



Check Your Bias

Are you barring capable learners and spenders from the game?

By Sue Shapcott

Golf's hot topic for the last few years has been women golfers – that is, how does the golf industry recruit and retain women in the game? Clearly, there are no easy answers for fixing the decades-long problem of women dropping out of golf.

The challenge faced by the golf industry is complex and consists of economic, social and lifestyle factors. The high attrition rate of women golfers is a multi-faceted problem that is best addressed from several angles – and that includes the role of PGA Professionals.

Data from the National Golf Foundation tells us that, as a percentage, more female golfers take golf lessons than male golfers – 33 percent to 24 percent, respectively. This data means that instructors are in a unique position to influence the motivation of women golfers in a positive way. But do they?

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In a recent study, I measured the attitudes of male and female golf instructors toward a “typical” male and female golfer. When faced with two recreational golfers of similar age, handicap and swing characteristics, male instructors indicated that the male golfer was more capable of improving than the female golfer. The female golf instructors did not hold

the same bias against the female player.

The bias held by many male instructors is not problematic on its own. What matters more is whether an instructor's bias against a female golfer's ability to improve translates to his or her behavior during coaching sessions.

So the question becomes, “Are instructors' attitudes toward female golfers predictive of their behavior toward them when coaching?”

Unfortunately, how instructors perceive their students' abilities to improve their games does affect their behavior. Those who had a bias against female players' ability to improve were more likely to give feedback like, “Don't worry, I'm sure you are good at things other than golf.” And, “Distance will never be your strength.”

Whether or not they thought this feedback was realistic, it was likely to make the female players believe that they had no control over improving their games. If golfers of any gender are not instilled with a sense of control over their games, why should we expect them to continue playing or practicing?

By contrast, instructors who perceived female golfers to have potential to improve were less likely to give discouraging feedback. They were more likely to give players a sense of control over their games. Some things they communicated were, “There is nothing in your swing that can't be fixed.” Or “Let's develop a step-by-step plan to improve your game.”

Motivationally speaking, this type of feedback is good because it communicates the potential for improving future golf performance. So even if her game isn't as good as she would like, explaining to her exactly how she can improve provides a reason to play and practice.

Instructors often give golfers comforting feedback, not motivating feedback. Regardless of gender, it's important to consider that all golfers want to believe that they can improve, and understand how to do so.

Perhaps the most revealing finding of my study is that golf instructors who were not biased against female golfers retained more female students. Golfers who were treated with the belief that they could improve took more lessons than those who were treated as if they had only a limited ability to control their game.

The data suggests we are failing many women golfers who step on to our lesson tees. And although golf instructors alone will not fix the low participation rate of female players, we can play our part.

Analyze and challenge the perceptions and interactions you have about and with female golfers. It may be the difference between your female client base staying in golf, or not. ■

Sue Shapcott is a British PGA Professional and the owner of Shapcott Golf (golf coach consulting) in Madison, Wisconsin.