



# THE TRUTH BEHIND INFOMERCIALS

Tacky and classy alike, they've gone legit as marketing tools

BY BRUCE SELCRAIG

**A** nutty professor, complete with moppish wig, lab coat and goofy German accent, appears on the TV screen caressing a cylindrical-headed putter that looks like a plump wiener on a stick. "I hoff got it, I hoff got it," he exclaims to his B-movie blond assistant. "Sir Isaac Newton's laws of motion hoff created zee pairfect golf putter. But vaht vill vee call it?"

Suddenly the lab's actor-in-a-gorilla-suit, whose dinner-theater voice seems overdubbed from a pay phone in Jakarta, springs to life and announces: "Why, the Green Gorilla, of course."

Game-show music swells. Chirpy, fist-pumping amateurs start sinking 20-foot putts. And then golf video instruction huckster Wally Armstrong declares that from the moment he first used the Green Gorilla putter, "I knew the game of golf would never be the same."

But wait, there's more. The author of something called *Combat Golf* stares down at us à la the Jolly Green Giant and says, with a face as straight as Janet Reno's: "The Green Gorilla literally wraps its arms around your opponent and crushes without mercy. It will destroy any opponent in head-to-head competition."

Purists might view them as insipid, insulting, comical, fraudulent or just a monumental waste, but who can deny the understated elegance of a truly fine golf infomercial—TV's 30-minute whoopee cushion for golf's often pompous bottom?

### Ripe for lampooning

Who can keep a straight face when the carry-barker voice selling the Sam 2000, a circular swing-trainer made of PVC pipe, promises: "Twenty minutes a day is all it takes for you to create the perfect golf swing. You will cut your handicap in half in just 21 days."

Money can't buy this kind of fun.

Blessedly, golf infomercials are still ripe for lampooning, even if the industry wants us to think they are now as sober as "Meet the Press." They still promise golf nirvana in three easy payments. Poor acting seems almost encouraged. And the Royal and Ancient will be selling Ginsu knives before

you'll ever hear an infomercial say you might actually need to practice.

But there *are* signs of change. Some golf infomercials have gone nearly respectable, and a select few have proved so wildly successful for small companies that they've enticed image-conscious stars like Greg Norman and Jack Nicklaus, and established firms like Taylor Made, Ray Cook and Top-Flite to take the 30-minute plunge.

"It was a big step for me, because infomercials are perceived as being at the bottom of the totem pole," says Norman of his pitch for the eponymous Greg Norman's Secret, a plastic training device for the wrist. "But they get to the masses."

"We saw the need to fully explain the technology in our new Bubble shaft," says Taylor Made CEO George Montgomery, "and we could not do that in 30 seconds."

Montgomery says that after Taylor Made aired its first infomercial in 1996 as part of a \$30 million marketing launch of Burner Bubble clubs, surveys showed 88 percent of viewers who called the company's 800 number intended to purchase clubs and 89 percent thought Taylor Made "more innovative" after watching the show. "Those numbers," says Montgomery, "are tremendous."

And while they're not quite ready to rub elbows with the Body by Jake Hip & Thigh Machine, the powers at Ping, Titleist, Callaway and Cobra no longer blithely dismiss the marketing potential of 30-minute hyper-ads.

"They have more visibility than our industry gives them credit for," says Ping spokesman Bob Cantin. "There is definitely a use for them."

"I won't say we won't ever do one," says Ely Callaway, head of one of the most profitable golf companies on earth. "But

our commercials work. All we do is state the facts. In 1997, of every pro tour, 60 percent of the players used a Big Bertha driver. If you can't say that, maybe you *should* do an infomercial."

Callaway is right. Infomercials aren't for everyone, but as more corporations like Nissan and Coca-Cola try them, the resistance lessens. Companies now know that infomercials aren't just for insomniacs and low-rent Oprahphiles. The Alien Wedge's makers reported that 36 percent of their infomercial customers had postgraduate degrees.

