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Sinking a Putt -- and Landing a Deal

For many partners, playing golf is an essential element for building relationships and closing deals. For others, the game is a nuisance. And for a few, it's, well, a handicap. Here's how to decide whether and when to hit the links.

June 01, 2007

by Anne Stuart

Shortly after graduating from college in the late 1980s, Jill Chappell started playing golf, viewing the sport as an investment in her career.

"I thought it would be important to learn for networking," she recalls.

She played steadily for a few years, but ultimately concluded that her skills weren't quite up to par. In fact, she thought her game might be actually be detrimental to doing business. So she quit.

Jill Chappell,
director of North
American Partner
Programs for
CorasWorks Corp.



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Chappell had second thoughts about that decision during

a six-year stint as a St. Louis-based marketing executive for Microsoft, where her responsibilities included coordinating a couple of golf tournaments. Again, "I realized how important it was," she says, "but I still didn't feel comfortable about my skill level, so I didn't participate."

Now, nearly 15 years after stashing away her clubs, Chappell is stepping back onto the course -- again as a business decision. Why? "I feel like I've missed out on a lot of opportunities to network with decision makers in the partner community," says Chappell, now the St. Louis-based director of North American Partner Programs for CorasWorks Corp. of Reston, Va., a Gold Certified Partner specializing in workplace applications based on the Microsoft SharePoint platform. "So I'm starting up again." This spring, she took lessons, practiced her swing at a local driving range and planned to enroll in a golf clinic offered at the Microsoft Channel Partner Summit in Phoenix in May.

And after that? "I'm just going to throw myself out there again," she says. "Wish me luck."

Chappell is, of course, far from alone in viewing golf as a key business skill. It's become so important, in fact, that some colleges and universities now provide business-oriented instruction in the sport. Purdue University in West Lafayette, Ind., has offered "Golf: For Business and Life," an eight-week class taught by Professional Golfers' Association of America (PGA) pros, since 1998; other schools have followed suit with similar courses. The McCombs School of Business at the University of Texas at Austin maintains an active MBA Golf Association dedicated to "bringing together students, faculty, staff, alumni, recruiters and business leaders" in a variety of golf events. And one executive who also plays golf has founded a company, BizGolf Dynamics of Berkeley, Calif., which specializes in "teaching professionals how they can use golf to build relationships and increase sales." (For BizGolf Dynamics advice on these topics, see "Tee-Time Tips," below.)

Tee-Time Tips

The game of golf has been around for at least five or six centuries. Not surprisingly, it's picked up plenty of dos and don'ts along the way.

You can find entire books crammed with advice on traditions, regulation and etiquette. Meanwhile, here are a few key pieces of advice that business-golf beginners in particular might find useful:

Practice before you play. "Be able to make consistent contact with the ball, whether you drive it 100 yards or 150 yards or more," says Suzanne Woo, a golfer, author of business-golf books and the founder of BizGolf Dynamics. Drop by a driving range and practice with a bucket of balls. If you sign up for private lessons, "interview potential instructors the same way you would interview a new doctor or lawyer," she says; it's important to find someone compatible with your skill level and personality.

Start slow. At first, play nine holes instead of 18, Woo suggests. "Build up to 18 holes. It makes for a very long day." Even when you're more experienced, you or your client may very well opt for a nine-hole game if you're short on time.

Know basic etiquette. Above all, know when to be quiet. "Don't talk when someone else is about to swing," Woo advises. Know where to stand. For instance, "know not to step in front of someone's line when they're putting," she says. And treat all your teammates with equal courtesy; after all, the weakest player may turn out to be the most important decision maker.

Stay off the phone. "Consider your business-golf round a meeting with your clients," Woo advises. "You wouldn't take a call while they're sitting with you in your office. Don't do it on the golf course, either." What if it's the client who's constantly making calls? "I suggest saying, 'Do you think we should quit at nine [holes]? It seems like you're really busy, and we can do this another time.'"

Bet carefully. "If you're the host, don't suggest the wager first," Woo says. "Let the other party make the offer." Make sure everyone's comfortable with what's at stake, whether it's a round of drinks, dinner or \$1 per hole, she says: "I've seen the smallest bet bring out the ugliest forces among a foursome, which results in bad feelings rather than in building relationships."

Don't throw the game. "Golf is a game of integrity. I would be insulted if I felt someone was letting me win just because I'm the client," Woo says. (However, one Microsoft partner says that while he won't deliberately surrender the game to a client, he will, on occasion, "slow down" his game to match the other player's skill level.)

Avoid prima-donna behavior. No one respects business golfers who take the game too seriously -- that is, those who curse, throw their clubs, become overly competitive or refuse to partner with less-skilled players. Ultimately, Woo says, "most people won't remember how well or how poorly you played a particular game. They're going to remember whether or not they liked playing with you."

Steer clear of jerks -- on and off the course. Woo recalls playing with an executive who constantly bent the rules. "He'd pick up the ball saying that he was just trying to make sure it was his -- even though we all knew it was his," she recalls. "Then he'd place it to improve his lie to help himself on the next shot." Later, Woo crossed paths with that player in a business context, and found that experience equally unpleasant.

