PHOTO BY LEVETTE BAGWELL

JIM RISCIGNO

Right people, right plan are keys to customer service quality for golf course operators

Jim Riscigno believes the principles underlying quality customer service are fairly simple. Putting those principles into action, however, is another story.

"Once you're dealing with reality, everything gets more complicated," said Riscigno, a former ClubCorp executive who is now director of the professional golf management program in the Dedman School of Hospitality at Florida State University.

Riscigno shared tips for operators looking to improve customer service.

The right plan

"The basics first have to be there," Riscigno said. "Do you have a plan and is that plan truly a business plan that includes some kind of long-term view, something that looks further ahead than the next six to eight months?"

A particular club's position in the market is equally important.

"Everyone has a position in the market whether they know it or not," Riscigno said. "Until you determine that, it's tough to establish a customer service system."

The right people

Perhaps as important as having the right plan is having the right people to implement that plan.

"The selection process is the single most important step a person with hiring authority can make," Riscigno said. "It's a decision you have full control over and you have many resources at your hands to help you make the right decision, yet it is the one many people fail on."

Riscigno recommended using all available resources to help select the right person, from background checks to personality tests.

"Hiring anyone in a public operation without doing a background check is taking a very high risk," he said.

Year-round feedback

Feedback, according to Riscigno, helps customer service develop.

"That doesn't mean just taking a snapshot once a year," Riscigno said. "Get constant feedback from a member or employee base throughout the year. Then sit down, with confidence, with your staff and with member input committees and develop standards of operation."

Simple standards

Sometimes the simplest standards are the most effective.

"One standard might be addressing members by name every time an employee sees them," said Riscigno. "You should never have an employee approach a golfer in a cart and not know his name. That doesn't require some huge database system. That's simply passing along names, but it makes a big difference."

Learn from others

"There are no trade secrets," Riscigno said. "The knowledge base is out there. There is information out there that can help. There are companies out there that are succeeding. I don't know why more operators don't look at these successful companies to see what they're doing."

Riscigno also suggested seeking advice from industry associations such as the PGA and Club Managers Association of America, and he highly recommended books such as Robert H. Dedman's *King of Clubs* and Joseph Pine II and James Gilmore's *The Experience Economy*.

"I've never read books that quite capture the sense of what I'm trying to convey better than these," Riscigno said.

— Scott Desiere

The Riscigno File

NAME: Jim Riscigno

POSITION: Executive in residence and director of Professional Golf Management major at Florida State University's Dedman School of hospitality.

EDUCATION: Riscigno received his BA in Hospitality from Florida State University and his MBA from Southern Methodist University

BACKGROUND: Riscigno started in the restaurant business before joining ClubCorp in the early 1970s. Five years ago, after over 30 years of service, Riscigno left ClubCorp to take his current position with FSU.