

# Hosting a golf tournament



## that brings them back next year

**P**laying in your favorite charity's tournament is one thing. It's a day out of the office, laughing with friends about the disrepair of everyone's game, and—as they say—all for a good cause.

But now they've made you the tournament chair.

Just because you play golf doesn't mean you know how to run a tournament. Or vice versa—just because you have the organizational skills to put a tournament together doesn't mean you understand what golfers really like.

So let's figure this out. Here are ten ideas for putting on a wonderful golf tournament.

## DREAMS AND THEMES

When your committee sits down to plan your tournament, you want to recognize that the best group consist of those who love your organization and those who love golf. These don't have to be the same people! Some who love you don't know much about golf. And maybe some of the best recruits for your committee are golfing friends who hardly know your organization. Bring these folks together and start planning!

### Don't throw it all away

If you are new to planning a tournament that has been going for a while, be sure to pick the brains of those who've played it in the past. What did they like? What would they like to see added this time around?

### This year into next

The first year of a tournament can be light in participation. That's OK. Let this first year help you get comfortable with the logistics and make an impression that turns your players into your PR team for next year!

### Find fun themes and amenities

Start the fun with your committee. What theme might you use to make a great day for players? How about a "Masters" with jackets for the winners? Maybe open the event with a Scottish bagpipe player. Perhaps find a couple of hams and set up an "anchor desk" at one tee, with the mock announcers calling the tee shots as if the players are on TV!



## 1 Build a working committee

Ideas are great, but they don't get the tournament rolling. What you need are people with assigned roles, both before the tournament and on tournament day. Here are six key roles:

### PROMOTION

Before the tournament: Put together the flyers, emails, and social and traditional media avenues for getting out the word about your tournament.

Tournament day: Provide attendees with materials about your organization, so they truly get to know you.

### FACILITY RELATIONS

Before the tournament: Make arrangements for golf and food through the golf course you choose; maintain an ongoing conversation with the course as needs and numbers become more concrete.

Tournament day: Work with the tournament liaison at the course to make sure everything comes together smoothly (most PGA professionals or tournament coordinators will provide all the help you need with scoring, rules, etc. on the golf side of the event).

### SPONSOR RELATIONS

Before the tournament: Take your message and your sponsorship opportunities to those who will provide more than a foursome (see page 4 sidebar), selling sponsorships as a way to allow others to see who stands with you.

Tournament day: Provide a special greeting to your sponsors and find a powerful way to thank them in front of all your players.

### REGISTRATION

Before the tournament: Take registrations and payments, keeping very careful track of who is playing, their partners, and their finances.

Tournament day: Greet golfers with their tee assignments, answer questions, procure any lingering registration fees.

### GIFTS AND AWARDS

Before the tournament: Secure gifts for all golfers and awards (for winning teams and individuals). Many golf shops, including the one at the course you are playing, will offer discounts for prizes. If you have a lot of true golfers, one of the best gifts or awards you can offer is credit at the golf shop on site, allowing the players to choose their own prizes.

## FOLLOW-UP

Before the tournament: Plan how you will follow-up, including how you will use the contacts gained at this event to lead into other event and opportunities to tell the story of your organization.

After the tournament: Send a thank you letter than includes a photo from the day, a receipt for participation, and a save-the-date card for next year's event.



## 2 Ignite next year with excellence this year

Fund raising golf tournaments often don't find their biggest audience until two or three years in—after they have built a reputation for being a standout event. Those who are often asked to play in such events and must choose among them will come to your event—and invite others—because it offers them a great blend of quality, uniqueness, and fun. Give them more than their money's worth and they'll give you a lot more than the dollars they pay to play on tournament day.

This is an important sell to your first sponsors as well. Sell a long-term vision for what this tournament can do, explaining that you want to put on the best tournament in town and let the word spread that yours is a can't-miss event.



## 3 Know your golfers

One of the blunders any promoter can make is not knowing their audience. The same is true in organizing a golf tournament. Many who organize golf fund raisers want serious golfers to play, then they choose a format or course that serious golfers don't like.

**Start here:** Among those who will be playing no matter what, what kind of golfers are they? Are they club members or avid golfers who play seriously apart from your event? Or do they just like to hang out with others and support your cause, no matter what the activity is?

