They are described as taking their jobs and careers seriously, undertaking tasks without questioning their superiors, preferring face-to-face communication, and craving recognition. Boomers are depicted as being more motivated by goals, promotions, and monetary rewards (R. Beekman, 16). They are highly competitive and independent. Boomers are described as resistant to change and a tendency to micromanage (D. Koepfel). These generalizations, certainly the negative ones, may complicate workplace interactions with co-workers who come from different generations.

Generational conflicts are not new. Each generation brings different expectations to the workplace. Yet the characteristics described above would suggest that baby-boomers and millennials are most likely to clash. Certainly, the challenging economy and lack of job opportunities is part of the problem. The Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM) reported that almost 25 percent of HR professionals have observed generational conflict in the workplace (D. Koepfel). Issues mentioned include technology adoption, resistance to change, and lack of respect for authority. The golf industry is not immune to these conflicts. The boomer generation is well established throughout the golf industry as executives, club professionals and staff. The millennial generation has not only entered the industry but beginning to dominate certain segments, e.g., sales and assistant club professional ranks. It is possible the backlog of boomer workers, resisting retirement perhaps due to economic necessity, has heightened potential workplace conflict (D. Koepfel).

One objective of the PGA Golf Management program is that students will have an understanding of the business of golf, including how golf consumers choose, experience and evaluate golf-related services. And like all other industries, the importance of building customer

relationships and achieving customer satisfaction in the golf industry cannot be emphasized enough (K. Hoffman, J. Bateson, 288). The golf industry is based on developing and providing offerings that satisfy consumer needs and expectations, thus ensuring not only its survival but, hopefully, a growth in the game of golf. Specifically, golf instruction, swing analysis, events/outings, club and clothing selection advice are just a few services normally provided within a public or private golf course business. The “D Player Challenge” is designed to measure (i.e., qualitatively) and evaluate the “experiences” of a sample of “boomer golf consumers”, the largest and most affluent generational segment.

## **PGA GOLF MANAGEMENT**

The PGA Golf Management program is an option within a College of Business. Graduates of the program are prepared for competitive positions in the golf industry such as Club Pros, Assistant Club Pros, Retail Sales (Dick’s, Titleist, Ping, Callaway, TaylorMade, etc.), and PGA administrative positions. In addition to the normal business requirements of an AACSB institution, the PGA Golf requirements include:

1. Complete PGA Golf Management Level 3 Testing and Seminars
2. Complete 16 months of approved Cooperative Education experiences
3. Pass the PGA Playing Ability Test
4. Attend two national workshops hosted by PGA Career Services.

The university’s program was initially accredited in 2006, and currently has over 100 fulltime students. There are only 19 PGA university accredited programs in the country. To this point, every graduate from this particular institution has a fulltime position in the golf industry. A senior level requirement is a course titled Golf Administration and the “D Player Challenge” is a requirement of this course. The activity is worth a maximum of 30 percent of the final grade.

The breakdown is as follows:

- |  |            |
|--|------------|
| A. Target Score  | 10 Percent |
| B. 360 degree feedback evaluations (Guest, Peers and Observer) | 10 Percent |
| C. Swing Analysis Report for Guest                             | 10 Percent |

Having run this activity for four years it is obvious, students believe it is more than just a game. Students take it very seriously.

## **“D PLAYER CHALLENGE”**

Students are formed into 3 person teams and assigned a “D” player. A “D” player is essentially a new golfer. The “D” player is expected to be viewed as a “new” golf customer with varying degrees of expectations surrounding the game of golf and how he / she might be able to play the game at an enjoyable and satisfying level. Students understand that learning and fun can be combined into one activity.

The four person team will be assigned a target score for a nine-hole scramble format based upon the particular combination of golf skills of the PGM students and the D player assigned to the team. The university’s PGA administration / faculty, having thorough knowledge of each student’s golfing abilities, sets the target score. The standard scramble format is the best-known and most popular team event in golfing. It’s often employed at charity events and other informal tournaments. Four golfers, playing as a team, tee off. The group then determines the best tee shot and the players hit their second shot from that spot. This continues after every shot.

However, using this format, it is unlikely that a “D” player’s shot would ever be better than the more experienced golfers, thus little probability of being selected and, in effect, lessening his / her potential for a satisfying golf experience. Consequently, additional parameters have been added to the experience requiring tactics, effective planning and decision making, listening, leadership and communication skills. First, a “D” player’s shot must be used at least once per hole. Second, the “D” player’s shot must be used from the tee on one Par 5, one Par 4 and one Par 3. On a typical nine-hole course, there are usually two Par 3s, two Par 5s, and five Par 4s. Teams that meet or exceed the target score earn 10 percent of their final grade. For each stroke over the target (i.e., higher), the team loses points.

The “D” players, thus far, have been members of the “baby boomer” generation but younger professionals may be invited to participate as well. The “boomers” are both men and women, and share one characteristic, all are new golfers. The majority of boomers are professionals, i.e., professors, physicians, executives, retired military and law enforcement officials to name a few.

Prior to the actual activity, all “D” players are expected to visit the PGA Learning Center and have their swings digitized and analyzed by their student teammates. After reviewing and studying the swing, students are encouraged (not required) to meet with the “D” player and begin developing a dialogue and rapport regarding the game of golf, and answer any and all questions involving the golf swing.