### Instantaneous feedback

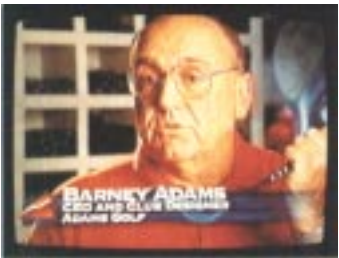
Infomercials no longer simply push telephone orders. Now they're primarily used to drive retail sales—hence the little label on many store items: "As Seen On TV." And unlike conventional TV spots that may use vague, trendy art that doesn't even mention a specific product, infomercials and their toll-free lines tell companies almost immediately if the ad is working.

"I used to spend 80 percent of my time trying to convince people on the idea," says Tony Kerry, vice president of marketing and public relations for Script to Screen, a successful Santa Ana, Calif., infomercial producer. "Now I don't have to do that. Either people get it, or they don't."

One older, established company that listened to Kerry's pitch is Ray Cook, whose infomercial for the M1-Xi mallet putter began airing in February. Cook's putters have won more than 200 PGA Tour events

This message brought to you by, Taylor Made, Green Gorilla Golf, Tight Lies, Sam 200, Golden Bear Putter, John Daly's PowerGroove, Greg Norman's Secret, Black Rock Golf's Killer Bee and the Alien Ultimate Wedge.





Tight Lies' winning formula includes testimonials from instructor Hank Haney (top) and company CEO Barney Adams

A staple of infomercials is the enthusiastic, rapidly improving amateur; from top, for Norman's Secret, Killer Bee and Tight Lies



in the last 35 years, and its annual sales rank fourth behind Odyssey, Ping and Titleist—with a fraction of their ad budgets. “We have a great reputation within the golf fraternity, but no image whatsoever with the new golfer,” says Cook president Bob Bauer. “I’m tired of sitting next to people on airplanes who have never heard of Ray Cook.”

“We’re one of the last putter companies that hasn’t been swallowed up. We must find a way to compete.... I hope this [infomercial] is it.”

### The Tight Lies model

Like many, Bauer is hoping to duplicate the recent phenomenon of what used to be a small but respected Texas custom-club maker. Barney Adams believed his firm, located in the Dallas suburb of Plano, had a great product—low-slung, high-trajectory, 16 degree fairway wood called the Tight Lies.

With only \$1 million in sales in 1995, Adams began telemarketing the Tight Lies to golf store and club pros. Eighty percent of those cold calls hung up on Adams, he says, but by the end of 1996, sales were up to \$3.5 million.

“But if we didn’t do something more,” thought Adams, “someone would just run us over [with knockoffs] and we couldn’t protect ourselves.”

So Adams researched every golf infomercial he could find—“most were disgusting”—and questioned scores of infomercial producers, their clients and club-buying customers.

“I swore that if we did an infomercial,” Adams says, “it wouldn’t be like the others.” He wanted to deceptive editing—ball leaves clubface (cut), ball soars through air (cut), ball trickles to pin—no outrageous claims or unbelievable testimonials, and no nongolf celebrity endorsers.

“I had been in the business 10 years,” says Adams, “and I knew I had a product that worked. I have every dime, my entire life, in that business. I didn’t want to be embarrassed.”

Budgeting \$650,000—double or triple what many golf companies have spent—Adams lined up as the host one of golf’s most recognizable voices, Jack Whitaker. Adams chose Script to Screen to make the show, which took an unusually long six days to shoot because of unruly Texas weather.

The result was every bit an infomercial—“Four easy payments of \$39.95,” “the tri-level sole assures that you make solid contact with every swing” (we wish)—but it definitely had a different feel. It was informative and persuasive without insulting your intelligence.

The National Infomercial Marketing Association awarded the Tight Lies show “best demonstration infomercial” of 1997. An informal GOLF DIGEST focus group of a dozen Austin (Tex.) amateur golfers chose the Tight Lies infomercial as the most believable of 13 they viewed. (The Sam 2000 and Green Gorilla tied for least credible.)

“I was really impressed that Adams doesn’t pay pro golfers to use his clubs,”

remarked Brad, a 5-handicapper. “There was no bull,” said Alicia, a total beginner. “It was all business.”

