



Monroe Miller retired after 36 years as superintendent at Blackhawk CC in Madison, Wis. He is a recipient of the 2004 USGA Green Section Award, the 2009 GCSAA Col. John Morley DSA Award, and is the only superintendent in the Wisconsin Golf Hall of Fame. Reach him at groots@charter.net.

DOES BRAND LOYALTY EXIST ANYMORE?

When I was growing up in Wisconsin, “brands” identified you and your neighbors. The Bohls were a John Deere farm, the Baumgartners had Case, and we were Ford and Oliver. Dairy cattle breeds were sort of a brand. You had Holstein farms, Guernsey or Jersey farms and even a few Brown Swiss herds could be found. There was fierce loyalty to the breed of cattle your dad liked.

And so it went with cars and trucks and even seed corn varieties. That brand loyalty that was so evident and important in my youth is with me yet today, and dictates many personal choices. It is still important to me. I like Case pocketknives, Red Wing boots, Carhart jeans, Pendleton shirts and Stormy Kromer winter hats. I drive only Ford and I’m partial to Snap-On hand tools. I even have a preference for the wooden pencils I write with – Ticonderoga No. 2s.

A 2010 survey stated for two thirds of Midwest farmers, brand loyalty influences their decisions on equipment purchases. I was surprised, expecting brand loyalty would have gone by the wayside in the sweeping changes in agriculture in the past 50 years.

Not so. The same survey reported that less than 20 percent responded that they were less loyal to equipment brands than five years previous, while more than 25 percent had become more equipment brand loyal.

This got me to thinking about superintendents and the shops I have visited in the last 40 to 50 years. There are shops that heavily favored one brand of turf machinery over others. It wasn’t hard to tell – either they were orange or red. Jacobsen and Toro dominated the golf machinery market until the past couple of decades, when John Deere entered the turf care market. Some shops are now green.

How much influence can brand loyalty have for most superintendents? It is one thing when a farmer who owns his own business can use his own money to buy whatever brand he wants. It is another thing entirely when you are spending someone else’s money, whether it is an owner, a municipality or a private club.



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Blind loyalty is a rare commodity among the ranks of superintendents. The fact is for almost all of us the choices we make in selecting equipment is based more on things like distributor reputation, the salesmen involved, and the fit of a particular machine to our turf and individual course features. Price is also obviously a very important consideration.

The distributor’s role in service is critical and almost every superinten-

dent I know puts high value on parts availability and delivery. Anymore, with the high cost of turf equipment, no one wants it sitting in a corner of the shop for a week, waiting for a part.

A lot of what appears to be brand loyalty to a color or logo is really salesman loyalty. We count on them for so much – information, demonstrations, communications – that there is a natural tendency to want to deal with one who is dutiful, reliable and honest. I will never forget the salesman who left a family reunion to chase down to the distributor shop on a Sunday afternoon to get a part for us so we could keep a Greensaire operating. And as generous as that action was, I love the story of a sales person snagging a needed part from the assembly line for a desperate superintendent. Boy, do heroic efforts like these ever build brand loyalty.

Location of a distributor plays into loyalty, too. If a distributor is relatively close by, then that proximity can influence what appears to be brand loyalty in a big way.

What it comes down to is less brand loyalty and more the distributor/superintendent relationship. Obviously, there has to be satisfaction with the product he sells, but it may be less of a machinery loyalty factor than the comfort and the trust offered and nurtured by the seller. When brand loyalty exists, it is almost always because it’s good business. Honestly, orange and red and green all do a great job and help courses all over the world prepare for major tournaments as well as daily play.

I was thinking back to last spring when I was mowing fairways while wearing my Jacobsen hat, a Deere sweatshirt and operating a Toro fairway mower. Apparently I spread my brand loyalty around. That is, except when it comes to Ford trucks. **GCI**