Bottom line: "When you're playing 18 holes of golf, you'll be spending four to four-and-a-half hours with other people," says Woo. "It's a good opportunity to learn about them. If you're playing with someone who insists on winning or who cheats, that tells you something about the person -- and about how they do business. If you don't like them when you play golf with them, you're not going to like them much better off the course."

-A.S.

Meanwhile, as anybody even remotely associated with the Microsoft Partner Program knows, golf is an essential element in Redmond's universe as well. Golf plays a role at events ranging from small regional meetings to the giant annual Worldwide Partner Conference (WPC), which kicks off with an invitational all-expenses-paid tournament for players from all over the globe. "Invitations are coveted," notes Bill Breslin, who plays golf and is president of the U.S. chapter of the International Association of Certified Microsoft Partners (IAMCP), which holds its own tournament just before the WPC each year. (For a preview of this year's WPC, to be held in Denver in July, see "[It's the Networking, Stupid.](#)")

Networking: Par for the Course

What's the big attraction? From Microsoft's point of view, the golf events it sponsors provide a venue for partner-to-partner interactions, which company executives have identified as a current priority for the partner program. "Through casual conversations on the course [and] formal networking events afterward, Microsoft partners are able to connect to talk about customer opportunities, areas of potential integration/collaboration, and best practices," says Pam Salzer, Microsoft's worldwide director of partner marketing, who has coordinated golf outings for visiting members of Microsoft's Partner Advisory Councils.

For many partners, though, the real value of golf events is getting a large block of face time with Microsoft executives. So when the IAMCP plans its tournaments,

organizers take a highly strategic approach to pairing up players. "There's at least one Microsoft person in every cart or on every team," notes Breslin, who is also director of sales for Houston-based Gold Certified Partner Insource Technology Corp. "Partners get to hang out for hours with a Microsoft employee, and that's very valuable to them." That careful attention to dance cards extends to the local level. Last year, for instance, the IAMCP's Colorado chapter launched a golf league that played twice monthly from May through August. "Our golfers were always partnered in their foursome with a Microsoft employee," says Robert Houdeshell, president of New Frontiers Consulting Inc., a Registered Member based in Denver, and principal analyst for InterDyn AKA. "Thus, we got to know our local Microsoft reps very well." At press time, the Colorado league was gearing up for the 2007 season.

However, the chances of spending half a day (in the case of an 18-hole game) with Microsoft's highest-profile partner executives are admittedly slim. "I used to play golf a lot," Robert Deshaies, vice president of Microsoft's U.S. Partner Group, says rather ruefully. But Deshaies hasn't hit the links in nearly two years due to a work schedule that's heavy on travel and multiple meetings.

"I get asked to play quite a bit when I'm traveling," he says. "When I go somewhere outside of Redmond, I typically do my best to pack my time with as many partners as I can, to get as much feedback and interaction as I can. So I typically am prohibited just from that time constraint to go out and play for four hours," he says. "Would I like to play? I sure would. I love the game. But there are just priorities around the business that [make golf] an easy one to cut out."

Even if top-level Microsoft executives don't participate, golf events tend to provide strong return on investment, partners say. "We wouldn't have a year without our tournaments," says Allison Bowden, sales manager for Microsoft Licensing Global and Public at Dell Inc., who's involved with two IAMCP tournaments in Austin, Texas. "Most of our people feel that these are the events that provide the best business value," explains Bowden, who heads IAMCP's Western region.

As it turns out, golf can be highly lucrative for the nonprofit IAMCP chapters themselves. "The golf tournaments are big money-makers. We get sponsorships from partners that want their signs out there," Breslin notes. "We can make our annual operating budget on a single golf tournament."

Hit the Ball, Make a Deal

Much of business golf revolves around creating and maintaining relationships. Breslin, for instance, plays golf mostly with new prospects and customers, but also schedules a friendly game every couple of months with an existing client. "A golf course is a great venue for those kinds of relationships," says IAMCP President Per Werngren, who is also CEO of IDE Network Consultants, a Gold Certified Partner based in Stockholm, Sweden. Werngren, who describes himself as "theoretically a golfer," notes that tournaments in particular are typically "more for networking than for actually doing business."

Michael Worsham, owner of Registered Member MWE Computer Services of Edgefield, S.C., uses the game to learn not just about his customers' companies, but how they approach business. "Playing golf is a great way to unwind and actually see how well the client, and myself, deal in each unique situation, whether it be hitting from the rough, setting our stances prior to making a shot or making a long putt," says Worsham, who, as the son of a golf pro, grew up in a community built around a group of Georgia golf courses.

But many partners say they've also done actual deals during or immediately following a round of golf, or identified opportunities that paid off well soon afterward. Consider Tynan Fischer's experience last year in the Colorado IAMCP's golf league.