Says Adams: “We blew the doors off established golf history.” Gross sales in 1997 surpassed \$30 million, and the Tight Lies was voted “breakthrough product of the year” by an industry group. (By comparison, other infomercial legends, like the Healthrider exercise equipment and Victoria Jackson cosmetics have made more than \$200 million each.)

Now the golf industry is watching carefully for Adams’ encore, because they all remember what happened to the last infomercial phenom.

Alien Sport was an invisible, six-month-old company with four employees in July 1994 when it aired its first Ultimate Wedge infomercial, featuring didn’t-they-used-to-be’s, such as former NFL quarterback Jim Plunkett and actress Lee Meriwether, playing effortlessly out of bunkers with what looked like the dimpled front end of a steam iron.

The response from high handicappers and women was astonishing. In the critical first six months, Alien grossed \$6 million. In three years it sold 400,000 clubs (at about \$100 each), and attracted at least 13 knockoff imitations, according to the company. Total cost: about \$300,000, excluding royalty payments to “talent,” like tour player-commentator Jerry Pate, who admits he never actually carried the Alien in his bag.

But Alien was a one-trick pony. The company abandoned infomercials for its second offering, the Tutch Putter, and watched it fail miserably. Last year the Alien name and assets were sold to Nitro Golf.

### Thank ‘The Gipper’

Fittingly, a former actor and Borax pitchman, Ronald Reagan, helped make the modern infomercial possible. In 1984, in the spirit of Reagan’s deregulation fervor, the Federal Communications Commission lifted the restraints on television stations that prevented them from airing more than 12 to 14 minutes of advertising per hour. Some fledgling cable networks had already experimented with long commercials in the late ‘70s, but the infomercial format we know today really began, says the industry’s father figure and veteran producer, Timothy Hawthorne, with Herbalife’s Sunday evening pep rallies on the USA Network.

Since then the industry has grown from annual sales of about \$10 million to nearly \$1.5 billion in 1997. Climbing with that revenue, however, has been the cost of television time.

Rates for “media buys” vary widely. In 1985, an advertiser could purchase time on cable at an average cost of about \$250 per half-hour. Now a weekend morning half-hour on The Golf Channel, with its 15 million subscribers, could cost around \$9,500, and a half hour on CNBC or Lifetime (with 65 million subscribers) perhaps two to three times that.

Jim Harrison, a consultant from Weed, Calif., who worked on the Tight Lies project, says that to influence retail sales,

companies should spend at least \$300,000 to \$400,000 per month on commercial time for one product. Big operators like Adams Golf, says Harrison, spend \$1 million or more a month.

An infomercial’s worth is usually gauged by its response rate—the amount of money brought in per advertising dollar. In a business where simply breaking even between telephone sales and advertising costs is considered a success, fewer than one in 10 infomercials actually make a marketing profit. That is why the Tight Lies story still astounds the industry. Adams reportedly generated more than \$2.70 for each ad dollar spent.

### The product-as-hero

Infomercials often look simple to produce, but in order to make them as addictive as potato chip they follow time-tested formulas. Harrison says infomercials inevitably fail when they forget two rules: First, the talent must have credibility. And second, the product is always the hero of the show.

“People will watch Greg Norman,” says Harrison, “but they don’t buy Greg Norman. You must have a great product.” A founder of defunct Alien Sport, Harrison says his company blundered when it used former NFL coach and TV analyst John Madden in some “obtuse” artsy ads for its Tutch Putter. “Madden was talking about the challenges of life and all,” Harrison says, “but he had no credibility about golf clubs.”

Here are some other local rules most infomercials follow:

- Say the name of the product at least three times in the first 30 seconds. You’ve got two to 10 seconds to catch the average channel surfer.
- Don’t ask for money before the six-minute mark.
- Show the problem. Show the solution. Show the customer satisfied.
- Price the TV product higher than the in-store version to drive retail sales. But throw in freebies with the TV offer as an added “value.”

Perhaps you’ve also noticed that infomercials repeat themselves. “My advice,” says producer Scott Opfer, maker of the Green Gorilla infomercial, “is tell them what you’re selling, then tell them what you’re selling, then tell them what you’re selling.”

