



The Whalen Family: Alan Whalen, Jerry Whalen, Tim Whalen, Matt Whalen and Luke Whalen,

Customer orientation, family dedication drive Fiddler's Green success

By Jim Marks

You won't find the case history of Fiddler's Green in Eugene, Oregon in any book on "How to Start a Business." But it would certainly be a feature in "How to Run a Business."

The start was accidental and inauspicious. As son Luke and nephew Jerry tell it, Fiddler's Green patriarch Dan Whalen had simply been seeking to buy a business which would let him remain at home. After decades on the road, covering vast areas of the mid-west for an apparel company from his Minnesota home, doctors, and his heart, had told Dan he had to stay put or suffer extreme consequences.

Golf not originally on Whalen radar.

Following the doctor's suggestion, Whalen decided to look for a retail business – preferably a clothing business – that he could buy, and he and his family could run. He knew and liked the Eugene area, so decided to look there. Unfortunately, there were no clothing businesses to be had.

"What about a fast-food franchise?" the broker asked. Dan was amenable to the idea, but the only franchises available were too pricey. Then, after some thought, the broker suggested Dan look at a local golf range, one that would be described as a "fixer upper," or "needing TLC" if it were a house. Whalen reacted negatively.

"Golf!?! The closest thing I know to golf is Greek, because they both start with 'G,'" he said. "I wouldn't know what to do with a golf range."

According to family legend, the broker answered instantly. "No problem. *Anything* you did with the place would be an improvement." And that answer led to Dan Whalen buying the range in 1976.

Fiddler's Green now a giant.

Since buying the failing range, the family, (Dan, sons Tim, Matt, and

Alan, plus the aforementioned son Luke and nephew Jerry), has grown the business to be what their website calls "the largest on-course golf pro shop in America." There are over 13,000 square feet of floor space, plus thousands more of workshop and storage area. There's even a room and high-tech machinery dedicated solely to embroidering shirts, caps, jackets and even golf bags for individual or group customers. Including the Whalens, the staff numbers 85 in the summer, and 65 in the winter.

These days, having led the development of this nationally famous store, father Dan has now pretty much retired and spends a lot of time traveling for pleasure, instead of work. "But he pokes his head in the door every couple of days," reports Alan, who's the main Whalen when it comes to marketing and public relations.

Early days difficult and dangerous.

When the Whalens took over the range, father Dan would watch the place during the day while Mom took care of the boys, who were then still school age. Then Dan would go home for Daddy-duty, and she would go off to her night job. Things were made even tougher when the business was robbed three times during the first 90 days the Whalens owned it.

The thieves may have come from a rest stop just down Highway 99/N. It was then notorious as the most dangerous stop in all of Oregon and home to more than a few violent crimes, including murders. The place has now been cleaned up and made safe, but did little to encourage visitors to Fiddler's Green in the early days.

Building expanded 13 times.

The original Fiddler's Green building was in what is now the snack bar. Jerry pointed out that the original door from the parking lot was behind where the Pepsi machine now stands. In other areas of the present store you can see where a former small putting green was eliminated to make room for club inventory, or where a one-time chipping area was enclosed to create added bag storage. All told, the building has been expanded 13 times to accommodate growth and create more space with which to better serve customers.

There's even a small waterfall and fishpond in the store. It was originally put there to help create more of an outdoor atmosphere, and to help keep kids entertained while Mom or Dad shop. But many visitors see it as a wishing well, and throw coins into it, perhaps in an effort to enlist divine help for their golf games. In any case, Jerry admitted when asked, "Yeah, it has become sort of a profit center."

Range key to club sales.

There were no clubs sold at Fiddler's Green when the Whalen's took it over. Dan just added them in an attempt to increase revenue enough to keep feeding his family. These days, while the range is no longer the primary income generator, the Whalens have no doubt it is critical to their success. Golfers can pick up a club in the store, get a basic feel, and then, if they like, take it out to one of the range spots reserved for club trials and actually hit balls with it. Outdoors.



A view of the tee line into the landing area



All-weather, covered tee stalls

Not into a net. Not into a simulator screen. But outdoors, where golf is played.

In addition to giving potential buyers a place to try clubs, the lighted range also draws traffic into the store, and generates significant revenue itself. Jerry told us that so many balls are banged at Fiddler's Green that they go through 5,000 dozen range-balls a year.

a complete game improvement center, rather than simply a store or a range. PGA Professional Doug Chateau runs the school, which offers a full range of learning opportunities. He provides classic individual lessons for adults and juniors, with or without video, and arranged one at a time or in discounted packages of

new grips he or she wants. And while waiting, the customer can browse in the store, eat in the snack bar, or even try out some new sticks on the range. Whichever they choose, it's a win-win for them and Fiddler's.

If a golfer finds a club model he basically likes but needs to have the clubs

Since buying the failing range in 1979, the Whalen Family has grown the business: **Fiddler's Green is one of the largest on-course pro shops in America with 13,000 sq. ft of floor space; 20 trained clubfitters on staff; 220 sets of irons; 1,000 putters; hundreds of wedges; staff of 85 in the summer and 65 in the winter.**

Executive course draws singles, families.

