

THE BUSINESS OF LIFE

BRANDING

The Els Club highlights how to manage a successful launch

■ A well-executed campaign for a new golf brand is already reaping rewards, with the membership drive exceeding expectations ■ The week-long targeted activities saw everything from sports stars to helicopters brought into play

DUBAI Joy Chakravarty

The success of the recent launch of the world's first Els Club can be gauged by the fact that less than a week later, Dubai has forgotten all about The Dunes.

For three years that was the name of the Ernie Els-designed golf course, which forms the heart of the \$3.8 billion (Dh13.9bn) Dubai Sports City, the world's first purpose-built integrated sports city. But a well thought out, and an equally well executed launch later, The Dunes is history. And in its place a new brand has been established - The Els Club.

Just about everything went right for Dubai Sports City, including the timing. For a golf course, it was launched during the Dubai Desert Classic week - a time when everyone in the city was talking golf. And Sports City is already reaping some very tangible rewards.

An initial drive aimed for just 125 members for the course (the second phase of the membership drive starts next year after the clubhouse facilities are completed). Applications are being accepted for one month, starting from January 28, the date of launch. By February 1, they had crossed the 125 figure almost twice.

Within a couple of days, Dubai Sports City also launched the sale of its second phase of Victory Heights, premium villas in the periphery of the golf course. Thomas Rubl, general manager, The Els Club, termed investors' response "overwhelming".

The key players of this high-profile and extremely well-targeted activity were Dubai Sports City, world No4 golfer Ernie Els and his invited guests - who included tennis legend Martina Navratilova, England cricketer Andrew Flintoff, South Africa's Rugby World Cup winning captain John Smit and former Manchester United goalkeeper Peter Schmeichel - Jamie Cunningham and his Professional Sports Group, and the helicopter that flew over the city for the rest of the week with what is being described as the world's largest sky banner.

The objective of the launch was simple: establish the brand of The Els Club.

But it was easier said than done, especially in a place like Dubai, where just about every leading brand in the world is clamouring for space. More importantly, this being the first-ever The Els Club, it has no history to fall back upon, except for the reputation of Ernie Els as a person, and his achievements.

Explaining the situation, Rubl said, "The entire process had to be carefully planned. The launch was significant not only from the standpoint of Dubai Sports City, but also Ernie Els and course operators, Troon Golf."

"This being the year of deliveries for us at Sports City, and the golf course being the first



From left, U Balakrishnan, CEO Dubai Sports City; Mohamed Al Hashbi, CEO Dubailand; Ernie Els; and Khalid Al Zamil, President Dubai Sports City. (www.elsclub.com)



“We were all working towards building up a new brand, not only for Dubai but also the rest of the world
Thomas Rubl, general manager, The Els Club



facility offered by us in a market that includes so many other big players, we needed to make a huge impact. "For Ernie, it is his first The Els Club. A successful start here means he can take this idea to so many different parts of the world. And for Troon, this showcased the quality and commitment they stand for."

Sports City roped in Professional Sports Group and with their far-reaching network - and also with a little help from Els - they came up with a plan.

The team had just a window of one day to cram in all activities. Els was in town for Desert Classic and could only commit to the Monday of the week. "We had to think of a concept and media strategy that ticked all the boxes - one that excites the media, potential members and investors, and firmly establishes The Els Club brand," said Cunningham, managing director, Professional Sports Group.

The day started with a photocall at the club with the invited guests, followed by a press conference, international TV interviews, the official inauguration of the course with Els playing a round with the other stars, and a dinner with VIPs, potential members, investors



FROM PHOTOS: LANCHEW Ernie Els, center, welcomes Peter Schmeichel, Andrew Flintoff, Martina Navratilova and John Smit at the launch of his first Els Club. (www.elsclub.com)

and current partners of Dubai Sports City. "We tried to extract the maximum out of the available time with Ernie, who, I must add, was just fantastic and extremely co-operative. We brought in our own television production people, and booked up live from the course and did as many as 18 interviews with all the leading television channels in the world, including CNN, CNBC, Al Jazeera, NDTV in India and Sky," Cunningham said.

The press conference was very well attended and the round of golf in which Els played and interacted with his guests, was entertaining. And more than 300 people turned up for the "Braai at the Beach", a barbecue dinner



A banner was flown across the skies of Dubai to herald the launch of the new club - and new brand.

hosted by Els in typical South African style with meat specially flown in from his home country. But more was to come. Two days after the launch, Dubai woke up to a huge sky banner of The Els Club whizzing around the city from a helicopter. The banner, hand-made in New Zealand, weighed 90 kilos and measured 70m by 40m - almost two-thirds the size of a football pitch.

Rubl said, "Like everyone else in Dubai, we also wanted to announce our arrival in a big fashion. The sky banner from the helicopter proved very effective. It just prolonged and maximised the impact of our launch event. Almost everyone who saw it remembered it."

We are quite happy with our launch and the feedback so far has been very positive. We wanted our brand to stand out, and I think we achieved that.

"Our whole objective of the launch was not to derive commercial benefit. We were all working towards building up a new brand - not only for Dubai, but also the rest of the world. If we could do that, the commercial dividends will surely follow."

"The challenge now is to carry on making a good impression. But we are not worried on that count. We know we have a really good product, and we are committed to maintaining the quality."