



JOHN G. FORNARO
PUBLISHER, BOARDROOM
PRESIDENT & CEO, APCD

'Going Green' Is Part of Doing Business Today and in the Future

'GOING GREEN' HAS BECOME A POPULAR TREND. BUT KEEPING UP WITH THE TIMES ISN'T THE ONLY REASON TO MAKE YOUR PRIVATE CLUB FACILITIES ECO-FRIENDLY.

In fact, 'going green' now is more than a trend, and there are many other significant reasons why your club should be 'going green.' It's what today's private club members want and it has a major impact on the sustainability of private clubs.

For me, much of the redefining of the 21st Century country Club began to take on greater meaning a couple of years ago with my involvement as an owner of Bella Collina Towne and Golf Club in San Clemente, CA.

Oftimes, private clubs have carried a stigma because of their selective memberships, and the perceptions that people generally have about what a private club really is. We've been viewed as water wasters, people who dump chemicals and fertilizers into our ground water and streams, and of course, private clubs have been viewed as a bastion of exclusivity.

Members are seeking different experiences and 'going green' is part of the experience.

Our commitment has included a 'green effect' on many areas of our golf course. We've removed approximately 20 acres of turf surrounding tee complexes and out-of-play areas, and replaced the turf with wood chips, some of which has been generated on-site by chipping tree trimmings and bushes that have been removed.

We've made major changes in how our irrigation is done so that it's more precise, thereby significantly reducing our water usage.

Our pro shop is using eco friendly scorecards, printed using soy-based inks and chemical-free plating. They're 100 percent environmentally friendly and recognized by Audubon International.

In the dining areas, we've used recycled wine barrels, which have been converted into new tables. Because they're wood and aesthetically pleasing, we've been able to cut our

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As outlined in our cover story a year ago about Bella Collina, you can either be part of the problem or part of the solution and we've been offering solutions. Now we're even more committed a year later.

While members for many years have sought out private clubs for their exclusivity and privacy, that's changed today.

linen usage by 75 percent. The uniqueness of the tables, of course, makes them a great conversational piece.

VR Green Farm's market garden, perched on a south-facing hillside near the clubhouse, provides the club and members with organic, fresh produce. And we've

SEE PUBLISHER'S PERSPECTIVE - PAGE 101

cut costs by not having to deal with a distributor. The first of our wine plants sit on sunny garden areas near the clubhouse and we're selling our used kitchen oil to a Temecula, CA firm that's using it as fuel for tractors.

On the expense side of the equation, 'going green' can actually help save money. We're focused on being greener, and healthier, leaving as small a carbon footprint as possible. Not all the projects we've implemented over the past couple of years have cost a great deal of money, and in many cases, we're able to calculate a very good return on our investment.

It's been a matter of getting everyone – members, staff, and owners and boards of directors included – to think differently about how we're doing things.

And along with the potential cost efficiency, development of a 'going green' plan can also help gain new members as people seek alternatives closer to home for their recreation and socializing. And ultimately, recruitment and retention is the number one thrust for private clubs today.

The focus for many private clubs today is to build up a club's membership by offering what many younger families and members want in a private club today...a family-centered club with a variety of events and programs for everyone in the family.

For businesses to be successful, and that means private clubs, they must be aware of these things. It's also being a responsible business within the community.

A much higher percentage of younger members admire eco friendliness, because so many are so much more aware of what must be done to sustain our environment, and ways that clubs and businesses can contribute to that sustainability.

So, a greener private club has the ability to attract more prospective clients and this becomes an extremely valuable marketing tool. Being eco-friendly also creates another major differentiation from your club and other private clubs in your competitive area.

Really we're at the point where 'going green' is no longer a trend. It's probably the way all private clubs are going to have to operate in the future.

But it can also mean eco-friendly or going green means your community will look at you differently.

Change is happening, but there are areas all our clubs will need to work on to advance our case of 'going green' including more conservation of natural resources, more enhanced recycling and reusing, and greater reduction of waste.

But the point is: For private clubs, becoming green, or earth friendly, can be a marketing asset, especially for improving your club's image amongst the community.

Advertising in your local newspaper or online for new members at your private club may be of questionable value. But having the local paper write about your new solar panels producing electricity for your buildings or golf carts, using recycled water, friendlier chemicals, your own organic garden that produces vegetables for your dining room can gain stories, airtime and free publicity. These articles will reach a wide audience.

The key to using going green as a successful revenue generator depends on how your club approaches these challenges.

For many years going green in our industry has strictly been looked at as a way to cut our expenses and comply with government regulations.

But, I'm telling you, it's a great way to bring in new members, sell more golf tournaments and even more weddings.

SEE PUBLISHER'S PERSPECTIVE - PAGE 102



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Michael MacDonald, CCM
General Manager, Royal Poinciana Golf Club

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Being part of an exclusive private club is no longer the only motivation for many people of this next generation.

We just can't assume that what excited people 30 years ago about the private club will excite people today. Thirty years ago 'you had arrived' if you were able to become a private club member.

Today it's certainly not a bragging right for everyone. In fact, the words 'private club' carry a negative connotation for some.

Much of this of course, comes from the fact that clubs are dealing with a many different demographics, from the pre-Boomers (65 and older) now well into their retirement, down to the Gen Ys – all of whom are seeking different experiences. So it becomes a matter of how we meet the demands of the different generations.

We, in this industry, need to improve the image of private clubs if we are to bring in the next generations. And 'going green' and being responsible about how we deal with the environment becomes a major part of decision-making process.

We know private clubs are among the largest employers in suburbs across North America; contribute some of the highest taxes in these communities, and our members are also some of the largest charity fundraisers who also pay higher housing taxes because of the value of their homes around golf courses.

Few people know this and maybe it's not sexy enough for the local media to tell the story about how valuable your private club is to the community it's in.

But I do believe by protecting our environment and being eco-friendly we will generate much interest in the community and from the media.

I believe private clubs need to take a stand on going green, because it will build a stronger and better culture within your own private club. Your younger staff members want to work with companies whose values are similar to their own. And younger people are worried about the environment.

'Going green' gives both your staff and club members something to brag about.

'Going green' helps reduce expenses, conserve our energy, and improves the image of our clubs in your communities. It attracts younger members, attracts motivated younger staff, and keeps them longer. All these benefits save and make us money. To me it's a no-brainer.

I'm just not preaching, our experiences prove it. At Bella Collina, we've reduced water usage by 40 percent, decreased use of fertilizers by 43 percent, and use recycled water.

We have our own garden producing vegetables for our restaurants. Members buy organic products, and our club is filled with new tables, chairs and carpets created from recycled products.

We use less paper, buy green products, have greatly reduced electricity usage and we've improved our recycling program.

Besides saving hundreds of thousands of dollars, we've had many media outlets in the area writing great things about us, and lastly, we've sold many memberships to families who are excited about what we are doing.

'Going green' does make a difference.

At least that's the way I see it! **BR**

John G. Fornaro, publisher

If you have comments on this article or suggestions for other topics, please contact John Fornaro at (949) 376-8889, ext. 4 or 105 or via email: johnf@apcd.com

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