

Where do those statistics used in club and ball ads come from?

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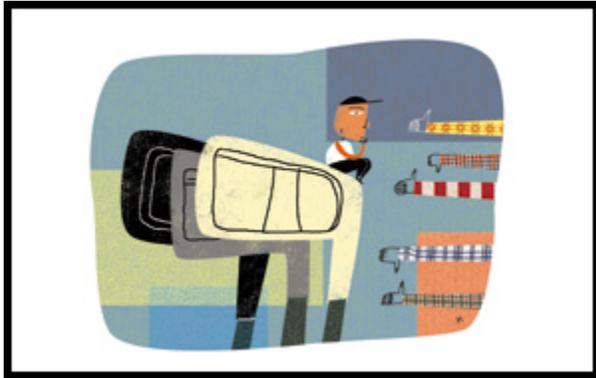
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Where do those statistics used in club and ball ads come from?

Equipment surveys. You've seen them quoted in ads from ball, club, even shoe manufacturers, many of whom spend six figures a year on data they then use to tell you about their products' success among pro and amateur golfers alike. These numbers, which can be very convincing, are churned out by a few low-key companies that are vital to an industry relying on word of mouth and a "pyramid of influence" to move its goods.

Darrell Survey

Invent a golf club and you'd tell your friends about it, right? But manage to get it into the hands of the best players in the world, and you'd want the whole planet to know. Enter the Darrell Survey, an organization with an army of "surveyors" who stand on the first tee and check what clubs are in the bag of each competitor during the opening round of every PGA, Senior PGA, LPGA, Buy.com, and Japanese PGA Tour event. The "Darrell" records every player's club, ball, shoe, spike, bag, shaft, grip, glove, and headwear choice.



James
Yang

Artist: James Yang

"There are no shortcuts when it comes to looking at the equipment," says Susan Naylor, who co-owns the company with brother John Minkley. "We physically look through every bag."

Darrell Survey results can give a product instant credibility, particularly if it's used by a superstar. As can the equipment count from each tournament, which tells how many pros played each brand of ball and club. "If you get the chance to quantify that you're the best in some category and can prove it with the Darrell, it will grow sales and solidify your reputation," says Randy Romberg, director of marketing at Cleveland Golf, one of the many club manufacturers that subscribe to the service. (Subscribing entitles companies to quote survey results in ads, provided Naylor's staff verifies any claims.)

The survey is the standard measure of Tour use, says John Steinbach, head of marketing at TaylorMade-adidas Golf. "We have to be able to show we're played by the best in the world," he says. Manufacturers also use the data to measure their Tour market share, see what competitors are putting into play, and verify that pros are living up to their contractual obligations.

"We don't know what contracts players have with manufacturers," says Naylor. "We only pay attention to what we see in the bag."

The Darrell Survey launched in 1932. Driving Spalding's equipment car from one PGA Tour pre-tournament exhibition to the next, Eddie Darrell would stay at the course until players arrived and record which pro was using what club and ball as a favor to manufacturers. Today, his service remains the only one of its kind in any American sport. The company also reports annually on the equipment choices of 4,000 U.S. golfers at more than 75 courses. And it publishes an annual almanac (\$24.95, www.darrellsurvey.com) replete with Tour and consumer use of every golf product. (For another look at the almanac, see page 210.)

Golf Datatech

You may have read ads claiming a club or ball is America's top seller according to Golf Datatech (www.golfdatatech.com). This market-research firm tracks the sale of golf products by electronically gathering information directly from the cash registers of 600 on-course and 250 off-course golf shops. Statistical models from this sample project the entire golf market in the form of detailed monthly reports broken into categories such as unit sales, dollar sales, selling price, inventories, market share, and distribution percentages of balls, clubs, bags, shoes, and gloves.

"The idea for the company came from a real void in manufacturers knowing what sold through at retail," says Tom Stine, former publisher of Golfweek magazine, who founded the company with fellow industry veteran Dave Overmyer. "There needed to be accurate and timely data, so we set out with those two criteria."



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Golf Datatech began delivering reports in 1997, and companies started quoting them shortly thereafter. "We have very strict policies on what can and can't be used in ads, in order to maintain confidentiality," says Stine. "They can use their own numbers, but not their competitors'."

Twice a year, the company also surveys 5,000 "serious" golfers who have played a minimum of 16 rounds a year to determine what equipment they're thinking about buying and what affects their buying decisions. Those results are reported in the Golf Product Attitude and Usage Surveys. The company also performs proprietary research for manufacturers, some of whom claim they subscribe to the service for reasons other than the ability to quote the numbers in ads. "We just want the reports for data on sell-through, inventory, and to see what competitors are doing," says TaylorMade's Steinbach.

Rankmark

Rankmark goes to the source amateur golfers and asks what they think of new clubs before and after hitting them. Why before? To learn if opinions already exist based on advertising, hearsay, and previous experience. Testing may include a round of golf, but more likely is a hitting session on the range, which can consist of as few as three shots with just one club in the set. Testers then re-judge and re-rank the clubs based on accuracy, distance, and trajectory. These tests can include products from up to 40 manufacturers at any session. Because some clubs tested are struck only a few times, some manufacturers say Rankmark's system is unscientific and refuse to submit their sticks to Charlie Mandel, the owner/operator.

Unscientific or not, Mandel's results apparently carry clout. In June, the Web site (www.rankmark.com), which reveals test results, had two million hits. And Mandel says he receives about 40 e-mails a day from golfers asking which clubs to buy.

Mandel describes his six-year-old company as "the J.D. Power of golf. Manufacturers don't have an objective view. They're always claiming their clubs hit the ball the longest and straightest. But they can't all be the best."

His rankings are categorized by handicap and club type. No tests are performed by swing robots, because "Iron Byron doesn't hit a ball out of a sand trap or buy clubs," says Mandel, who also sells reports and the rights to use the

results to 20 to 30 manufacturers a year. "A 15-handicap wants to know what clubs other 15-handicaps prefer."

On a for-hire basis, Rankmark also has tested clubs for 28 companies, several of which have Mandel run multiple product tests using their own methodology and not the usual Rankmark process. Mandel says his general surveys are not influenced by those companies that pay for his proprietary tests. "I don't care who wins our surveys," he says. "I have no ax to grind."

Manufacturers submitting their clubs for Rankmark's general testing do so willingly. Mandel says that gives lesser-knowns an equal footing with big brand names. "Our testers always seem to find clubs they've never heard of perform best for them," he says. "We're just helping golfers make a choice."

This type of testing has great potential, says Barney Adams, head of Adams Golf, a company that uses and regularly wins many Rankmark tests. "When an independent runs a test, the results should speak volumes to the consumer, who shouldn't value Tour information until companies stop paying players [to use their clubs]," Adams says. "That's why honest peer information is best."