

# MEETINGS ON THE GREEN

*\$10.00*





Imagine your reaction to these two invitations:

“Hello, I’d like to set up a five-hour meeting to get to know you so we can do some business.”

“Hello, I’d like to invite you to play golf at Pinehurst No. 2 next Wednesday.” To the first, you probably thought, “Five hours, are you kidding? Forget it.” If you’re a golfer, though, you’re predisposed to accept the second with pleasure.

You may never have thought of golf with business associates as a five-hour meeting, but the results can be even more beneficial than focused time at a conference table. Just ask Beverly Kinkade, the 1991-92 president of M.P.I. After her first-ever golf experience, which took place at a fund raiser tournament, Kinkade says: “Now I see why golf works. It’s an opportunity to share feedback and encouragement, strategize together how to play the hole, and is tremendous for informal networking.”



Mike Marchev, a New Jersey-based marketing consultant and motivational speaker, explains that what happens on the golf course is, “I decide if I like you and if we should do business.” The real business gets done afterwards, on the “19th hole.” In other words, a round of golf lays the groundwork for making high-level decisions like, should we hire his company to do our advertising? Can we work with Jones? After seeing him sulk his way through the last four holes, you may have your doubts.

Just the fact that someone plays golf creates a level of understanding and a conversational “comfort level” among devotees of the sport that may create a bond. Players know that golf requires patience (lots of it), attention to detail, and sensitivity to surroundings.



Take a colleague out for a round of golf and find out even more. Michael Murphy, founder of the Esalen Institute, says in his classic book, *Golf in the Kingdom*, “...a man’s style of play and his swing certainly reflect the state of his soul”. True personalities come out on the golf course, from the stickler for details to the focused, goal oriented player. PGA Great and NBC analyst Johnny Miller sums it up: “Golf tells a lot about people...honesty, temper, impatience, integrity.” Golf serves as a high-level decision-making tool by helping to reveal what people are like and accelerating the rapport-building

process between business associates, normally wary and self-protective. It’s used by busy executives to make decisions about each other in a pleasant, non-threatening and relaxed way.



The meeting planning industry hasn't been the same since decision-makers discovered golf is a valuable business tool as well as a lot of fun. Now most high-quality meetings include a golf event, and woe to the meeting planner who isn't savvy to the nuances of golf.

**Common novice error:**

*Starting a full shotgun tournament (about 140 people) at 1:00 p.m., which won't realistically end until 6 or 7 p.m., by which time all the golfers will have missed the cocktail party and arrive sweaty and late for dinner as well.*

**Another common novice error:**

*Not organizing the golf bags and carts the day before, for a 7:30 a.m. tournament. When those 140 bleary-eyed golfers arrive at 7:15 a.m., name tags should be on each golf cart with the players' golf clubs already loaded onto the cart, the scorecards marked, and printed instructions set out with the designated starting hole and any tournament rules for the day. Without this preparation, the tournament can't go off on time.*

It's critical to have someone at the facility charged with overseeing the whole event. If the planner is into golf and all the pieces are understood, it will show. So will the opposite.



Meeting planners lucky enough to qualify for the Meeting Planners Invitational (MMI) can see how the pros do it. Always a sell-out, the MMI marked its tenth anniversary with the November 1993 event at Miami's Doral Resort & Country Club. It's the largest of three annual golf tournaments put on by The Golfe, which calls itself "the Association of Meeting Industry Golf Enthusiasts."

The Golfe's executive secretary, Sharon Tierney, says its main purpose is for members to network through their annual golf events. Only winners of the 50 industry golf tournaments sanctioned by The Golfe qualify to play in the Invitational. If a supplier qualified, he or she must bring a meeting planner along to the event. Started in 1985 with 50 members, The Golfe has grown to close to 1,000.



What are some creative ways to make sure the golf event matches the quality of the rest of the meeting.

•Schedule it at a great course - golfers

playing a new course get as excited as a kid opening a new toy at Christmas.

- Set aside adequate time for the golf event.
- Know your group - understand the skill level and tastes of your group so you can give them optimal play.
- Start off by knowing what the desired result is...fun and camaraderie or one-on-one bonding with specific clients? Then choose the best site (with budget in mind) and the best format.

Dove Jones of World Golf Hospitality in Atlanta shows companies how to use golf in their meetings to achieve desired results, starting with knowing the purpose of the golf event and who the participants are. If the clients are top-level golfers whose goal for the day is to bond with specific individuals, then choose a challenging course and let them play their own ball.

