

Beating the recession at Swanston with flexible memberships

Challenges

Swanston Golf, on the slopes of the Pentland Hills outside Edinburgh, re-opened in 2007 following a major clubhouse refurbishment and course upgrade.

It now has an excellent bar, restaurant and fitness suite. Its nine hole par 3 'Templar' course, opened in 2008, and new 350 yard driving range, compliment its par 68 'Swanston' 18 hole course.

Re-opening in the midst of a full blown recession will seem brave to many in the industry but Swanston was founded on a willingness to change and embrace fresh ideas.

Solutions

Swanston Golf Ltd's owner-managers, Colin McClung and Stewart Snedden, performed extensive research to identify and understand their audience. They found that people did want to play golf despite the credit crunch but many needed alternatives to rigid annual memberships and additional joining fees.

"We offer standard and family memberships for the people who can play most days," said Director of Golf, Stewart Snedden, "But for golfers who can only play certain days a week, or are just starting and don't want to commit to an annual membership, we have made golf as flexible as possible."

Though golfers that buy annual memberships are Swanston's priority – and at a rate of less than £45 a month, they receive the best deal – it offers a range of options including Limited Play (20 rounds for £245), pro rata rates and attractive prices for families. It even has an Armed Forces membership for £45 a month. The full list of 2009 membership categories and prices are listed here:

Swanston Golf Membership categories	Annual Price from 1st March 2009	August 2009 Pro-rata price
Gents & ladies ordinary (age 25 to 64 inc)	£535	£312.08
Gents & ladies 5-day	£310	£180.83
Seniors (65 and over)	£320	£186.67
Seniors 5-day (65 and over)	£225	£131.25
Country/Overseas	£220	£128.33
Family (2 adults + all youth/junior)	£995	£580.42
Family (single parent)	POA	POA
Junior 1 (8 to13 inclusive)	£55	£32.08
Junior 2 (14 to17 inclusive)	£95	£55.42
Youth 18	£140	£81.67
Youth 19	£195	£113.75
Youth 20	£250	£145.83
Youth 21	£305	£177.92
Youth 22	£360	£210
Youth 23	£415	£242.08

Youth 24	£470	£274.17
Armed Forces (£45 a month when in base)	£45 pcm	
Fitness Suite Only	£15 pcm	
Templar (9-hole) membership	£180	£105
Limited Play (20 rounds on 'Swanston' course)	£245	
Limited Play (20 rounds on 'Templar' course)	£85	
Social membership	£35	

Appreciating children are the future of the game Swanston is, in Stewart's words, "making sure that it costs next to nothing for them to join". It has clubgolf coaching and works hard to ensure juniors are welcome and fully integrated. To help keep juniors enthused it has incentives such as offering free tuition and free golf clothing when they reach certain handicaps.

Swanston has no annual levy or joining fee and all members receive full membership rights. Its online booking system means members can book their own tee times. Additional revenue is generated by making its excellent new restaurant and bar open to the public.

Outcomes

Since re-opening, Swanston's membership has soared from 200 to 960 - over 170 of them are juniors.

Key Learnings

"It's been a massive success and it's working because people like the flexibility," said Stewart.

"Offering flexible memberships would definitely work elsewhere. My view is that clubs have to be more proactive and more open to change.

"I know a lot of clubs frown on kids. But if you integrate them properly, teach them the etiquette, give them a games room and get them to play with the adults it works a treat."

The future

Stewart believes that there is potential for future membership growth, yet that is not Swanston's sole focus.

"For Colin and me it's a long term plan and our ultimate aim is to get Swanston on the map as a club which everyone knows as a centre of excellence," he said. "The sort of club where you can send your kids and know they are being looked after, taught properly and enjoying themselves.

"Ultimately we want to produce another four or five of John Gallagher (2007 Scottish Amateur Champion whose home is the club).

ENDS.