

Mike Meldman

Discovery Land Co., Chairman & CEO, Vaquero Golf Club owner

He's meticulous, inquisitive and determined when it comes to service. And he's like that every day.

By Mark Button

Mike Meldman can't sit still. Twenty minutes into our telephone interview and his squirming-in-the-chair has become audible from his office in Whitefish, Mont.

Come on, come on. Let's go, Meldman thinks, I've got things to do here.

Though his responses shorten a tad the longer we go, he remains calm, polite and humble throughout the process. We wrap up, say our salutations, and before Meldman hangs up, he's already back at work.

And back on the phone.

The CEO and Chairman of Discovery Land Co., a San Francisco-based outfit that developed and created (along with designer Tom Fazio) the caloric slice of golf heaven in Westlake known as Vaquero Golf Club, burns telephone lines like a Wall Street stock broker. Juggling several calls at once, Meldman religiously phones the general managers and salespeople at each of the seven private resorts for the ultra-rich, which he refers to as his "projects."

"I just try to stay in touch," said Meldman, 44. "I can only be at one place at a time, so I have to stay on the phones. E-mails help, too. I go through about 150 a day."

Meldman has been in motion as long as he can remember. He spurned golf when he was young because it was too boring. "I played football, basketball, baseball – the traditional sports," he said. "I needed contact."

He still does.

The contact he craves these days, however, involves those phone calls. The result of Meldman's continuous communication with the overseers of his projects is a level of quality and service second to none.

Members of Vaquero are treated like royalty. From unsolicited, free car washes while they're out on the course, to sliced tenderloin at the 10th tee box, Meldman makes certain his customers have everything they could possibly want. Looking for a baby-sitter? Need a gallon of milk and a dozen eggs? No problem, Vaquero's concierge-like service is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Located just south of State Highway 114 in Ross Perot Jr.'s Circle T Ranch, Vaquero is Discovery Land Co.'s first foray into a primary market. Since the 1995 genesis of his first project – Scottsdale, Ariz.'s Estancia – Meldman's company has created masterpieces in vacation destinations such as Hawaiian beaches (Kukio Beach Club on the Kohala Coast), the mountains of Montana (Iron Horse in Whitefish) and the California desert (The Hideaway in La Quinta).

With Vaquero, Meldman brought the vacation back home.

"People spend all this money to go to Palm Springs or Scottsdale," he said. "Obviously they go for the weather, but the level of service and the amenities you get [at vacation resorts] are different than you get in most places in Dallas. So we're trying to provide that type of service and lifestyle on a daily basis. They might leave for the leave, but they definitely don't have to leave for the golf and the service."

Mike Abbott can attest to that. Vaquero's general manager says no service request will be denied – as long as it's legal.

"That's not because Mr. Meldman is trying to outdo anyone," said Abbott, who knows about quality service as he came to Vaquero from the Four Seasons Resort at Las Colinas. "Mr. Meldman just thinks that type of service makes people's free time better. The better the service, the better the experience is. The fresher the food is, the better it will taste. The best greens you can play on, people will remember that stuff."

The members also remember Meldman's personal touch.

Soon after Meldman hired Abbott in 2000, the two visited the Discovery Land Co.'s projects. Abbott was blown away by the fact that Meldman seemed to know every single member – by name – at each club.

"And [the members] were like, 'Hey Mike, how is it going?'" Abbott said. "Usually when the developer walks in, someone wants to corner him to tell him about something that is wrong. So the developer is running because he didn't live up to what he said he was going to do. But every place that Mike has done, it's like he just becomes part of the family there."

Like at each of the Discovery Land Co.'s clubs, the only thing that rivals Vaquero's service is the golf itself.

Fazio, the award-winning architect who has designed three of *Golfweek* magazine's list of the nation's top 10 modern courses, created the par-71, 7,064-yard masterpiece. Not shy about how Vaquero turned out, Fazio said, "I believe that golfers will be amazed by the spectacular beauty and quality of Vaquero, I know I am. Vaquero will be considered one of my most dramatic golf courses."