That’s the easy, paint-by-numbers part. The more difficult job is finding the right chemistry of celebrity host, information, product value and emotion.

### Can’t miss or can’t win?

Nicklaus Golf did an infomercial with what you might think would be can’t-miss ingredients—an oversize, less-skid putter called the Golden Bear with the greatest golfer in history hawking it for three easy payments of \$39.95. But the show, which was free of outrageous claims, was doomed from the start by too many Nicklaus film clips, dreadful hosting by ESPN golf host Jim Kelly, unconvincing amateurs and the kind of on-air excitement that would make you long for C-Span. The show was quickly

pulled.

The putter's depressing sales still baffle Nicklaus Golf's CEO, Bob Kelly. "Very few were returned," he says, "so I know the product wasn't the problem. I guess that timing is everything."

Says Harrison, the infomercial consultant: "I would have had Nicklaus saying, 'I'm getting older. I don't putt as well as I used to, so I had our engineers make me this putter....' But they didn't ask me."

Neither can the endorsement of Norman guarantee a blockbuster. His two infomercials for the Secret (now marked down to \$29.95) are low on buffoonery, but how successful they are remains a mystery. Sandy Lang, a former Hollywood studio exec and stuntman, says he signed Norman to a five-year contract to market the Secret, and told us last December he had sold more than 230,000 units. Then in late January he said it was approximately 170,000, with a return rate of only 3 percent. (The industry average is 10 to 20 percent.)

Of Norman's deal, thought by many in the industry to be near \$1 million up front, Lang says: "You can report that you called me, and I would neither confirm nor deny."

Just getting a player of Norman's stature was a major coup for Lang. Virtually all of the top 50 money winners on tour have been approached repeatedly about doing infomercials, but many remain skeptical that their well-polished public images would not suffer from the experience.

"They're not in the best interest of the consumer," says Phil Mickelson. "I think they're tasteless. I've told my agent not to bother bringing [proposals] to me."

"I probably would not do one," says Justin Leonard. "I don't want to say they suck, because some of the guys out here have done them."

Nick Price calls them "the bane of all golfers' existence." Scott McCarron adds: "A lot of guys have done them and didn't come off looking too good."

A sales rep for one of golf's five largest companies expressed amazement that Payne Stewart did a rather poorly produced TV commercial for a weed whacker, the Weed Terminator. "He's always been this gold-toe, high-dollar guy," said the rep. "What does that do for his image?"

"I hope Payne got a million bucks for it," said a fellow player, "because we've given him at least that much grief over it."

But at least Stewart didn't say his grass-cutting gizmo could trim the Serengeti in an afternoon. Golf infomercials seem almost genetically incapable of *not* making inflated and sometimes preposterous claims. Products are never simply fabulous. They must be "the most phenomenal training device ever developed" or "the most significant breakthrough in golf in 30 years."

"If a weight-loss product guarantees you'll lose 30 pounds, and you lose only 15, most people are thrilled," says Scott Opfer, who did the Green Gorilla and Weed Terminator ads. "I don't think that's the product. Golfers want to be guaranteed the product will help their games."

Still, marketers of the Sam 2000 swing

trainer may have a hard time justifying their guarantee that it would cut one's handicap in half in 21 days—a feat Jerry Pate joked "could only be done with an eraser." The ad also says: "Recent studies show Sam 2000 users adding 40 yards to their tee shots."

A man who identified himself as U.S. Golf's director of marketing, Mike O'Leary, told me: "From a marketing standpoint that's what golfers wanna hear. They wanna hear that their handicaps can be cut. And it's not false advertising, because we've had thousands and thousands of people who have written us and testified to that, that they were 25-handicappers and now they are down to 10."

However, though we asked for others, the only name we were given of such a person was that of a man identifying himself as Peter Harrold, president of U.S. Golf; he said that when he first used the circular PVC device he was a beginning golfer who shot in the 120s. "After being with the product 21 days," Harrold said, "I was shooting in the 80s."

