



GOLF REINVENTED

A little birdie told us about this unbelievable new hotspot in Texas

It is remarkable and not insignificant that so much creative language has been used to describe TopGolf. As a revolutionary take on the traditional driving range, it has drawn an estimated half-million newbies to the game, stirred up considerable buzz among investors, and is showing no sign of slowing down. Thanks in part to Diem Digital Interiors and Control4, TopGolf CEO Joe Vrankin ranks their latest location as the most advanced one yet.

In his New York Times blog, Bill Pennington described TopGolf as “a cross between the ambiance of a 1950s bowling alley and an episode

of *The Jetsons*.” Bob Carney mused in his *Golf Digest* column that it was, “a sports bar where golf happens to break out.” Much like one Yelper’s description of “Wii meets golf,” Robb Sidebottom, TopGolf’s national director of sales, calls it “a video game come to life.”

Perhaps the most straightforward handle is the one offered by Vrankin, former CFO of the Arena Football League. He calls it ‘golf entertainment.’

Still wondering exactly what it is? And what’s with all the elusive descriptors? To answer the latter, it is—simply put—the first of its kind. Not just for golf, but sports in general.

PHOTOS: TOPGOLF

Located about 20 minutes north of Dallas in Allen, Texas, this facility blends tee time and technology into what many are calling a highly addictive experience for golfers and non-golfers alike. In fact, 45 percent of TopGolf’s customers would be classified as non-golfers, i.e., they’ve never played on a traditional course or usually play fewer than two rounds a year.





At the entrance, three TVs display TV programming or TopGolf leaderboards, and sometimes both. You can also view real-time scores of TopGolf patrons.

A GREAT PLACE TO DRINK AND DRIVE

TopGolf stands for Target Oriented Practice Golf. It is essentially a driving range with microchip-embedded golf balls. Each chip registers the ball to its user, enabling it to track their score.

Players play in individual hitting bays that are not unlike what you find in a bowling alley, in this case, six at a time. Different games are simulated, including things like your basic nine holes.

But what has really made it such a success is its ability to bring in droves of non-golfers. While TopGolf attracts a core of avid and even professional golfers seeking to improve on their skills, the casual atmosphere, an indoor restaurant and three full-service bars also draw a broader demographic of entertainment-seekers.

As a result, more than 45 percent of its customers are categorized as non-golfers, meaning they play real golf less than three times a year if at all. This is a significant number

when you consider that the first six sites alone average over 1.2 million players.

ALLEN, TEXAS: THE LATEST, LARGEST & MOST ADVANCED TOPGOLF YET

The latest facility to go up is the Allen, Texas location: a three-story, 65,000-square-foot complex that is the fourth nationwide for TopGolf. The other three include Alexandria, Virginia; Chicago, Illinois; and Dallas, Texas. The three

PHOTOS: TOPGOLF



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Thanks to the programming smarts of Diem Digital, controlling 10 televisions throughout an expansive venue is an easy task.

original locations in the United Kingdom make it a grand total of seven.

Control4 dealer Diem Digital Interiors designed and installed the Allen project, which wrapped this June 2011. “The entire facility is controlled by Control4,” says John Dorsey, Diem Digital Interiors president. “I am proud of our team’s Control4 design and we’re elated to have played a part in creating TopGolf’s premier facility.”

The project began two years ago, when one of TopGolf’s main

investors approached Diem Digital Interiors to design a Control4 system for the new Allen facility. The original vision was video distribution: to have everything from the marketing to the drink specials integrated into the facility’s many screens.

What resulted was even more impressive. Along with the original scope of work, Diem Digital Interiors set up every hitting bay with two televisions. The bottom TV displays players’ scores and the top TV functions as a regular

TV, featuring local and national sports games.

As simple as that seems, the difference has been spectacular. A major sporting event would normally affect business, with people opting to be where they could watch the game. Now, a scheduled game drives business to the Allen location. In fact, when the Dallas Mavericks were in the NBA playoffs last year, Diem Digital Interiors sales rep Derek Wilson said, “The Allen location was packed.”

PHOTOS: TOPGOLF

A WALL OF SCREENS, A DESK OF IPADS

A video wall in the manager’s room controls everything. Six Control4 screens are run by a single iPad. Sidebottom cites this as his favorite feature, “To wirelessly control the whole system from an iPad is pretty cool.”

From the iPad, the staff can control the entire facility, including remotely switching which DIRECTV channel is playing on each of the 240 televisions, individually or all at once. “We don’t have to spend a lot of time turning on all our A/V equipment. That allows our staff to focus on running a facility, not turning on TVs.”

Additionally, Diem Digital Interiors can train TopGolf staff and do programming changes remotely. Even this is remarkably easy: Staff can be trained to run the entire facility in under 30 minutes. “We are very proud of that,” says Dorsey.

Sidebottom agrees: “Control4 takes the complicated steps of A/V away so that all we have to do is hit buttons that accomplish what we need them to.”

EVENTS AT TOPGOLF

“This technology has given us the ability to wow potential corporate clients by demonstrating that our A/V solutions are as technologically advanced as our state-of-the-art gaming system,” states Sidebottom.

Corporate events at TopGolf are no small potatoes. Hosting Fortune 500 companies such as AT&T, a venue of this size can bill out at tens of thousands of dollars. A \$60,000 price tag is not unique.

Some of the features include: a video wall in the VIP area, four leader boards distributed throughout the facility, and



Everything from the marketing to the drink specials are integrated into the facility’s many screens.

individual control over every TV. If there’s an event—a concert, game or presentation—video can be pushed to any or all of the TVs, with the same applying to audio.

“Having the Control4 system and demonstrating its ease of use and features makes our clientele comfortable that they will be able to accomplish everything they need during their time at our facility,” says Sidebottom.

CONTROL4: THE ONLY WAY TO GO

Sidebottom recalls the decision to go with Diem Digital Interiors. After reviewing a slew of proposals from automation vendors, the decision was made to trust the experts at Diem Digital to design the TopGolf system. “They felt Control4 was the only way to go,” he recounts. “They were right.”

He adds, “It’s pretty impressive to be walking through a very large facility and to see the televisions turning on one right after the

other... with the music suddenly filling the air during that process. It brings a level of energy to the place before anybody ever walks in.”

Wilson and Dorsey agree, joking that, “The facility is alive. It turns itself on.”

Whether it’s the energy it brings or the efficiency of operations, it’s working for TopGolf. TopGolf now generates 200,000 visitors per site and Vrankin recently announced he hopes to have 50 sites in five years.

Likewise, Bill Pennington, in his “On Par” column for *Golf Digest*, heralds TopGolf as “the future of driving ranges.” At the grand opening for the Allen site, Mayor Steve Terrell told the *Allen American*, “It’s a concept I firmly believe will start sweeping the nation pretty rapidly.”

“I am comfortable saying we have an aggressive expansion plan,” says Sidebottom. “If you watch TV, you’ll probably continue to hear about us. If you aren’t watching TV, get a Control4 system and tune in!” ■