Originally, Meldman considered building Vaquero in Austin's Hill Country, but that was before he investigated Westlake and Circle T Ranch.

"If you look at Estancia and all our projects, they are great natural pieces of land," Meldman said. "And the Metroplex is flat. It doesn't have a lot of great pieces of land. So we looked in the Hill Country. But when I was introduced to Vaquero, what I liked about it was that it was zoned and it was in the path of growth. More than that, though, it was probably the prettiest piece of property I had ever seen in the Metroplex. It reminded me of being in the Hill Country. So why be in the Hill Country if you have a piece of property like that in the Metroplex?"

That's the thing about Meldman. He uses common sense. And it's always been that way. After graduating from Stanford in 1981, Meldman spent a short summer working in a Lake Tahoe casino. It was his next stop, however, where he hit the jackpot.

He took a job at a real estate firm in San Francisco as a broker – "I graduated with a liberal arts degree; I wasn't smart enough to be a venture capitalist," he said – and though he had no idea at the time, his first assignment changed his life.

"I started as a broker and they put me out in an area called Fremont, which was all farms and ranches," Meldman said. "I was told to get to know all the land owners. I went in and spent a year getting to know all the ranchers and farmers out there."

The next thing Meldman knew, that stretch of farmland became one of the hottest spots for development in California. Smack in the growth path of Silicon Valley, Meldman's farm and ranch contacts were sitting on a gold mine. He started selling off the land to developers, making his clients rich.

"I was just lucky to be at the right place at the right time," he said.

A year later, Meldman started buying land himself. It didn't take long to figure out the best way to turn around plots of acreage was to get the land zoned and add the key ingredient: exclusive golf courses.

It was common sense, just as it is common sense that keeps Meldman on the phone all day. Abbott said Meldman calls every general manager twice each day – once in the morning and again in the afternoon – to see how everything is going. He reviews the morning's tee times and that evening's dinner reservation list for every club, every day.

That means you can't play a round of golf or eat a steak at any of Discovery Land Co.'s resorts without Meldman knowing about it that day — or without Meldman calling the club to make sure you have everything you need while you are there.

No wonder he's busy.



Mark Button is an award-winning, Dallas based free-lance writer.



In the Bag

Age: 44

Residence: San Francisco, Calif.

Club Affiliations:

The Estancia Club (Arizona), CordeValle Golf Club (California), Kukio Beach Club (Hawaii), Iron Horse Golf Club (Montana), Vaquero Golf Club (Texas), Mirabel Golf Club (Arizona), The Hideaway (California).

Occupation:

Chairman and CEO of Discovery Land Co., a San Francisco-based real estate development firm specializing in the creation of world-class golf and residential communities.

In the Bag:

Callaway Big Bertha woods, regular-flex shafts; driver, 3-wood, 5-wood. Big Bertha irons, graphite shafts, 2-iron through sand wedge. Odyssey White-Hot Rossie 2 putter; Titleist Pro V1 balls, FootJoy sandals, FootJoy glove and, the most important thing in the bag, the cigar lighter. (Cigars kept separately.)

Best Round:

84 at Estancia in Scottsdale, Ariz., which is Discovery Land Co.'s first project. Meldman recorded his 84 in 2000. He said he was straight off the tee most of the day and he putted well. He never flirted with an eagle, although he does have an eagle to his name after sinking a 20-foot putt for a three on the par-5, fourth hole at Iron Horse. Meldman is a late-comer to golf and makes no excuses for his game: "With the courses I play, combined with my game, it's like being married to Christie Brinkley and being gay."

Favorite Golf Course:

Cypress Point in California and the San Francisco Golf Club.

Would you rather caddy a round for Tiger Woods or play a round with Annika Sorenstam?

"I'd rather caddy for Tiger. That sounds like fun. Plus, Annika would kick my butt."

As a kid, what did you want to be?

"I always wanted to be a teacher. But there's no money in it. When I found that out, that dream faded."