**Now here:** If you have a lot of true golfers in your mix, choose a golf course that will attract golfers (though this will cost you a bit more). If you have social players, find a nice course but watch your budget, too.

**Then here:** Consider incorporating two formats into the same event. Occasional and recreational golfers, as well as mixed foursomes of men and women, prefer scrambles, where bad shots are abandoned and everyone plays from the best shot. But serious golfers always like to play their own ball,

If your event is typical, people will show up to help your cause, whether or not they are really golfers. Here's a look at how you can strike the balance at making both kinds of player happy.

### WHAT GOLFERS LOVE

- Good golf courses. You'll pay more to host your tournament at a country club rather than a municipal course, but golfers will leap at the chance to play the nice course if you can keep the price right.
- Playing their own ball. Allow the golfers in your tournament to play a format that lets them play their own ball, tee to green. Two best balls of the foursome is a good option.
- Better golf balls. If you're giving golf balls as prizes, recognize that there are premium golf balls and cheap ones. Good players don't play with cheap balls.

### WHAT NON-GOLFERS LOVE

- A relaxed format that covers their mistakes. In a scramble or shamble format, bad shots are tossed out and players move their balls to the best shot among them.
- 'Little helpers.' Mulligans are an old standard, and a good one. But how about a free toss out of any bunker (one per player)? Or give each team a yardstick and let them call every putt inside that yard a "gimme" (which will also speed up play among your slower golfers).

## SPONSORS ARE YOUR TOURNAMENT'S FRIEND

Everyone playing in your golf tournament will pay a base fee. But unless you have a packed golf course of 100 players or more, you may find that you don't make much money for your organization. Sponsors are the difference-makers between a good tournament and a great one, in terms of excellence and your bottom line.

### Sponsors on your tees

Offer sponsorships for tees. You can do this in two ways: with signs and with set-ups. Set a price for posting a sponsor sign on a tee and another price for setting up a table to tell folks about their business.

### Sponsors in your foursomes

Encourage more players by coming up with sponsored foursomes at package prices (four players and a tee sign, for instance). Sponsors may select their own foursomes and bring their friends or put up the money for others (like teachers or clergy) to play.

### Sponsors for your prizes

Look for sponsors who want to make people happy! Allow a business to supply imprinted water bottles stuffed with snacks or balls and tees. Encourage a sponsor to buy (or at least subsidize) your winners' gifts. Get eateries and golf stores to give you coupons for all your players. Even locate a sponsor who will buy your perpetual trophy—and put their name on it, a la the FedEx Cup!

especially on a course they don't play very often, so allow for a best-ball format for these players. Allow for players to choose their format when they register, then offer awards in each format.



## 4 Set the right price—and keep it there

There are all kinds of golf tournaments, but when it comes to fund raisers, there are often just two: the nickel-and-dimers and the all-in-ones.

A nickel-and-dime event comes with a base fee to play, but when players show up they are offered lots of other opportunities—mulligans, drawing tickets, shots hit by a local pro or celebrity to add to the group's effort, auctions. You get the idea. Some fund raising committees go with this motto: "We don't want anyone to leave with a dollar in their pocket."

An all-in-one event may come with a higher price tag, but the list of add-ons each player receives is included in that price.

We strongly recommend the latter. Why? Because it feels like a country club invitational. And because you are always building your participation for next year by what you do this year. If you are giving and giving on tournament day rather than taking and taking, your players go away saying, "I'll be back!"

The second factor in setting your price has to do with your necessary profit margin. If you are a small operation—say, a school athletic team raising funds for your program—you want to hit your intended income target on the nose. Build a tournament, a fee, and a field size that gets you to that number. But if you are a larger organization with this being only one of several fund raising activities you do through the year, focus on sponsors for your profit margin and let the players fill the field and go away with a great memory of your organization. It's this great memory that will bring them back to this event as well as to other events you hold this year.

Finally, don't play games with the tax deductibility of participation. Because golfers receive a round of golf (and maybe a meal and prizes, all with fair market value), their fee to play is never "100% tax deductible." While the IRS allows the organization to disclose before, during, or after the event the fair market value of goods and services received, no one likes a bad surprise! Be honest in your promo notes, disclosing at least this: "A portion of your registration fee is tax-deductible." For your big sponsors, be specific, listing the benefits and the deduction allowed for each level of sponsorship.