However, if it's a group of players with diverse skills and the goal is to have a fun, casual day, typically a **four-person scramble** format is a great way to intermix a lot of different people. It works like this:



After each player hits his or her tee shot, the team selects the best positioned ball. Everyone else picks up their ball and moves to that spot. The next shot of the group is then played from that position and once again the best shot is selected and the team plays from that location. This procedure is followed until someone sinks the final putt, completing the hole. New players find putting easier than other golf shots and often sink the winning putt. Variations on the basic scramble format include a provision that each player's drive must be played at some time during the game,

as determined by the tournament organizer.

In addition to the choice of format, other considerations can help to put participants in the mood to achieve their total best:

- Be flexible in scheduling, understanding that sometimes an early morning tournament is better, with afternoon meetings and late evening activities on site.
- Be aware of players' abilities. Don't put a slow player (even if it's the president of the company) in the lead foursome or everyone will fall behind and so will the event schedule.

- **Let people know in advance how to make tee times at the resort or in the area, and perhaps block tee times in anticipation.**



- **Organize fun things to do at the golf event, such as:**

**1) Celebrity appearances** - Either a golf pro or a sports figure who plays golf. For instance, for an event in Chicago, Michael Jordan might be a popular celebrity choice. The star can offer a clinic, an exhibition, stay on one tee and hit drives with each foursome, play a hole with each group, be fun and personable or technical and serious, whatever your group wants. Price ranges from \$1,500 to \$60,000 for one day.

**2) Themes-** Hole sponsors, company shirts or hats, signage, goody bags in carts.

**3) Hole prizes** - Remember in corporate golf, while you want to recognize skill you also want to recognize everybody and so give recognition to other than the best players.

- 4) Photographs** - With the celebrity or if not, then on the signature hole of the course.



Don't rely on the director of golf to do all of this for you. They're generally very responsive and helpful but have other duties as well as the meeting. Don't expect them to anticipate your group's needs. They assume a planner understands the game and what is needed, i.e. the correct format for that group, the number of players, handicaps, starting times, name badges, carts, rental clubs, hospitality carts, boxed lunches, etc. To get the best results, find out key facts about a course from the golf director:

- **Is the course too tough for the group? Even though it may be the most famous course, like the Blue Monster at Doral or the TPC at Sawgrass, if it's too frustrating the group won't**



enjoy play as much.

- **Is the condition of the course appropriate to the level of the play of the participants? For example, if a pro tournament was played on the course over the weekend, on Tuesday, it may still reflect thick rough and more challenging conditions.**

- **Is the course being prepared for an upcoming tournament? La Costa in December prepares the course for its biggest tournament of the year. The Tournament of Champions, which takes place in January. If certain holes are roped off or under repair, cart use may be restricted.**

- **Is any maintenance scheduled that might interfere with play? Often maintenance takes place in the off-season, which may be just when you planned your event because the rates were so reasonable.**

Although new players may cringe in embarrassment and good players roll their eyes in dismay, corporate golf matches these unlikely players in a foursome, with excellent results. In skiing, the novice and the pro don't ski on the same hill and in tennis if you can't return the ball, you're soon out of the game. Dove Jones points out that golf is unique in that the handicap system allows players of unequal abilities or skill levels to play the same course together and enjoy it.



In golf a person essentially competes against her or himself. The five-handicapper knows his or her level and tries to best it, like the 30-handicapper. As in life, we're all given certain skills and handicaps and faced with challenges. Mindful of our past performances and fears of the future, we forge ahead, buoyed by our "playing partners" Ideally, we cheer each other's victories, empathize with losses, and encourage perseverance. When the game

is over, we've learned a lot about our partners and ourselves. And in the process, managed to discover that a five-hour business meeting can be fun.



***About the Author***

Cori Kenicer, RMP is a freelance writer living in San Mateo, California. She's a member of Bay Area Travel Writers, the California Golf Writers Association, the Golf Writer's Association of America and most importantly the International Society of Meeting Planners. Recent assignments have taken her to Europe, the Caribbean and the Canadian Rockies.

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International Society of  
Meeting Planners

**International Society of Meeting Planners**

P.O. Box 879 • Palm Springs, California 92263 USA

Tel: (877)743-6802 • Fax: (760)327-5631

E-mail: [info@ismp-assoc.org](mailto:info@ismp-assoc.org)

Website: <http://www.ismp-assoc.org>