



when they read and consider the Scriptures together. But it's still hard to make spiritual cold calls. As relationships advance, and two people become more comfortable with one another, their connections broaden. They'll talk about the things closer to their heart, where risk is greater. Until you know someone more than a little bit, you're not going to be comfortable, or find many positive results, in asking, "Would you like to come to a meeting where we talk about Jesus?"

**What Dan lacked**, in his own poignant words, was relational equity. He needed time to just hang out with other golfers, establish friendships, and let the points of connection kick in. This is how he found himself in Scottsdale.

For many golfers, Scottsdale is a dream. It's an escape from the cold of a northern winter, an opportunity to play when you would otherwise be cooped up inside, lucky just to roll some putts in your basement. But Dan already lived among the palm trees of Orange County. Scottsdale was for him—with apologies to the Chamber of Commerce—no great shakes.

Then came the announcement that some guys from Durango were headed to Scottsdale. Golf trip, baby! And Dan found himself saying, "I'm in." His wife wondered why he'd go somewhere he didn't really like, but the answer was easy: "I need to get to know people."

This is where relational equity begins. Just getting to know people. But Dan will tell you that this

doesn't happen by accident. You have to be as intentional about establishing relationships as you would be about remodeling your kitchen. Equity is maximized when we come to it with a plan.

**In order to make your plan** for getting to know others around golf, you need to consider several factors: your time, your game, and your club's environment. Let's look at each of these.

*Your time.* Golf can be learned on the course or in the practice area. You'll get more reps in at the range but you'll learn to hit shots under pressure and score on the course, so both are necessary. But what about when you want to build relationships? Where should you hang out? The answer leads us to a combination of time spent playing rounds with others, lingering in the practice areas talking technique and strategy, and also heading inside to share some food, drink, and conversation. While golf can be a real time-eater, it doesn't have to be. If you only have an hour today, you don't have to stay home. You can practice your putting and introduce yourself to others who make their way to the green. A quick hello today can set up further conversation tomorrow.

*Your game.* Although golf's handicap system allows for players of all levels to play together, golfers tend to group themselves according to skill level. Part of this has to do with which tees you are comfortable playing, because groups of the same sex want to play the same tees when they're



## CONVERSATION STARTERS

**To keep building** a conversational relationship over time, you want to be ready with fresh questions each time you meet up with someone. Good questions dig deeper than "How's business?" or "How's the family?," but they don't make the other person uncomfortable. A round of golf almost always provides opportunity to slip in a surprising and interesting question. Here are a few examples:

- Today would you rather have your best round ever or a hole-in-one?
- If you could redesign a hole on this course, which one would it be?
- What was your first job? Do you still use anything you learned from that job today?
- Do you watch golf on TV? What players do you like to watch most?
- Are you a reader? What kind of articles catch your attention?
- Away from the golf course, what makes you happy? How often do you experience this happiness?
- How do you decide what's most important each day?
- Who has helped you succeed the most in your life?
- What charities do you appreciate because of the great work they are doing?

grouped together. All this means is that to the extent your relational equity is built on the course, it will be built with those who have a game like yours. However, this can be mitigated when your pace of play is good and your attitude is pleasant. A 5-handicap will make room for an 18 if the bogey golfer provides enjoyable company and keeps moving.

Your comfort zone in the game is an acceptable place to start, but as someone intentional about expanding relational equity around golf, you might have to make concessions. Can you adjust your pace of play? Are you open to playing a different set of tees than you're used to? Will you be patient with a player who leaves a shot in the bunker or needs your help looking for wayward tee shots? In any case, considering these possible adjustments beforehand (and even praying about them) will allow you to connect with a bigger group of golfers.

*Your club's environment.* Every golf facility is different from the rest. These differences might be obvious, but they may also be subtle and learned over time. Some clubs revolve around the head professional, others around the chairman of the board. Your club may be great at incorporating couples into their events, while the club down the road might be separated between the sexes. And what about other activities your club offers—weeknight dinners, pickleball or tennis, annual golf trips, providing a volunteer corps for a tour event? Any of these may provide an open door for your

intentional efforts at establishing relationships that lead to connection for the sake of your Links Fellowship and ultimately for sharing the good news of life in Christ.

**Perhaps now is a good time** to ask whether you are comfortable with all this intentionality. After all, we live in the age of targeted advertising, when marketers use data from what we viewed yesterday to sell us on all kinds of products today. In a way this is great. I see plenty of ads for drivers and none for fishing poles. But in the end, they're ads, a barrage of clutter I didn't ask for.

So you might be concerned that others will view your intentional efforts at building relational equity this way. *Oh, it starts out all about the golf, but pretty soon he's coming at me with all that Jesus stuff.* Nobody wants to be the object of criticism, especially when their purpose is a good one—or in this case, the most important purpose of all.

Let's address this concern biblically and practically, because we want you to be encouraged to remain diligent.

Links Players Southern California region director Dereck Wong speaks often of one his life verses from Scripture. In Matthew 9, we read of Jesus leading his disciples through villages and towns, "proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness." Throughout this work, Jesus kept seeing people with physical and emotional needs. But their greatest need in life was a shepherd. They needed



## THE CRITICAL BALANCE

**While the work** of building relational equity should be intentional, we must be careful.

First, people are people, not targets. When firing at flagsticks from the fairway, we try hard to stick to a routine, so we can produce the same good results over and over. But dealing with people is more like playing in the wind or getting out of trouble. Every situation is different. The fundamentals are modified with creativity and confidence. So listen well and let the conversation flow. If you're caught off guard by a person's response to your comment or question, be honest: "Wow, I didn't expect to hear that!" But this doesn't have to derail you. You can come back with a humble reply, like, "I've always thought of it like this," and then explain your perspective.

