Golf Course Expo, not just another trade show

Almost exactly 1 year ago, Golf Course News announced the launch of Golf Course Expo, the only trade show and conference for owners, managers and superintendents at public-access golf facilities. Almost immediately, we receivedythe familiar chorus: "Geez, not another trade show!" Apparently, this was a refrain we heard many times over the last 12 months. This phenomenon is touchy subject because, to be perfectly candid, there are too many trade shows in the golf course industry. No wonder people are tired of them. Most are ill-defined, misdirected and focused at the wrong end of the industry.

When thinking about Golf Course Expo, the proper refrain shouldn't be, "Geez, another trade show," but rather, "Wow, a new market!"

Truth is, until this year, there has been only one trade show that successfully serves its market sector on a national basis. The Golf Course Superintendents Association of America (GCSAA) show has catered to the private club market for well over 50 years, and only a foolhardy organization would attempt to compete with GCSAA on this front.

But there is another, larger front to consider: Public-access, ie, daily-fee, resort and municipal courses.

Private golf clubs, while they represent a strong portion of the golf market, account for only one-third of the nation's golf facilities. Further, the number of private clubs is shrinking, and the number of public-access facilities is growing.

In one way, Golf Course Expo is just another trade show. But it's the only one where you can target the golf course industry. And this majority portion of the market has distinct needs; needs that aren't currently being served; needs that will be met at Golf Course Expo.

For example, exhibitors need to understand that buying patterns are different in the public-access sector. Put simply, owners and managers at public-access facilities have more input than their counterparts at private clubs. Appropriately, owners, CEOs and general managers account for a full 47 percent of the Golf Course Expo attendee list.

From an educational standpoint, superintendents and owners at public-access courses have different needs. Ask superintendents who, during their careers, have cared for both daily-fee and private courses. They will tell you it's a tough path to travel.

As architect Bob Cupp said when thinking about Golf Course Expo: "This is a touchy subject because of its acidic nature. No serious change is difficult for any industry to accept, much less an industry that sports field contractors are more diligent than golf course builders about using quality root-zone mix (See page 1 story).

"The certified members of GCSAA [Golf Course Builders Assn., American] are all terrific. They're great. When we say we want to do something, they do it."

"No," he added with a laugh, "if they didn't, Billy'd maim 'em."

A major point of the market is the simple fact that builders are dealing with living organisms in this process of greens construction.

They're blending peat moss — which is fairly acid (3.0 pH) — with silica sand or calcareous sand that is inert and, if it's calcareous sand, at 7.8 to 8.2 or higher. The organic matter hasn't broken down because of its acidic environment. But now it is placed in a neutral environment where it will start to break down. Plus, fertilizers and water will be added to the equation.

Does anyone know what this recipe evolves into? Could be a good research project for aspiring university professor or PhD candidate.

Until then, is the golf industry putting its superintendents in a crap shoot? Sounds to me like that old schoolyard game, Dodgeball... better known in some parts — and perhaps more aptly — as War Ball.

"My fundamental feeling is that the most important people having great putting greens is to have a great superintendent," said Mike Hurdzan, a golf course architect and PhD guy himself. "We have seen superintendents grow every kind of bentgrass you can think of on every kind of material, but if the guy understands his craft, you are going to have great greens."

"No matter how well constructed a putting surface is, the super isn't 'lucky enough to understand what's happening in this organic soup, he could have problems,'" he said.

Hurdzan said the biggest problem has been seen in root-zone mixes, which have been in the maintenance balance. "It's never the big things that are out of kilter," he said. "It's the little things — the magnesium, the manganese, the copper, the trace elements. Magnesium is the one I see the most often. It causes a problem with establishing greens in that it's usually a magnesium imbalance — especially with calcareous sand, which is high in calcium, low in magnesium, and in that imbalance, the center of the chlorofil molecule is magnesium.

"You have to have magnesium there for the plant to make chlorophyll. So we end up taking soil salts in order to try to balance that out. It's a matter of taking soil tests, using your knowledge of how grass looks, taking a calcium-to-magnesium ratio and making adjustments."

Did you all stay with that? We'll have a short quiz in the next issue.

As I was writing this article, several key players in the golf course industry decided they wanted to design golf courses and asked an architect the best three courses he ever designed. The architect's reply was, "It is impossible to answer that question.

The Pleasure was Entirely Ours

To the editor:

Please accept our sincere thanks for your Tee Sponsor donation at the 1994 Scholarship & Research Tournament (Sept. 20, Cape Arundel Golf Club, Kennebunkport, Maine).

The money goes a long way in helping a future turf student's education and diagnosing turf problems.

Again, thanks for your contribution.

Patrick E. Lewis, GCSS Falmouth C.C., Maine Golf Course Superintendents Association.