

#11: Sun City – The Renaissance

I read a lot. I like how good writers turn a phrase, capture a thought. I love when they take me on a journey, make me laugh and cry and feel emotionally connected. I try and pay attention to technique, though it gets challenging when the story is too good. One oddity is when they write short paragraphs. It doesn't happen often, but for my purposes I am going to use it here.

John Meeker

I intentionally withheld information from you when I started the Sun City story. My apologies, it was done because I always intended to circle back. The missing piece is central to the changes Meeker brought to the community. Tom Breen wrote a two-page memo prior to opening that became the centerpiece for Sun City's development. The three basic concepts were; "Activity, Economy and Individuality."

It was a simple plan; the golf courses and rec centers provided the activity. Those resources would be paid for by everyone, hence economical. The third was the rub; individuality meant "no organizing." Breen's vision was to let them do what they want. It looked and sounded good on paper, but it was shortsighted.

By 1964 and worse yet in 1965, Del Webb had just about reached the breaking point. When he sent John Meeker to Sun City his task was well defined; fix it or we quit the experiment with senior living communities. He was so specific that included in John's Volume Two Journal is Plan B. Everything they owned North of Grand Avenue would be converted to an industrial park and non-age restricted homes.

IF YOU'RE 50 OR OVER...NOW IS THE TIME TO

Enjoy a Wonderful Vacation Week in a Lovely SUN CITY Apartment!

\$75 TWO PEOPLE FOR ONE WEEK
OCTOBER 16 THROUGH MAY 31
(\$50 June 1 Through October 15)


Treat yourself to a fabulous week of fun! Enjoy a King's ransom in resort facilities under the sunny skies of scenic Arizona.

INTRODUCTORY OFFER! Sample resort living at its finest — see the million-dollar resort facilities. Meet the warm and friendly Sun Citizens — see their healthful, happy way of living. How? Enjoy a wonderful vacation for two, in a lovely, furnished, air-conditioned apartment — only \$75 for one week, Oct. 16 through May 31. One condition: you or your companion must be 50 or over.

FREE GUEST ACTIVITIES CARD! Your passport to pleasure — tennis, swimming, shuffleboard, lawn bowling, bridge, dancing, arts and crafts centers — yours to enjoy *free!* Bask in the warm sun or just loaf. Be a Sun Citizen for a week. Discover what they enjoy every week, for only \$20 a year.

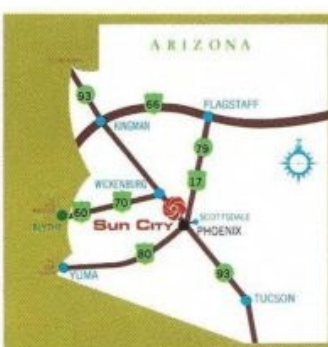
PLAY TWO GOLF GAMES FREE! Sun Citizens enjoy golf the year-round on seven beautiful 18-hole courses. Two free games are included in your vacation week — one per person. Sun Citizens have the advantage, though — they enjoy remarkably low annual rates, and they can own their golf carts, too!

ENJOY A VACATION PARADISE! Sun City is in Arizona's famed Valley of the Sun, 13 miles from Phoenix. And it's an easy drive to the Grand Canyon, Mexico, Tombstone, Tucson and all of Arizona's fabulous tourist attractions.




**DEL WEBB'S
Sun City**


America's Most Famous Resort-Retirement Community



All roads lead to Sun City.



Take a golf vacation.



You'll have your own air-conditioned, furnished, garden apartment.

MAIL THE COUPON TODAY

Del E. Webb Development Co. • P.O. Box 555, Sun City, Arizona 85351

Enclosed is my check in the amount of \$ _____ for deposit-in-full on your Vacation Offer.

Confirm my reservations beginning _____ (Date: start any day of the week)

NAME JS

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ STATE _____ ZIP _____

OFFER LIMITED TO AVAILABILITIES 037AR12-1

Marketing Genius. This one page advertisement became the sole sales technique to sell Sun City. John Meeker understood the importance of potential buyers seeing the community as a place to come and live, not die.