Second, people are people, not commodities. Commentators debate the precise meaning of Proverbs 11:30, which states, "He who wins souls is wise," but a common interpretation is those who win souls show themselves to be wise. In other words, wisdom comes first and soul-winning follows. This is a good reminder to keep us from tallying spiritual victories as though we are the ones changing hearts. Rather it is our job to love souls by way of the gifts and insights God has given us. The actual heart-changing, or soul-winning, is the work of the Holy Spirit, and we humbly rejoice in that work just as we rejoice in the new life it produces in our friend.

to be cared for and led. So Jesus said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.”

What’s fascinating about this passage is that Jesus, the master worker, wasn’t positioning himself to do all the work of the kingdom. He knew the need for many workers. More than this, he knew that as time progressed, you and I would be those potential

self-perpetuating charge. If we are disciples, we are to be disciple-makers.

Disciples are learners. They cannot be lassoed like a calf and dragged across the arena of life. Rather, they submit themselves to the instruction of their teacher. This happens when they see the teacher’s passion, connect with the teacher’s style, and respect the teacher’s life. In other words, we’re going to learn most from those with whom we have relationship.

and we don’t realize that what we are saying is, “I’d rather not talk to you about this anymore.” This is a big mistake when it comes to keeping the conversation going for the sake of the gospel. A friend may not be ready to agree with you today, but if you are willing to keep pouring into the friendship, understanding and agreement might come later. Do you have the patience to wait for this? If you do, when a disagreement arises, don’t “agree to disagree” (this too can



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We must also be reminded of the Great Commission, which undergirds the fifth tenet of Links Players: Share Christ through the great game of golf. This commission, which we find in Matthew 28, charged the disciples to make disciples in all nations, directing every follower of Jesus to obey what he has commanded. It’s a

Once I have chosen this course, the more I know of the teacher, the more I want to know what the teacher has to teach me. In this way, we might say that you never stop building relational equity. Your friendships in Christ can always go deeper.

**The biblical injunctions** to be harvesters and disciples provide impetus to reach out as one of Jesus’ ambassadors. A few practical suggestions may also help you not “grow weary in well-doing” when pushback comes your way.

First, be a conversation continuer. Too often, by being quick to speak and reluctant to listen, we cut off a conversation. We draw lines between what we believe and what someone else believes,

end a conversation for good). Instead say, “Maybe it’s better if we let this rest for now. We can come back to it later if you want.” Then fall back on the common ground that is more comfortable for your friend. Go to the range or the restaurant. Ask familiar questions about work or family. Send every message you can that this friendship is still on.

Second, understand the value of a ministry of presence. Through the years, some of our favorite stories have been those where a club member lacks what we’ll call spiritual connections—they don’t have any religious background or a church home. Then a crisis arises around them and the only place they know to turn is to that group of golfers that have seen reading

the Bible and praying together in their club. Sometimes the best thing you can do as a Fellowship or even an individual believer is to just stick around. Keep making friends, keep reaching out through caring questions. A time will come when hurting people need someone like you. Likewise, be on the lookout for open doors in troubling times. Personal crises, local tragedies, and national catastrophes all can soften a person's heart toward the words of the Lord through you.

Third, help. People have practical needs as well as spiritual ones. A member's spouse lands in the hospital; offer to bring a meal. A staff member's car breaks down; take up a collection in your Fellowship to pay the bill. A local high school team needs golf shirts or golf balls for their coming season; provide for their needs and build bridges across socio-economic divides. And what if your Fellowship showed up on the last green of that team's first tournament to cheer on each player as she finished?

**Relational equity is built** through word and deed. Circles of friendship often center around a common sense of humor. And it's through the little things—even picking up someone else's wedges from a putting green or raking a

## MATTERS OF CONSCIENCE

**One of the questions** that can arise around relational equity has to do with personal moral boundaries. Is it OK to drink beer and talk about Jesus at the same time? How much money is too much to lay on the line if getting in the game buys you access to others you might not otherwise reach?

The difficulty here is that these are matters of conscience, and each person's conscience comes down hard in a different place.

One Links Players staff member steered clear of alcohol for many years, as this is how he had been raised: Christians don't drink. But he later found this to be a point of pride that kept him from crossing over to build relationships with people who really needed the faith he possessed. So he learned to drink beer—an acquired taste, they say. He won't tell you this makes him more holy, but it does make him more comfortable sitting down with "those guys" and bringing his view of the world into the middle of theirs.

The same principle can't be applied to everyone. If you have a history of alcoholism, you know the damage that "demon drink" will do to you. You'll have to build relational equity through other means.

What's common among us is that, if we are praying for God to lead us to others for the sake of advancing his kingdom through the salvation of others, we can trust he will do so despite the boundaries of our individual conscience. You don't need to pray that God will make you more comfortable with gambling; instead pray that he will introduce you to others whose comfort level is the same as yours.

bunker for them—that we forge appreciation for one another. But as women and men in whom Christ dwells, we must also be seeking opportunity to "give reason for the hope that is in you" (2 Peter 3:15). We use the equity we have accumulated to expand the

conversation among friends. God has given you the gift of salvation, and while it may be socially awkward to push that gift into the hands of another ahead of building a relationship, we need to be eager to present that gift as soon as we can. 🏌️

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