"On the very first day of the league, I was in a foursome with another partner and two Microsoft enterprise salespeople," recalls Fischer, who was then general manager of the New Horizons Computer Learning Centers of Colorado, a Gold Certified Partner based in Englewood, Colo. (he now holds a similar position with New Horizons in Hartford, Conn.). "During the round of golf, we discussed Software Assurance and uncovered a client that had 380 [Microsoft Software Assurance Training Vouchers] that were going to expire in six months. By the end of the round, we had worked out an arrangement to redeem these vouchers over the next six months." The result: About \$90,000 in new business for Fischer's company.

To Golf or Not To Golf?

Stories like Fischer's might well leave partner-company executives wondering whether they really do face a serious threat of being left out of the loop if they don't play golf. The answer depends upon whom you ask.

"Hopefully, we've all become a lot smarter about networking opportunities and [not playing golf] doesn't put you at a disadvantage," says Deshaies, the Microsoft U.S. partner program chief. "I don't think it's mandatory. I believe that it's probably a 'nice to have' in a lot of cases." But people who do plan to give playing golf a shot should get some practice before playing in a business setting, he adds: "They should at least be able to pick up [a club] and hit the ball off the tee. They don't have to be great at it -- as long as they can go out and not shoot a 150, then I think that's good enough."

Several business golfers of both genders noted that women in particular may want to take a hard look to see whether, as Jill Chappell suspects, they're missing opportunities by not playing. "A lot of the women at Microsoft play," Breslin points out. If important business and social activity is happening on the golf course, women at partner companies "are getting left behind if they're not there," he says.

Those on the fence about whether to take up the sport can take heart that many business tournaments now use the "scramble" format, which involves a foursome playing as a team rather than for individual scores. Typically, each player tees off,

the team picks the best shot and everyone plays again from wherever that ball landed. The advantage for the beginner: "You have three other players to rely on," explains Suzanne Woo, the founder of the BizGolf Dynamics business-golf training program. "Usually the more experienced players can hit the ball long and accurately." A beginner may not be able to match the other team members' powerful drives, but can contribute in other ways. Says Woo: "You might become the star of the team by getting close in chipping shots and then putting well."

Beyond the Links

And what if you -- or your prospects or customers or colleagues or Microsoft representatives -- just don't play golf, period? Obviously, you have other options for business-related socializing.

"During the winter, you can't really play golf anyway, but a lot of people around here hunt. So you might take your client out hunting," Worsham says. "Business can be done that way as well."

Werngren's golf alternative: hiring a special chef, who supervises teams of customers or other guests as they prepare an elaborate meal. "We've done all kinds of food: Spanish, French-influenced, Swedish," he says. "One team takes care of the [appetizers], one team takes care of the entrée and one takes care of dessert." Sometimes the event includes wine tasting as well.

Cooking serves as an egalitarian icebreaker because everyone can participate in some way. "I love it," says Werngren. "It's my special weapon. It's always a success."

Breslin, too, finds no shortage of business networking activities for non-golfers: "I take them to a basketball or football or baseball game, or out to dinner with our spouses. Once I took someone to a concert," he recalls. "[Playing] golf happens to be my favorite way, but I've got other tools in my bag."

Anne Stuart is the executive editor of Redmond Channel Partner magazine. Before joining RCP's staff, Anne Stuart was a freelance contributor to CFO, Inc.com, Corporate Counsel and Harvard Magazine, among others. Previously, she was a senior writer covering technology for Inc. magazine, a senior editor and writer for CIO and WebMaster, and a reporter for the AP and several daily newspapers. She lives near Boston.

More Information

Selected Business Golf Resources

Basic Golf Guide

"Golf for Dummies," by Gary McCord (3rd edition, Wiley Publishing Inc., 2006)

Business Golf Guides

"Business Golf: The Art of Building Business Relationships on the Links," by Pat Summerall with James A. McNulty, John Creighton and Will D. Rhame (Career Press, 2001)

"Business-to-Business Golf: How to Swing Your Way to Business Success," by Michael Andrew Smith (InfoPro Publishing, 2001)

"72 Secrets for Successful Business Golf," by Suzanne Woo (SuccessWorks Publishing, 2000)

Business Golf Consultants

BizGolf Dynamics, Berkeley, Calif.
www.bizgolfdynamics.com

Online Golf Etiquette Resources

About.com: Golf Etiquette
<http://golf.about.com/cs/beginnersguide/a/golfetiquette.htm>

Mr. Golf Etiquette's Golf Etiquette Primer
www.mrgolf.com/primer.html

Professional Golfers' Association (PGA): Golf Etiquette
www.pga.com/play/golf-etiquette.cfm

U.S. Golf Association: Etiquette
www.usga.org/playing/etiquette/etiquette.html

Resources for Women

"On Course for Business: Women and Golf," by Suzanne Woo (John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2002).

Executive Women's Golf Association: Non-profit organization promoting golf activities for career-oriented women; based in Florida with chapters from coast to coast.
www.ewga.com

06/01/07 - Anonymous says:

Great Idea. I sure am glad Jill Chappell included me in all her letters, I needed that to boost my pursuit. Thanks again

06/10/07 - Anonymous says:

As a developer I've come in to fix major disasters on development projects where the business was awarded based on golfing & hunting relationships rather than competency. One client - a division of a fortune 50 company suffered an 8-figure loss due the the incompetency. Leave me out!

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