In addition to the lighted range, Fiddler's Green has an 18-hole executive course. The 2,378 yard, par 54 layout over flat, easy-to-walk terrain is a great place for individual golfers to practice their iron games, or families to have a couple hours of outdoor fun together. With adult rates at \$9 for 9 holes and \$15 for 18 holes, and both junior and senior rates at \$7 for 9 holes and \$12 for 18, the course is a highly affordable way for golfers to play and improve.

Precision Golf School on premises.

Fiddler's Green has a Precision Golf School on site, the better to make itself

three or four lessons. Chateau also offers sessions using 3-D Digital Analysis, which he describes as "the ultimate state-of-the-art learning experience." And for those who prefer to learn in a group setting, there are clinics and classes for all skill levels, beginners' classes for ladies, and summer camp programs for juniors. It's all a reflection of the customer service orientation that permeates the entire Fiddler's Green operation.

Regripping while you wait, club fitters at the ready.

For golfers who need new grips, Fiddler's Green can provide them on the spot. Trained staff can re-grip a set of clubs in minutes once the customer selects the

fitted, Fiddler's Green can custom fit on premises as well. There are 20 trained club fitters on staff, and they have fitting carts from just about every major manufacturer available. So whatever brand or model the golfer chooses, whatever the body type, whatever the specification changes needed – more upright or flatter lies, stronger or weaker lofts, bigger or smaller grips – Fiddler's can provide the skill and expertise to make the clubs properly fit the individual customer.

Massive selection provides customer choice.

The choice of clubs at Fiddler's Green is close to mind boggling. There are 220

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sets of irons for right-handed or left-handed golfers, male or female. Amazingly, according to Jerry Whelan, there are eight or nine left-handed *women's* sets to choose from. That could well be more than most on-course shops have for left-handed men. The store also has a separate Putters and Wedges Room that houses over 1,000 putters which golfers can try on the indoor putting green. Or they can try one of the hundreds of wedges on the range, or the separate chipping area. There is also a separate Golf Bag Room for cart bags, carry bags with and without stands, and travel covers.

Out on the floor, there are over 1,000 woods, from the latest 460cc adjustable drivers to woods made of actual wood. The clothing sections contain what the Whalens say is the largest selection of men's and women's golf attire on the west coast. Golfers who don't want their spouses discovering great buys had best not leave them alone in the store, where they'll find everything from cashmere sweaters to crew socks. There is also a vast collection of accessories, from the latest rangefinders to the simplest divot tools, and a media department full of books, tapes and CD's it would probably take months to go through. Basically, if it has to do with golf, Fiddler's Green has it. So the place is, as the Whalens like to say, "the golfers candy store."

Website, E-mail keys to marketing.

Marketing chief Alan Whelan, a marathon runner, doesn't believe in fancy footwork in his hobby or his job. He believes in a straightforward approach and honest communications that serve the customers needs, not the corporate ego. That's why, for example, the Fiddler's Green E-mail campaign goes only to those who have signed up to receive it. And even when they do, they are always given two chances to opt out. They are actually asked, "Do you really want to be on this list?"

The Fiddler's Website – www.fiddlersgreen.com – is a reflection of the company. It's straightforward and customer-oriented. It's even so humble it doesn't use any capital letters.



13,000 sq. ft. of floor space for the pro shop



Fiddler's Green has a custom embroidery shop



20 trained clubfitters on staff with extensive repair business

Instead of leading with some fancy graphics, or a heart-warming story about the Whalen family, the home page features merchandise the user is probably looking for, and an easy-to-use directory to find anything the site visitor is looking for. Only at the bottom of the page, in small type, is there a heading that says "about fiddlers green." And if you follow the link, you won't be blown over by scenes of famous courses backed by inspiring music. All you'll get are a couple of simple paragraphs about the store's history and philosophy, and a "thank you" from the Whalens.

Map giveaway used effectively.

Each year, Fiddler's Green prints and distributes 300,000 maps of all the courses in Oregon and Washington. Alan, Jerry and Luke Whalen all agreed that it was one of their most effective promotion pieces. It serves a customer need, and has a long useful life. Whether it is stuffed in the clothing compartment of a golf bag, or in the glove compartment of a car, it is available when needed to help the golfer find a course to play. And to remind him about Fiddler's Green.

"Golfers are tough to reach," Alan Whalen said. "There's too much waste in radio and TV, so we don't use them." He went on to say that the company used to print and mail catalogs twice a year, but found they weren't effective for Fiddler's. Whalen does use local newspapers, especially for holiday ads. He also uses the Yellow Pages. "But the greatest marketing," he believes, "is providing your customer with a fantastic experience when he comes in the store."

Considering that Fiddler's Green has become the largest on-course golf pro shop in America; and considering that it has become a destination in itself, drawing customers from as far away as Redding, California, 313 miles to the south, one has to conclude that the Whalens do provide their customers with a fantastic experience. In the process, they have developed a model from which many companies, in and out of golf, could learn. ●