Del Webb was a master builder. If you have followed the series, you know he dabbled in buildings of all shapes, sizes and uses. From stadiums to hospitals; massive manufacturing plants to complex office buildings; military bases to small scale communities; commercial stores to residential homes. He did it all.

Sun City was the one project that appeared to stump him. Simply putting up homes, recreation centers and shopping centers wasn't enough. Therein was the genius of John Meeker. He understood the root success behind Sun City was more about the residents than it was about the marketing concept, the buildings and the promotion. One of his first steps was to abandon the "individuality."

The best story to amplify this was how clubs were languishing in mediocrity. Remember, the company goal was to let them do as they pleased. John decided to do some internal promoting. He bought the largest color TV set he could and brought it to one of the club functions and gave it as a door prize to the small cadre of those attending. He claimed about 10 members were present.

Word spread quickly and suddenly clubs experienced a remarkable spurt in attendance. Meeker quipped in his Journal piece entitled Overview: "...the next month's meeting drew a very large crowd looking for that big prize, but instead found friendship and companionship." They still occasionally gave away stuff, but more importantly residents came to grasp the true value of living in a community and clubs became the lifeblood.

I love this line and have used it numerous times: there wasn't a book entitled "Building and Running a Senior Community for Dummies." We were the first of its kind and it was simply trial and error. John was quick to understand everything was a moving target. If it worked, great, if not move on. He knew building a sense of community was done from within, not externally and certainly not without.

The amazing thing is several of his ideas are still in use today. When he dumped the 50 person advertising department, some thought he had lost his mind. Truth be told, that decision might have been his best. The three person department he created initiated a relatively new program called the "Stay and Play." John claims more than 50% of the Sun City home sales through 1978 came from people who used the program.

It was a pretty basic concept. Like the "Try Before You Buy" program, the goal was to get potential buyers to see the community up close and personal. The length of stay was shorter; a one week stay with use of the recreation centers, a couple of rounds of golf and a box of cactus jellies. Seriously, he even talks about the flavors in his interviews. When the program started it was \$75 for the week, but sky-rocketed to \$99. It was the one single advertising tool they used till John left the company in 1981.

Initially they used the Kings Inn (because they sold the "Try Before You Buy" units on Peoria Avenue), but eventually it wasn't adequate. Meeker incorporated newly opened Garden Court apartments as program rentals as their base of operation and as they moved further north, opened new units and sold off the old. It was nothing short of brilliant and communities still use it today.

John also disliked the idea when a home was sold; it became the owner's problem. He added a home warranty program guaranteeing they would take care of any issues the first year. He laughingly talks about widows calling about lights out in closets and his crew going in and replacing a light bulb. It was all about building brand loyalty. Goodness, did it work.

The blessing to go ahead with the Sun Bowl was huge in Meeker's eyes. He knew the company had access to some of the best entertainers in the country. Webb's connections in Las Vegas, a mere hour flight away, insured he could bring in the biggest names in the country. That would allow him to market Sun City to both current owners and potential buyers.

He understood the barrier to Sun City being successful was the idea the community was a place old people went to die. Everything he did was about overcoming that stigma. In the coming years, he became even more aggressive in using the residents as his primary "sales force," but that's a story for another day.



You would never know times were tough in 1964 and 1965 in Sun City. The 5th anniversary parade was one of life." Those "hard times" for the Webb Corporation would become the catalyst for changes no one could see coming.

Next week we will take a closer look at those changes in years 1966 and 1967. The results of John Meeker's actions were almost immediate, as you will see. For now I am going to quote his summary from Overview (an absolute must read piece). He might be the one Webb employee who best understood what the opening and success of Sun City meant to the country and the seniors who fell in love with it.

It bears its own paragraph and bolded on purpose: "Sun City, Arizona, not only changed America's viewpoint on retirement living, but became its most successful and largest retirement development. In fact, it surpassed the 17,000-unit conventional housing Levittown project in New York as the country's largest development by a single builder with more than 25,000 homes and earning \$171,000,000 in pre-tax profits through 1981. This was accomplished by a dedicated team of caring DEVCO employees, plus the courage of the Webb Corporation. To put their money on the line and a commitment to invest in resident involvement projects which in turn created a sales force second to none."

Amen John, amen. See you all next week.

Bill Pearson