## 5 Turn your players into recruiters

Golf tournaments are perfect for multiplication. When they can, people love to play golf with their friends. So when you secure one player, you may very well be securing two, three or four. But you want to make it easy for registered players to recruit others. There are two ways to do this:

First, encourage players to buy foursomes. Those with corporate interests often look to invite key contacts to quality events. Include foursomes in your sponsorship packages, but also offer straight foursome prices (your individual fee x 4).

Second, if a player registers on his or her own, email them a flyer that they can forward to friends (or print and hand to a friend).

Don't pester your registrants, but encourage them to get others involved with your event.



## 6 Greet your golfers with thank yous, not solicitations

We've already spoken of nickel-and-dime events. They're not all bad, but don't start there!

When players arrive at your event, greet them with a hearty welcome and thank you. Here's the place to employ your cheeriest volunteers. Give each player an essential info sheet about the day's proceedings—*what*, *where* and *when* are key items.

If you have goodie bags or thank you gifts, you can give them out at this time, but a more strategic move may be to give these out at the end of the day, when players are heading back to their cars. You can put snacks right into the golf carts and give out thank you gifts with information about your organization tucked inside when players leave.

If you plan to go ahead and sell mulligans or drawing tickets, do this on the practice tee (or the first tee if you have tee times rather than a shotgun start).



## 7 Seize the moment to sell your organization

OK, you've got a captive audience to tell all about your organization. Here's the problem: People don't like being

### SHOTGUNS & TEE TIMES

In a golf tournament setting, a shotgun start is the preferred avenue for getting your players around the course. By starting the different groups each on a different tee, the players start and finish all at the same time. This is ideal for a fund raising event, because it allows you to address all your participants before and after the event. Find out what the minimum number players is that you need to secure a shotgun start at your course and make every effort to get to that number!

For a shotgun start, here are a couple of helpful ideas:

- Give your tournament sponsors the "best" tees for starting their rounds—these are usually the tees closest to the clubhouse.
- Plant your photographer(s) on one tee and catch all the groups as they come around, both with posed shots and "action" shots. If possible, upload these to an ever-building gallery on a tablet or digital frame, so friends can see friends when they come through.

### Tee time adjustments

If you have no choice but to go with tee times, your most important task will be figuring out how to occupy your early finishers as they wait for the later ones to come in. Some nice hors d'oeuvres can do the trick (just make sure there are plenty left for those who come in at the end). Then be prepared for a quick, tidy wrap-up to present awards and say goodbyes.

## GETTING GREAT HELP FROM YOUR VOLUNTEERS

The success of your golf tournament will have everything to do with your volunteers, those people who are “loving on” your participants on tournament day. Your key is to make sure you get the right volunteers into the right spots.

### Many of your volunteers don't know golf

This is good and bad. Because your volunteers aren't golfers, they won't be pining to play. But unknowledgeable volunteers can also show up in awkward or even dangerous spots on the golf course when they are given a cart to “just drive around and help.” Be sure your on-course volunteers are trained in golf course etiquette and safety.

### Think in terms of people power

How might your volunteers help by their ability simply to work? For instance, if your organization helps teenagers, you can offer a tremendous amenity by enlisting those teenagers to wash every participant's car during the event (with a responsible adult supervising).

### Use people's strengths

Find out who your committee members know. Among them, they are bound to know “experts” or those with “uncommon gifts” who can add to the strength of your day by volunteering their time and talent. Use good people to find other good people!

held captive, especially those who are outdoors for the day. So consider carefully how to present yourself in a lively, succinct fashion that invites those who are truly interested to find out more. Stories and visuals win out over explanations. If you have a compelling video (no more than 5-10 minutes) about your organization, show it only if the venue will do it justice. If you have a testimonial from someone who has greatly benefited from the work of your organization, it's almost always better to use an emcee to conduct a Q&A with this person, like a talk show. Again, though, limit the length.