The Challenge is usually conducted over a two week period. Students are expected to contact and arrange a suitable time to play the event including coordinating with the Golf Course, Observer, themselves and their guest. Weather forecasting is another part of the activity. Not every round of golf is played in perfect weather conditions. The more inclement the weather, the more likely the misery index rises while the students’ grades decline. Procrastination is costly.

On the day of the event, students are expected to meet with the guest, observe guests on the practice range and putting green, perhaps offer a few suggestions, work on the short game and / or putting techniques, and continue developing customer rapport. Students are encourage to plan ahead, visit the course, study the layout of the holes, develop contingency plans depending on which nine-holes will be played (i.e., they are not told until the beginning of the event).

Once the activity actually begins, each student within the team will be expected to be a coach/captain for three of the nine holes. As a coach, the player will move his / her golf bag to the cart carrying the “D” player. The coach will then be responsible for determining tactics and shots for their respective holes and also to facilitate communication with the “D” player, perhaps offering golf tips, etiquette instruction, or more serious swing analysis instruction. In addition, an outside observer (i.e., Head Club Pro, Assistant Club Pro, PGM faculty and staff) will be assigned to the team for the complete nine holes. Their role is to observe all facets of the team experience, including the effectiveness of the tactics, overall interpersonal skills, level of communication, and the reactions of the client...the “D” player... to the students’ professionalism. Observers are one part of the 360 degree evaluation feedback. Peer evaluations are also an important of the learning experience.

Upon completion of the activity, students are encourage to relax with their guest at the 19<sup>th</sup> hole, perhaps have lunch and discuss the nine hole round with the “D” player. Specific golf shots are mentioned. Students often use this occasion to praise a “D” player’s putt on hole number 3 or a particularly good drive on hole number 8, thus providing relevant, timely, and

specific positive reinforcement. Explanations, clarifications, and recommendations are tossed around, giving the “D” player a great opportunity to learn and enjoy the golf experience to the maximum degree. “D” players often mention the 19<sup>th</sup> hole (i.e., Club house) as a memorable moment.

Following the challenge, each student will be expected to complete a professional swing analysis report for their guest. Elements of the golf instruction that was discussed during the round of golf are formally included a two to three page report. Additionally, an action plan for improving golf techniques is outline in the report. The PGA faculty review these reports, make suggestions, grade the reports and return them to the students. At that point, the final swing analysis report is created and distributed to the “D” players. Upon receiving and reviewing these reports, the “D” players complete their assessments of each student, thus completing the 360 degree circle of feedback (i.e., observer, peers, guest).

## **FEEDBACK**

Student feedback has been overwhelming and positive. The PGA students not only enjoyed their “D” player experiences, but talk about them years later. Although many teams missed hitting their target scores for various reasons, the students recognized how the experience of engaging and teaching an older generation is a necessary skill if they are to advance in their chosen career. Working and building customer relationships with boomers is only one challenge for millennials in the golf industry, but it is a segment that is important to the growth of the game.

Gender differences were identified and discussed at length. Lessons in how to communicate with a different generation were shared during class sessions. While they themselves were quite comfortable and capable to communicating via texting, that method is rejected by the older generations. In the authors’ observations, old fashioned personal selling, relationship building and face-to-face communication are the most effective methods of customer relationship management. Students related easily to senior men. Communication styles were similar regarding technical elements of the swing, strategy, and methods for improvement. Senior ladies were another story. The ladies were more challenging, generally due to physical limitations. Students learned to take more time to communicate and repeat instructions, had to be more creative in explaining a complicated swing instruction, and develop meaningful metaphors for illustrating short game techniques. Students, for example, recognize that senior women enjoy the game as much as the guys, but unlike the guys, don’t generally enjoy wagering or participating in intense competitive games. The senior women who learn how to consistently make contact with the ball, will have a fun and enjoyable experience, and will return to repeat that experience. Perhaps one of the more significant influences affecting the golfers’ customer satisfaction is the generation into which he or she was born (V. Zeithaml, M. Bitner, D. Gremler, 48-49).

Interestingly, the importance of identifying pre-existing physical challenges to making a good golf swing, a basic start to teaching the golf swing was forgotten by a number of students. One boomer, in particular, was missing several toes off one foot due to an old industrial accident. Yet he didn’t volunteer this information. The effect influenced his weight shift during the swing and ultimately the outcome of the hit. Had students not asked if there were any pre-existing limitations, a recommended swing diagnosis, most likely, would have been faulty. During a



debriefing class session, this lesson was highlighted and mentioned years later as a learning moment that stayed with the students.

Feedback from “D” players has been positive. Most of the “D” players reported a fun and entertaining experience. The vast majority of “D” players provided thoughtful, insightful, and meaningful recommendations to their student teammates, too many to address in this paper. One common thread was the importance of building rapport via good communication efforts prior to teaching elements of a complicated golf swing. All of the “D” players mentioned that they learned ways to improve their game. Whether these improvements have led these new players to become core customers remains to be seen and the seed for another paper.

## CONCLUSION

This paper described a different way of teaching professional golf management students. The “D” player challenge was designed to expose a millennial generation to the boomer generation. The purpose of the activity is to bridge the generation gap in terms of building customer relationships via effective communication, coaching and teaching, decision making and leadership skills. The experience is designed to make learning interesting, relevant to real world business management and marketing practices, and memorable to students and outside participants in a personally satisfying manner. The intensely competitive environment of the exercise added a lot to the class experience. Student feedback, guest feedback and observer feedback about this format has been overwhelmingly positive and it is strongly recommended to the other 18 PGA accredited programs.

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