



DRTV Profile

Infomercial Is Driving Factor in Golf Club Success

By Denise Duclaux

Barney Adams, president of Adams Golf; Plano, TX, stood 30 feet from his 1,500 square foot booth at Orlando's PGA Merchandise Show this month, observed its bustling activity and thought: "This can't be me."

Adams, 59, had attended the PGA show countless times during his rocky career as a golf-club designer. He often manned the smallest exhibition booth of the show, his lonely vigil interrupted only by friends who stopped by for a quick "hello."

"It's just a different world now," Adams said as he watched more than 30 employees staff his latest booth and welcome a swarm of golfers eager to test-swing his clubs. "Part of you is extraordinarily grateful and the other part of you recognizes the challenge that is inherent in that



Barney Adams scored a hole-in-one with an infomercial for his golf club, Tight Lies.

situation—like don't let this be a one-shot deal. Show everybody you're going to be here for a while."

Adams, who has been a golf fan since his caddie days at the age of 12, began designing golf clubs about three decades ago, originally as a hobby and later for a living.

But success eluded him until he aired an infomercial last spring to promote his Tight Lies wood. The 30-minute commercial transformed him from a long shot to a big shot.

His company earned \$37 million in 1997, 10 times what it earned the previous year. Stories of his arrival ran in publications such as The New York Times, Sports Illustrated, Golf World and Inc. magazine. And his winning formula was imitated by rivals such as Top-Flite Golf, Ray Cook, Cubic Balance, Orlimar and Competence Golf.

"I had people from the industry saying, 'My God, Barney, they ought to be sending you a commission check; people are doing infomercials left and right,'" Adams said. "At the risk of sounding arrogant, and I don't by any stretch of the imagination mean to sound that way, doing an infomercial is one thing, but unless you've got the product, you're wasting your money."

Before designing golf clubs full-time, Adams worked as a field engineer at Dow Corning and as a low-level consultant to small Silicon Valley firms. His stint as a consultant led him to the troubled Feather-Lite golf shaft company in the 1970s, which was eventually snuffed out by a Texas economic drought. Adams purchased its fixtures and equipment and founded Adams Golf in Abilene, TX.

'Scared to Death'

He began selling component parts to club makers, but was often asked to supply knockoffs of well-known brands. Deciding that a life of imitation wasn't for him, Adams moved to Dallas to custom fit golf clubs and hoped that the

metropolitan area would provide him with enough customers to keep his career afloat. But his phone seldom rang.

"I can't say that I ever regretted giving up my day job, but I can say that I was scared to death most of the time," Adams said. "But, you know, I either have a lot of resolve or I'm dumb, one of the two."

The latter option seems unlikely in light of



Script to Screen produced the 30-minute show, which features veteran announcer Jack Whitaker.

Adams' track record, which peaked with his creation of Tight Lies. Traditionally, manufacturers had attempted to resolve golfers' difficulty in using long irons by designing larger, deep-faced fairway woods. Adams however, designed a shallow-faced fairway wood with a low center of gravity. Clients were thrilled with the new club, and word-of-mouth spread.

"When we started making Tight Lies, we would get phone calls from friends of people

who had one," Adams said. "That woke us up to the fact that maybe there was a product here that had a life of its own."

After huddling with Mark Gonsalves, vice president of sales and marketing, Adams hired a team of four telemarketers to sell Tight Lies to golf pro shops and retailers. Sales jumped from \$1 million in 1995 to \$3.5 million in 1996.

The company needed a more aggressive effort but lacked the capital for more conventional marketing programs. When Gonsalves suggested an infomercial, his boss was leery of the idea.

"I thought [infomercials] didn't tell the truth, that they sold junk, that they made promises that were ridiculous, that they were an embarrassment," Adams said. "But I didn't have a hell of a lot of choice, that was the big thing."

Alien Success Inspiring

Adams overcame his trepidation. He was heartened by the success and quality of the Alien Ultimate Wedge golf infomercial, although Alien eventually declared bankruptcy.

Just as Adams was calling Script to Screen, the Santa Ana, CA-based firm that produced Alien's infomercial, Script to Screen's president was placing a call to Adams Golf.

"It was sort of like ships in the night contacting each other. It was an interesting coincidence," said Tony Kerry, vice president of marketing at Script to Screen. "We really felt that their product would be great for an infomercial. Our president had bought one of Adams' products and was just a huge fan of the club. At the same time they were interested in having us produce the infomercial." Adams came up with more than \$600,000, all his company could afford, to produce and test the infomercial. He then crossed his fingers and waited.

"I spent about six weeks of my life when I didn't sleep more than an hour at a time," Adams said.

Hosted by veteran announcer Jack Whitaker and featuring former PGA Teacher of the Year Hank Haney, former British Open champion Bill Rogers and LPGA Hall of Famer Carol Mann, the infomercial demonstrates the patented technologies that allow Adams' club to maneuver golf balls out of nightmare situations or "tight lies." Viewers are advised to call a toll-free number to order the 16-degree club, which costs \$159.80 in steel and \$219.80 in graphite.

"A lot of people have told us that the infomercial kind of reeks of honesty and integrity while many infomercials are full of hype and over promise," Kerry said.

Last year Adams Golf hired a dozen more outbound telemarketers. Now it plans to move to a 67,000-square-foot facility 25 yards from its current 25,000-square-foot building. The company, which had just 18 employees in 1995, now tops 180.

Although only the original 16-degree club is advertised in the infomercials, a line of related clubs are now available. Adams estimates that 80 percent of those who buy the 16-degree club buy another club from his line.

Driving Retail

Adams, who doesn't play much golf these days, will release a new line of products this fall and doesn't rule out the possibility of another infomercial. He will continue airing the original as well as using a series of direct-response print ads and radio spots. But he warns that his company's focus on direct marketing may be misleading.

"Our whole intention from day one is to drive retail; we are not intending to be a direct response company," Adams said. "We have taken the whole direct response world so to speak and we have pushed it as far as we can to drive retail. The game plan hasn't changed."

Although Adams is breathing easier now, he refused to regard his company as a success.

"We have a formula here that success equals progress over time," Adams said. "We are performing at the progress level, and as we continue, the time level will take care of itself."

"The analogy I use is restaurants. How many new restaurants have you gone to where you can't get near the place? It's the world's greatest this, the world's greatest that. You go back six months later, and it's a bowling alley. We recognize that we are very fortunate, but we also recognize that we have to keep it going." ■