One exception to the brief and powerful plan is when you are incorporating a keynote speaker into your event. Many churches or religious organizations tie the two together. If this is your plan, the best scenario is to play nine holes, break for lunch, and then play your second nine. Provide a nice lunch, then begin the speaker's time during dessert. By the time your speaker is finished, lunch will be digested and your players will be ready to head back out. Some groups go with a dinner and speaker, but you have to be careful here. Golf itself can be a long day, and most people are ready to get home after they've finished playing. These kinds of on-the-move folks don't make good listeners.

Lastly, consider what you will hand people to take home. This is where you can give them printouts that (1) tell the story of your organization's work, (2) provide a list of other events you do during the year, and (3) point people to your website, where they can find out even more about you (and where *very soon* you will post photos of the day at the golf course!).



## 8 Eliminate the waiting

Golf tournaments can be slow. If you have filled the course for your fundraiser, you'll find that play backs up on par-3s and maybe some other holes as well. No one likes this, but it's a pain that can be relieved by engaging distractions. Here are three possibilities:

- Side contests. Set up a miniature golf hole wiggling along the tee box, with players using any club but their putter to try to make a score. Or, to make some extra money for the cause of the day, offer a buy-in for hitting the green. Players put in \$5 or \$10, and if they hit the green they get a sleeve of balls.

- Snacks and treats. Have a snack station at one of your par-3s (or maybe one on each nine). If there is power available, arrange to bring in an ice cream freezer with tasty ice cream treats or mix up some smoothies on the spot.

- Personal greetings from organizational leaders. Make one of your par-3s a place where one or two of your organization's leaders can hang out to meet and thank every player. If your

organization touches people who want to sing your praises, bring them out too and let them be your ambassadors. Couple this with an edible treat, and you'll make a great impression!



## 9 Give prizes that make golfers and households happy

Too often, tournament organizers think only of the players when they come up with prizes for their winners. So they give away golf prizes. But what about the spouse or fellow workers back at the office who don't get to play that day? Instead of a nice putter for closest to the hole, think about awarding a gift card to a popular eatery or a lunch for eight delivered to a player's place of work. Imagine a golfer going home and saying to his wife, "Honey, I got to play golf today and you and I are going to dinner tonight." That's how you get the OK for that golfer to come back next year!



## 10 Say a great goodbye

When your golfers are done—especially if the majority of them are not serious golfers—they're going to be tired. And here's when you've been planning to give your big spiel. Uh oh! You can still make a great impression, but you need to keep two principles in mind: brevity and fun.

When you are giving away your awards, be organized, quick, and vocal. It's easy to lose people's attention if they're sure they have not won anything. But if you weave your drawings and other chance-based awards into the midst of your longest drives and closest-to-the-holes and winning teams, you'll keep people's attention. And speak up with those names! People like to hear their names—and the names of their friends—called out in public when there's a prize attached.

If you also plan to have someone address the audience about your organization, do this as the last thing. Declare it to be five minutes (or so) and hit your mark, keeping in mind some of the tips from idea 7. To close, let the people know that you will be giving them some information on the way out that will let them stay in touch with your organization (even if it's just a postcard pointing them to your web site). Then have some very happy, very grateful people saying goodbyes on people's way out.

### POLISHING OFF YOUR EVENT

Good news! You're getting closer to putting together the kind of event that will serve your organization excellently. Remember, every good idea in an article like this one is made better when you add your personal flavor and local understanding. Work with your committee to plan well, execute well, welcome well, and say goodbye well. This is the recipe for a tournament that will bring them back next time! 🍷



### KNOW YOUR PRO

The PGA professional at your course has many good tournament ideas and the training to help you pull them off. Enlist their help!



### TASTY GOODIES

Be sure you offer some nice snacks along the way—cool apples, crunchy trail mix, iced bottled drinks. Check out what foods must be negotiated with the host course and what you can bring in from outside.



### 'REAL TIME' SCORING

Is your organization a tablet-wielding group? Use some techie volunteers to employ spreadsheets and tablets to let players see how they stand every few holes. It's a great "tour touch" for your event!



### GO 'ONE BETTER'

Con conversationally follow up with enthusiastic participants, getting insights from them for next year. Have them give you one cool idea you can employ to make your event better.