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BUSINESS

Taylor Made's new 'storymercial' designed to educate consumers

By ADAM BARR

Ah, infomercials. Where else can you learn so much and be so entertained by ab flexors, psychic networks and miracle stain removal?

And now, longer, straighter drives.

People at Taylor Made Golf Co. wince when they hear the word "infomercial" used to describe the company's new television presentation.

"We prefer 'storymercial,'" said Taylor Made product marketing manager Mike Kelly.

At first glance, Taylor Made's new presentation looks like the long advertisements that insomniacs watch on cable every night. But don't touch that dial. Kelly insists that the nearly 30-minute spot, with PGA Tour member and CBS golf announcer Gary McCord as its host, is different from the shows that sell cleaners, exercise gear and even other brands of golf clubs.

"There's no direct selling. We just refer people to our catalog, or to a number they can call for more information," Kelly said. "We have so many competitors out there, consumers get overwhelmed."

Kelly said the idea is to educate consumers and get them to try the product, which is difficult to do in the usual 30-second or 1-minute advertising format.

So with the help of McCord, Taylor Made's tour staff and some willing amateurs, Taylor Made communicates its message about Burner Bubble products with

testimonials and demonstrations. As you might expect, the words "longer," "straighter," and "higher" are used a lot.

But the timing is as important as the message, Kelly said. Instead of 2 a.m. spots, Taylor Made's "storymercial" will air before and after tournament broadcasts. Other times may be selected based on test runs in 22 cities the weekend of March 30-31, but Kelly said the timing will be arranged to avoid the late-night infomercial cliché.

The Taylor Made spot will be formally rolled out on Masters weekend. In addition to spots around the Masters, Taylor Made will run the spot on a full schedule on The Golf Channel, with regional sports buys on ESPN, Sports Channel, and Prime Sports Network. The total media cost for a 12 week run is \$1.2 million.

Taylor Made staffers Helen Alfredsson, Mark O'Meara, Tom Lehman, Brad Bryant and Kenny Perry appear in the spot, as does Seattle Mariners outfielder Ken Griffey Jr. Taylor Made spent about \$2.2 million on the project, filmed at Grayhawk Golf Club in Scottsdale, Ariz., and Dove Canyon Country Club in Mission Viejo, Calif.

Measuring results from a purely educational venture like this can be iffy, but Kelly said it all depends what you're looking for. Although it may not be possible to tie eventual sales to a viewing of the spot, Taylor Made marketers will have the

numbers of call-in inquiries within days of initial broadcasts. That should at least indicate the level of consumer interest.

"It's part of the mixture, part of our whole integrated marketing campaign," Kelly said.

That marketing effort includes demo days, when consumers can try 124 Taylor Made clubs, including women's and left-handed models, titanium clubs and irons. Last year, only 24 clubs were available for demos, most of them woods. Taylor Made also has an Internet site that is getting about 1,000 "hits" daily. The next step there, Kelly said, is to measure the quality of the hits—how long people stayed and what they looked at.

It will all lead, Taylor Made hopes, to people trying clubs. The desire to "test drive" clubs has been a growing concern among equipment manufacturers, so much so that "off-the-rack" sales are becoming rare. With premium irons costing upwards of \$700 retail, clubs have become undisputed big-ticket items, no less than televisions and washing machines.

That makes getting people to try the product all the more important, said Ron Goldblatt, general manager of golf clubs worldwide for the Top-Flite Golf Club Co. "We had to get consumer awareness up, which we did with ads," he said, "but we also had to get people to try the product."

Top-Flite considered an infomercial, Goldblatt said, and still

may do something along those lines. But for now, the company is relying on a "tech rep" program that sends technical sales representatives to ranges nationwide and gives players the chance to try clubs. "That puts us on a level playing field, and gives us the opportunity to make a sale," Goldblatt said.

The Internet also figures heavily in Top-Flite's plans. The Top-Flite site debuted April 1, offering what Goldblatt called "the best opportunity for the consumer to get detailed technical information." Interactive question-and-answer fittings for balls and clubs are available, as well as electronic mail for other queries. Top-Flite promises answers to e-mail within 24 hours.

There is precedent for Taylor Made's venture. "I am a firm believer that (such presentations are) the next big thing," said Lawrence Crum, an independent golf marketing analyst in Northbrook, Ill. Crum worked on an infomercial for Alien Sport Inc., which started its business with television sales about a year and a half ago. Crum said the high expense of the Alien infomercial—"six digits," he said—has been worth it. Alien sold 200,000 units in 18 months, said Alien marketing VP Bruce Goslin. Alien ran their infomercial outside the usual time slots, getting some daytime exposure. Crum said that, and good production values, led to Alien's success.