

The Rise of TopGolf

by Duke Butterfield

In the late 1990s, the golf industry faced an existential crisis: remain a niche sport or rebrand as an entertainment option. That's when brothers and British entrepreneurs Steve and Dave Jolliffe had the idea for TopGolf. The concept originated as a way to infuse technology into the driving range experience. Microchipped golf balls and censored targets enable golfers to receive live feedback as to the precise accuracy of their shots as well as several other metrics on their swing.

But it quickly became clear that these advances in technology were not for the traditionalist; they weren't even for the golfer, per se. An independent study by Golf 20/20 found that only 63% of participants in TopGolf are current golfers, while almost 20% have "never played" and don't plan on starting. This "never played" percentage is higher than for any other alternative golf experience surveyed in the study. Instead, the experience seems to resonate with the athletic and competitive socialite.

Much like bowling alleys, TopGolf's driving range spots are organized in front of a seating area or "bay" with a live scoreboard. Up to six participants per bay drive golf balls out to a range with 11 targets. TopGolf also promotes the creation of leagues, offering competitive tournaments for the avid player. The golfing attraction at TopGolf is complemented by food and beverage options as well as music and TV for casual entertainment, with an atmosphere more akin to a sports bar than a traditional driving range.

This is good news for an industry looking to capture a younger audience. In fact, 53% of TopGolf participants are between the ages of 18 and 34. That translates to higher projected viewership for major golf events and main industry moneymakers such as The Masters, the U.S. Open, the British Open and The Players Championship.

But the golf industry is not the only beneficiary in the Rise of TopGolf, as casino developers are starting to catch on. Adding TopGolf as an amenity can shift the demographics of market penetration, drawing younger potential gamers to the casino facility. One TopGolf facility is already partnered with a casino in Las Vegas, the MGM Grand.

TopGolf currently has three locations in the U.K and 27 locations in the U.S., with 10 more under construction or planning. In the 21st century, where virtualization is dominating growth in just about every industry, TopGolf is hitting its stride with brick and mortar development.