

How I turned round an ailing business

How a struggling leisure centre owner gained the confidence and skills to rejuvenate her ailing business and seek out new markets



Gillian Robson, 60, took over the running of Gubeon Golf Centre in Morpeth, Northumberland following the death of her husband in 1996 and believes the business is now 'turning the corner'.

She says she is starting to take risks now and is confidently able to do so armed with new basic skills taken from modules of the BIIAB Profitable Business Portfolio (PBP).

The centre is isolated, definitely a destination venue, and Gillian acknowledges she'd been running the business in a 'cocoon' without taking account of nearby competitors.

Taking the 'Understanding Your Market' module changed all this.

"Visiting my competitors, which are mainly larger than us, made me realise we have a valuable niche market consisting of beginners and families," says Gillian. "We've been teaching juniors to play golf for a few years now but I've really decided to go for it and found a professional willing to teach youngsters, not that easy as many think it beneath them to do it."

Gillian also raised prices across the board. A 25% increase in the cost of using the driving range; £1 on the cost of a round of nine holes to £7 and around 30p on drinks such as Bud which has contributed to an overall increase in wet GPs from 37% to 45%.

"When I pick products up from the cash and carry they often have a recommended selling price which I blindly followed," says Gillian. "I saw what they were charging in some of the larger golf centres and in town and we're still way below that but I'm happy with my pricing which is right for my market and I've increased profitability quite significantly."

Seeking new markets

While the business turns over around £200,000 annually the weather plays a huge part, says Gillian with summer daily green fees of £1,000 sometimes dropping to just £10 in bad weather. Taking the PBP gave Gillian the confidence to seek out alternative opportunities.

"My husband was a farmer and the golf centre came about because of a farm diversification scheme so I thought I'd take it a stage further." She visited local farmers markets and thought she could at least equal the quality of the produce on offer. "I'm paying my kitchen staff anyway to

provide meals for golfers so I thought why not have them make pies and quiches to sell at the markets," Gillian says. "She now attends two markets a month which brings in around £400.

Further successful expansion

Similarly Gillian realised that there were several sheltered housing blocks nearby, all at least three miles from the nearest shops. She approached the management and now provides home-made food including sausage rolls and quiches to five units every two weeks bringing in another £1,000 monthly. There are regular training sessions at the units and Gillian has started to get work supplying buffet lunches.

"This is also a great form of advertising and we almost immediately started getting visits from residents and their families for coffees and meals," says Gillian. "We'd never have had this business if we hadn't started delivering the food."

The weekly and Sunday lunch market has grown on the back of this and knowing her market Gillian's menu features dishes such as mince and dumplings, lamb and bacon hotpot, pies, baked potatoes and quiches, it succeeds in offering families value for money 'home-made' cooking.

Full use of staff

The two full-time greenkeepers are also sub-contracted out doing clearance work and hedge cutting in the local area with the money from this more than compensating for their salaries. With the centre open from 7am until 10pm in summer and 9pm in winter due to the floodlit driving range there is more than enough time for the centre's nine holes to be tended.

Gillian used information from the 'Merchandising and Selling' PBP unit to change her customers' drinking habits. She took a leaf out of Jamie Oliver's book and steered her younger customers away from sugary fizzy drinks to healthier fruit-based options simply by removing them from the 'eye level' display and moving them lower down. The new drinks have 'sports caps' which mean they can be taken onto the golf course and it has cut down dramatically on glass washing in the café. Parents appreciate the effort and the drinks also deliver 2% higher GPs than the previous offer.

She says: "I wish these qualifications had been around 10 years ago, they are totally inspirational and made me step back from the business and see what really can be achieved. I actually have a unique selling point over other local clubs in being youngster and family-friendly, it took the PBP for me to see it though!"

Gillian's new found confidence seemingly knows no bounds - last month she exhibited at the Living North Christmas Exhibition at Gosford Park Racecourse along with all the region's top catering and craft food sellers.

Details on BIIAB's Profitable Business Portfolio www.biiab.org or Tel: 01276 684449 and ask for Quality Assurance

Gillian trained with Marjorie Brenikov Associates using European Social Fund money through the Learning and Skills Council. The course is offered without any charge to employers or candidates in the North East. More details from marjorie@brenikov.co.uk or 0191 281 3520