Are there any genuine studies or independent tests, as the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) requires, to back up the Sam 2000 claims?

"This is golf," responded Harrold. "This is not science. There's no scientific testing.... Our testing comes from actual people." Later, he conceded that referring to "recent studies" may have been overreaching. "I'll change that," he said, "in the new script I'm writing."

Strangely, Harrold didn't want to tell us the price of the Sam 2000—which the infomercial does not mention. What Harrold described as "\$100 of PVC pipe" was offered to us over the phone for \$469.

#### Well-compensated talent

To achieve instant credibility, most golf infomercials rely on hosts who are well-known golfer/commentators, such as Pate, Whitaker, Gary McCord or Roger Maltbie. Typically, for about two days of reading a TelePrompTer and emoting on cue, they receive an up front fee of \$10,000 to \$25,000 and royalties of .5 to 1 percent of the "net gross" on each club, which amounts to about 80 percent of the actual gross.

The Alien Wedge infomercials were a windfall for Pate, who was paid \$7,500 for his work, but received more than \$300,000 in royalties on some 400,000 clubs that sold for roughly \$100 each.

The fees go up, naturally, for true stars. But some companies have paid huge up-front fees to players and usually regretted it. Lee Trevino reportedly got \$500,000 to endorse a swing-tempo device from Applied Golf Technologies, which soon went into financial difficulties. "Lee is the only one who made any money on that deal," says a source. (According to his agent, Trevino proposed the idea of his new infomercial for Top Flite's Intimidator fairway woods and did it gratis.)

But is the lure of a financial windfall enticing players who should know better than to make dubious claims?

Why would Maltbie, the affable NBC commentator and part-time PGA Tour

player, say that John Daly's PowerGroove, yet another swing trainer, "is guaranteed to cut your handicap by a third and add 20 yards to your drives"?

Golly, Roger, in a week? In our lifetimes? *Your* golf handicap? Pavarotti's?

Maltbie says as long as the company offers a money-back guarantee, he's satisfied. "You can guarantee anything in the world," he says, "as long as you promise to give people their money back."

Not so, says the FTC, which has brought dozens of cases against deceptive infomercials over the years—though none yet involving golf products. "The law is quite clear," says veteran FTC attorney Joel Winston. "Offering money back is not a defense against a charge of deceptive advertising." Further, if the infomercial refers to any testing, or suggests that consumers can expect certain results, there must be valid evidence supporting the claim.

And celebrity or expert endorsements must be based on actual testing or experience with the product. "He can't just take the check and say whatever he's told to say," says Winston, a high-80s golfer, who says he would never buy a club from an infomercial without trying it first.

But take heart. Maltbie does draw the line somewhere.

In his first infomercial—for a driver called the Lone Wolf—he balked when the last scene called for him to crush a huge drive, turn toward the camera and howl.

"I said, 'Not a chance,'" Maltbie laughs. "'You don't pay me that much money.'"

#### A democratizing force

For better or worse, infomercials are now ingrained in the golf culture as thoroughly as mandatory carts and "You da man." They've proved to be a godsend for smaller companies competing against Callaway ad budgets, and, in that respect, they help democratize the golf landscape. In the right hands, infomercials can even make us wiser golf consumers. There is hope for their salvation.

But for every Barney Adams, there are still dozens of entrepreneurs who would rather fill your garage with quick-fix trinkets. They won't be nudged out by a few upscale giants like Taylor Made and Top-Flite testing the market. They will only get bolder, because they know golfers are easily parted from their money, and deep within many of us is the weakness that allows them to thrive.

"Let's face it," says instruction star David Leadbetter, "people want to buy a better golf game. They want instant gratification."

"It all symbolizes a much bigger problem in society," says Dr. Bob Rotella, the golf-game psychologist and Golf Digest Pro Panel member. "People are always looking for an easy way out. Golf is a very honest game in a very dishonest world. This is a very difficult game. You either accept it, or you run away from it. It's your decision."

Operators are standing by. ■



Broadcasters moonlighting as infomercial hosts include (from top) Jack Whitaker, Jerry Pate and Roger Maltbie.