

The Business Journal of Phoenix - June 26, 2006

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## ProLink brings advertising to golf carts

The Business Journal of Phoenix - June 23, 2006 by [Adam Kress](#) The Business Journal

Many golfers hit the course to get away from the hectic pace of everyday life. The cell phone or "CrackBerry" is left in the car, maybe a cigar is lit and a few beers are consumed among friends.

So if you've decided to get away from all the trappings of modern society for a few precious hours, would you want to see ads staring at you from your golf cart?

**ProLink Solutions LLC**, a manufacturer of global positioning systems used in golf carts on many of the country's finer courses, is betting you won't. Advertisers are eager to reach an affluent and captive audience rolling down manicured fairways across the country.

Chandler-based ProLink has resisted ads on its seven- and 10-inch GPS screens for years, but now the company is rolling out its Pro-Fit advertising and revenue-sharing program at its partner courses. The ads won't include any audio or video components, just a few different static images per hole -- usually on about one-third of the screen space.

"Over the years, we've been very careful not to fall into the trap of inundating people with ads," said Larry Bain, ProLink chief executive. "But advertisers have been breathing down our necks. They want to get to this very lucrative market."

ProLink has been in business 14 years and from the beginning, Bain said there were requests to include advertising on the cart-mounted GPS displays. The company resisted until now, but with screens on more than 35,000 golf carts, Bain believes there was a critical mass to reach.

"I don't think we ever had enough courses in a given market or nationally for it to make sense," Bain explained. "It just wasn't enough eyeballs."

ProLink has its GPS systems on nearly 600 U.S.'s golf courses and more than 100 others overseas.

The company's primary model for selling the ads requires golf courses to do very little, but still collect a good chunk of advertising revenue. ProLink representatives sell the ads for the carts, and the company and the individual course split the ad dollars 50/50.

Bain said this system was put into place to make it easier for courses to purchase its GPS system -- which generally costs about \$5,000 a month for an average course fleet of about 75 carts. Now, it could only cost a course \$2,000 or less.

"It gives us the ability to share revenue with the golf courses, and the golf courses don't have to sell anything," Bain said. "We'll advance the courses the ad revenue so their cost for buying or paying for a system is less."

Arizona courses have yet to roll out the Pro-Fit program, but advertisers in Indiana already have started using the GPS screens for exposure.

"The big reason we did it is because it's a great demographic for us," said Kari Mann, director of

marketing at Citizens Bank in Indianapolis. "And the ads are very visible."

Mann, who was reached by phone this week while golfing, said her ad runs on the first hole of The Links at Heartland Crossing golf course, and every golfer who plays the course sees it.

Dave Gustafson, vice president of [Place Builders Inc.](#), a South Bend, Ind., home builder, has been using golf cart advertising through ProLink for nearly four years. In the past, ProLink has allowed its partner courses to sell their own ads, but Bain said only a small handful of them did.

The ads for Place Builders have been running on the Blackthorn Golf Club in South Bend as part of a larger branding campaign.

"This advertising was less expensive than traditional media," Gustafson said. "We'd spend \$2,000 on a single print ad, and \$4,400 annually on the golf carts."

Gustafson also mentioned the golf demographic -- still mostly wealthy, white men in their 40s or 50s -- as a major part of the golf cart ads' appeal.

"These are people who usually have enough money to buy a new house," he said.

But while advertisers are beginning to jump on the bandwagon of this new medium, not everyone is so sure these ads are a good idea.

Dan Santy, an avid golfer and the owner of [Santy Advertising](#), said he likes the concept from an advertiser's standpoint, but not necessarily from a golfer's.

"The upside is the relevance of the audience -- there's a lot of data on what golfers like," he said. "But I'd probably be a little irritated at first, because I'm out golfing, and it's an intrusion. My question would be, 'Can I turn it off?'"

Golfers would not have the ability to turn off the ads, but Bain said one advantage to this means of advertising is that ads regularly could be tweaked to promote new products or services, for example.

Bain envisions the ads being split about 50/50 between local and national clients. Santy said multinational firms could give the system a try with little risk.

"Companies such as Miller or Ford can carve out a nickel from their budget without much sacrifice," he said.

ProLink already has run a pilot program with Cadillac and has just begun one with HBO to promote its series "Entourage." The reports from the Cadillac trial in 2005 show that the ads were memorable to golfers.

[Edison Media Research](#) polled 421 respondents at four Dallas-area courses for ProLink and Cadillac, and while 42 percent said they noticed the advertising, 54 percent of that group said they recalled the ad specifically being for Cadillac.

While ProLink is particularly careful not to intrude on the golfers' experience on the course or slow down play, there's no denying that more and more people "stay connected" while they're playing, through their phone or other devices.

"Down the road, we could add sports scores or a stock ticker to the screens," Bain said. "There are a lot of people who are checking their BlackBerry after every shot anyway."

Bain sees the introduction of advertising to its GPS screens as no less than a revolutionary move for his company.

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