Virtual Reality

GOLF CLUBS AROUND AUSTRALIA ARE LOOKING TO INDOOR VIRTUAL GOLF TECHNOLOGY AS AN INNOVATIVE METHOD OF ATTRACTION BUSINESS IN ANY CONDITIONS

BY KALON HUETT

IT MAY NOT BE IDENTICAL to the real thing, but virtual golf is certainly gaining momentum as a viable business strategy with some very real benefits for golf clubs around Australia. No longer a novelty, hitting bays with simulators are increasingly helping clubs attract new customers and generate higher revenue when conditions are not ideal for outdoor golf.

YARRAMBAT PARK GOLF COURSE – VICTORIA

Nobody could accuse Yarrambat Park Golf Course, situated in Melbourne’s northern suburbs of lacking creativity and ambition when it comes to technology. The club is making a significant investment in its indoor facilities including three new simulators, as it looks to lift the profile of “Virtual Golf at Yarrambat.”

General Manager and PGA Member, Rob Sacristani expects the innovation to drive Yarrambat Park Golf Course into a successful future. “Our contract was coming to an end in June 2014 and we needed to submit a tender to council on what we proposed to do for the next four-five years. We had a gym that was being underutilised, so we came up with the concept of virtual golf simulators to use the space in a more beneficial way,” Sacristani explains.

THE PLAN

“We highlighted our plan for a more innovative, progressive and golf-specific way of developing the space and increasing overall visits to the facility. We put in a non-conforming tender offer with plans, mock designs and projected financial figures.” Sacristani says. “It’s a state-of-the-art, automated indoor virtual golf studio that allows you to play golf courses from around the world socially or via lessons.”

THE BENEFITS

Sacristani feels the new facilities will set Yarrambat Park Golf Course apart, particularly throughout the low season. “In our prime seasons we’re very busy, but in winter, based on the former facilities and what we could offer, we were losing a lot of business,” he says.

“The technology available at Yarrambat Park provides a wealth of important data that allows you to play golf courses from around the world socially or via lessons.”

THE FACILITY

Above all else, it is the flexibility of the setup that stands out. “There are three simulators in separate bays available for public use. You can choose to be unsupervised, have a lesson with a PGA Professional, or link it with a package deal. You can come as a group or hold functions like bucks’ parties and kids’ parties, as well as organise clinics and ladies’ groups, for example. We’re catering to every demographic,” Sacristani says.

“People are time poor. We’re offering the ability to hit golf balls, play all the shots and score at St Andrews among other courses. As much as it’s not the real game of golf, it offers the feeling of going out and playing, yet only takes 30-45 minutes.”

“IT GIVES THE YOUNGER GENERATION MORE INSIGHT INTO GOLF AND HOPEFULLY INSPIRES THEM TO PLAY GOLF RATHER THAN VIDEO GAMES”

“Now we expect visitors and lessons not to plateau through the winter months or poor weather in general.”

“The club had identified a common challenge – how to get more kids to invest time in golf. ‘We feel strongly that the virtual golf studio will assist with the progression of junior golf in the area, helping juniors to fast track their development and go on to bigger and better things. There is a real push at the school level for anything technology-based. I see this as a way of integrating golf with IT. We can have kids playing the most famous golf courses in the world, film it and save it on a USB for them to take home or show their friends at school. Class groups can come in and look at their stats from swing speed to angle of attack and distance.’ he says.

“Now that we can track that information, it gives the younger generation more insight into golf and hopefully inspires them to play golf rather than video games. And for older people who potentially can’t get out on the golf course due to a lack of mobility, virtual golf means they can still enjoy the game.” Sacristani says.

The repurposed space will also feature a lounge area with dining and big screen televisions. “We feel it can become a destination point for meeting socially, having a meal or a drink, and watching the footy on a Friday night, for example.”

From a bottom line perspective, Sacristani is confident the facility will reach its key performance indicators. “Virtual golf will add to the appeal of the overall facility, but in its own right it will also provide a major drawcard. We are placing it at a price point we feel is affordable to our local community,” he says. “We also expect it to add more to
the centre by bringing people in, which will then overflow into secondary spending in the restaurant, the pro shop, coaching lessons, the outdoor driving range and green fees.”

WINDSOR COUNTRY GOLF CLUB – NEW SOUTH WALES

In Sydney a number of golf clubs have introduced indoor hitting bays and golf simulator technology as a method to increase tenure length by investing capital into the business. A prime example of this successful strategy is Windsor Country Golf Club, where a professional fitting centre featuring an indoor projector screen and launch monitor was incorporated into a shop extension in 2010.

“I think it’s important to invest in a facility and increasing your profile. The club wasn’t in a position to fund a facility and increasing your profile. The club wasn’t in a position to fund a facility and increasing your profile.” Kesby says.

CITY GOLF CLUB – QUEENSLAND

At City Golf Club in Toowoomba, the virtual golf centre incorporates a launch monitor, SAM PuttLab, video cameras, studio lighting, LCD screens and an overhead projector.

“We’ve been doing this since late January and it’s going very well so far. The overall look of the facility gives the customer plenty of ‘wow’ factor as soon as they come in,” says Certified PGA Professional, Chris Britnell. “At the moment we use the facility almost exclusively for coaching and fitting. Some of our members have found a short session before teeing off to be a good way to warm up for their round.”

As is the case for many clubs, City Golf Club faces challenges presented by the annual wet season. “The fact that the facility is indoors is fantastic for us here in Toowoomba, as our winters are cold and miserable, particularly by Queensland standards. So the all-weather factor means we don’t have to worry about cancelled lessons,” he says.

Britnell also suggests the quality of the technology itself has allowed the club to bring more customers through the door. “It has definitely helped attract more people, and anything capable of achieving that is a worthwhile investment. We have found that our lesson and club fitting numbers have already improved, despite the fact that we have done very little marketing.”

The PGA can provide advice to Members interested in exploring virtual technology at their club or facility. Please contact Nick Bielawski, Coaching Programs Manager, at the PGA Centre for Learning and Performance on 03 8320 1902.