



A Good Walk Unspoilt

Many service businesses, especially those in traditional markets, find it more difficult to take advantage of change or create major new opportunities. But those who can stand back and understand what their customers truly value in the services they provide are best placed to really take advantage of the new opportunities that change brings.

Chatting to friends on a walk recently, I was reminded how difficult businesses whose “product” is essentially the experience, qualifications and skills of its key people find it to take a radical, new approach.

Built up personally by individuals over many years of effort, this experience is both the strength and weakness of the business. Close relationships with a select number of customers can limit our view of the world and shield us from seeing the opportunities that might exist from serving other client groups or changing the way we deliver.

The ‘walk’ took place on a golf course. The talk moved from Tesco Law on the 3rd to home buyers packs on the 6th. Market changes that will alter buyers’ behaviour and expectations. But as the day progressed I remembered why a golf course was the place to have this conversation...

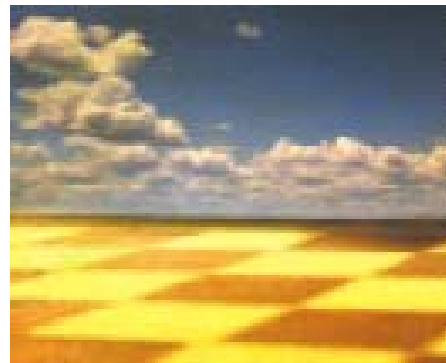
Like many people I have a love / hate relationship with the game of golf. I’ve never been very good, and I find this deeply frustrating. I suspect the main reason I have never improved is that I have never joined a golf club. I’ve thought about it on and off over the years, even come close a couple of times, but never taken the final step.

Why? If I’m honest the first reason is cost. I don’t have a problem with standard membership fees as such, it’s just that I have always doubted I would play often enough in any given year to justify paying them. The second reason is that I have never been comfortable with the culture and etiquette that pervades most golf clubs. Admittedly this is only my perception looking in from the outside and may not fairly reflect the reality of many clubs. But

as a customer I believe the onus is on the service provider to overcome this and attract my custom. However, I’m not sure that most golf clubs would recognise the customer / supplier concept in these terms.

So for me the answer was to play on a variety of “pay and play” courses. No problem with cost, no problem with culture, so no problem! Well no actually. In my experience these courses are usually of lower quality as are the facilities. I may find it less costly to play this way, but the golfing experience is poorer. Customer needs are still not being met, well not mine anyway.

Recently however, after 30 years playing the game, my golfing world changed. It changed because someone came up with a “service proposition” aimed at someone like me. Let me explain.

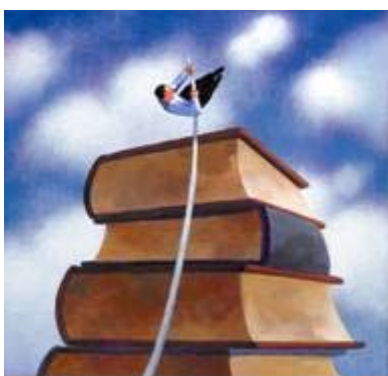


I live not very far away from Goodwood. You’ll recognise the brand. Glorious Goodwood. The Festival of Speed. The Goodwood race circuit – Fangio, Moss, Brabham et al. Goodwood also has a down land golf course, reputed to be one of the finest in southern England. It was a traditional members club and needless to say becoming a member was extremely

difficult – usually involving having the right connections and at least one death.

However in 2005 the Goodwood Estate decided to change the traditional golf club experience. The old membership structure was swept away as were the traditional joining / membership fees. Using new technology, and with the firm belief that there was a lucrative untapped golfing market waiting for the right offer, the club launched a “new concept in golf club membership”.

This involves a modest annual membership fee; payment for a round of golf using a system of “credits” purchased in various packages designed to suit the different playing needs of members; and a variable charging structure determined by when you wanted to play. This is facilitated through an online and telephone booking system that makes finding and booking a tee time quick and simple.



This new flexible way to play golf allied to an existing strong brand, first class facilities and five star service, has proved a winning concept.

For the first time I have found a golf club that meets all my requirements and so I have joined-up! And so have many other people like me. The course and its facilities traditionally stand up to the best the competition can offer. But there is a new service ethos focused on what the club has to do to meet the needs of the customer,

rather than the other way round, and this is new, fresh and different.

So over the recent break, as I stood on the 10th tee enjoying the view, although not unfortunately a good score, this struck a chord. How many firms are there out there with outstanding partners / directors, services and reputation that have nevertheless struggled to grow their business and find sufficient new clients? How many firms are prepared to embrace new thinking and innovate? To break away from the herd and dare to be different? To find ways of tapping into latent demand that gives them a genuine lead.

Those who do succeed ask questions. How is the market changing? How are clients' needs changing? What opportunities do these changes present? What do we have to do to respond?

Whether change is driven by technology, regulation or other factors, how could we meet the underlying needs of the market differently – and more profitably?

For professionals and service firms this means looking outward rather than inward. Pooling the insights gained by individuals in the team into a shared vision. Using research and evaluation techniques to identify and develop opportunities in just the same way that other businesses do.

The result could be developing a new service – not a “me too” that competitors have already, but a genuinely new offering. Or perhaps entering a completely new market – creating the need for your skills amongst a whole new set of buyers.

Whichever it is, success is about leadership and taking positive action. Having the confidence to put the plan into effect; the focus to stay the course when income from current clients may be greater in the short-term; and the commitment to allocate the necessary resources to ensure a successful outcome.

In an increasingly competitive market, both service perceptions and reality need to be challenged through innovative thinking based on a real understanding of what aspects of your service or products your customers really value. Those firms that dare to be different, like Goodwood Golf Club, may find new business opportunities their competitors didn't know were there.

Gary Manning, who has worked as an associate of Hyde Marketing