

Buying In on Open Hospitality

Ted M. Natt Jr., staff writer | Posted: Friday, June 13, 2014 12:00 am

What a difference a year makes for corporate hospitality at the U.S. Open.

At Merion Golf Club outside Philadelphia last year, organizers had 185 acres.

“It was like trying to pour 10 pounds of sugar in a one-pound bag,” said Mimi Griffin, owner of MSG Promotions, the Pennsylvania-based corporate sales and marketing agency for the USGA.

Pinehurst Resort offers 400 acres to more than 6,000 corporate guests of 230 companies at this year’s historic U.S. Open and U.S. Women’s Open at course No. 2.

“Space is the ultimate frontier,” Griffin said earlier this week. “People don’t feel claustrophobic.”

Pinehurst set a record for all U.S. Opens in 2005 for corporate sales. Although that mark was not eclipsed this year, Griffin said sales exceeded expectations.

“We sold out all the tents, all the tables and all the clubhouse options,” she said. “That is monumental and, honestly, unexpected because things have been really, really rough since the bottom fell out of the economy.”

In fact, this year was the first sellout since the 2008 U.S. Open at Torrey Pines in San Diego.

“I think it’s because we’re here at Pinehurst,” Griffin said. “I have never seen a region or state embrace the U.S. Open as much as people and companies do here. Pinehurst is truly a token of state pride.

“It was a treat to be able to operate in that environment.”

Griffin declined to disclose the client roster, but a recent stroll around the Tufts Village corporate hospitality area revealed a mix of local, state and national companies.

FirstHealth of the Carolinas in Pinehurst, the largest employer in Moore County, is back after having a corporate presence at the 1999 and 2005 U.S. Opens at Pinehurst.

“We are very excited to be partnering with the USGA and Pinehurst for this historic event,” David J. Kilarski, CEO of FirstHealth, said Thursday. “FirstHealth is a sponsor as well as the official medical services provider for both Open Championships.

“We’re doing our job while also sharing in this wonderful first-ever experience.”

The championships are being played in consecutive weeks at the same venue for the first time, and hospitality packages include both, though the add-ons and number of tickets can be scaled back for the U.S. Women’s Open.

Griffin said prices ranged from \$10,500 for a corporate table in the Champions Pavilion to \$485,000 for the right to entertain guests in the Members Clubhouse with an unimpeded view of the 18th green at No. 2.

“It’s client relationship building,” she said. “It’s how business gets done.”

Griffin added that companies will spend \$30,000 to \$150,000 on food and beverage, and one dropped \$185,000 just on tent décor.

“It’s about branding,” she said. “It’s about getting the look and feel so it’s quite clear who the host is.”

Griffin said sales exceeded expectations by more than 10 percent.

“That’s unheard of, because our projections were pretty aggressive when compared to what we had just experienced in 2012 and 2013,” she said. “Corporate sales have been coming back in bits and pieces, but we did not expect the monumental leap this year.”

Bob Dedman Jr., whose family owns the resort, said he was not surprised.

“Our corporate business has been improving, so it’s nice to see that spill over to the Opens,” Dedman said. “We’re hoping the international exposure generated in the next two weeks will help us in the fall and next year.”

Griffin said “everyone is excited” to be at Pinehurst.

“They’re bouncing off the walls,” she said. “North Carolina is a wonderful market and a golf-savvy market. It was not a hard sales pitch.”