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Following the path to success

In the competitive world of golf course superintendents, a bit of knowledge and a road map of the future can take one a long way.

The key to moving a career forward is having a sense of a golf course superintendent's changing responsibilities and the proper steps to take when obtaining a job, according to Lyne Tumlinson, director of career services and Frederick Thomas, career guidance manager for the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America and Paul Vermeulen, director of agronomy for the PGA Tour.

The three golf industry professionals hosted an interactive half-day seminar at the GCSAA's annual educational conference, Feb. 19 through 24 at the Anaheim Convention Center in California.

Superintendents face a changing industry as society presents more choices and more constant updates in technology, Tumlinson says. She quoted John Stebbins, western region v.p. of East West Partners Club Management, who told her, "People think superintendents are magicians or celebrities who have pixy dust."

To better prepare superintendents or those who wish to hold the post, the professionals helped to educate attendees on what will be expected of them.

The audience, which included a mix of golf course superintendents and assistant superintendents, collaborated to name factors they predict will come into play in the golf industry during the next 20 years. They include:

- Longer golf courses;
- A more technology-based job;
- More efficient water use;
- A more diverse group of golfers;
- More strict environmental regulations;
- Fewer golf courses; and
- Higher expectations of turf conditions.

Those attending the workshop also said superintendents will face some of the following factors:

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**TAKING ACTION**

To progress in one's career, golf course managers need to evaluate themselves first. Look for aspects of job performance that could be improved and set goals to achieve, Tumlinson says. For some, goals might include reducing the work week to 40 hours and learning to train and delegate better. For others, committing to continual learning in the industry or working to strengthen family or community relationships might be what superintendents or assistant superintendents work toward.

Vermeulen has seen countless signs of golf course mismanagement at courses he's visited, including bunkers that haven't been raked or facilities that aren't kept in good working condition. These reflect poorly on a superintendent and can negatively affect any chances of advancement.

"You can't hide your weaknesses as much as you think," he says.

Once a superintendent believes he has marketable qualities and wants to aim for a higher position, he shouldn't be discouraged about intimidating career-related numbers. For instance, it's said more than 175 candidates apply for any given superintendent position.

"That's a lot of candidates, but how many of them are qualified?" Tumlinson says. "The number of qualified candidates probably is much smaller."

People also often speculate the number of turfgrass students entering the job field exceeds the number of open positions in the industry, Tumlinson says. But many of those students don't end up entering the golf course industry. Still, the number of job candidates can be overwhelming, so the best way to stand a chance is to stand out.

**JOB APPLICATION BASICS**

When advancing a career, applying for a job is inevitable. The first step is to find a way to set yourself apart from the other candidates. That might simply mean displaying key competencies needed for the job. Tumlinson identifies them as communication skills, leadership, operations management, personal skills and resource utilization.

Exhibiting these skills to a potential employer is a plus, but getting to that point is equally as important. It starts with the first correspondence with the hiring company: the resume and cover letter.

A resume tells employers who you are and what you want (objective). It also has to be job specific and include what you have to offer (three to five bullet points) and a list of accomplishments. Employers like to see numbers to...
The GCSAA's Frederick Thomas offers career advice to superintendents in Anaheim. Photo: Heather Wood

The letter should include short, concise sentences explaining why you're writing, what you have to offer and how you will follow up with the potential employer. If you're called for an interview, take advantage of the fact that the interviewers are likely amateurs with little experience with the hiring process, Vermeulen says.

"Sell to their weaknesses," he says. "Make your moments with the selection committee count."

Interviewees can do this by considering the committee probably lacks:
• Knowledge of what the job requires;
• Understanding of the education required;
• An idea of what they want from the golf course;
• Knowledge of the hiring process; and
• An abundance of time.

The committee probably will favor the candidate with the least resistance, Vermeulen says. A few other tips for the interview include:
• Don't mention salary;
• Don't chew gum or smoke;
• Don't use profanity;
• Ask questions about the position;
• Practice good communications and presentation skills; and
• Avoid poor posture.

Above all, set yourself apart. Throughout the process, remember to make the application process about the employer.

"All they want to know is what you can do for them," Thomas says. – Heather Wood

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**Career Help**

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To succeed, golf courses should set themselves apart from the competition, says marketing expert Terri Langhans.

To bring more business to a golf course, golf course owners and managers should remove their marketing hats and think more like a "normal" person.

Langhans, c.o.e. (chief of everything) of Blah Blah Blah Etc., shared this message at her presentation on Maverick Marketing at the National Golf Course Owners Association's annual conference Feb. 20-24 in Anaheim, Calif. At the conference, held in conjunction with the Golf Industry Show, Langhans told the crowd to think outside the box.

"We spend so much time trying to get away from ads," she says. "When you put on your marketing hat, you're joining the chorus. Don't do what everyone else does."

It takes a different type of thinking to get attention and draw in new and returning business, she adds. Start by connecting with the customers before convincing them to give the course their business. This is not done by spewing out as much information as possible about the facility.

"We love to inhale the aroma of the product and then we exhale ad nauseum to the target," she says.

First, think of one or two attributes or attraction factors. What is the need or want that is satisfied by those attraction factors? Keep in mind that green fees usually aren't a wise factor to market she says.

Instead, marketers should think about the strategy from their own perspectives and what they would want to hear. "This will keep you from being poisoned by the exhaust fumes," Langhans says.

A successful marketing campaign is one that illustrates how a golf course sets itself apart from others. Langhans suggests that golf course managers and owners make a list of its services and note how it is different from other area clubs’ services. These include signage, voice mail, the people who answer the phone, letterhead, the Web site and parking.

Consider:
• What is the club doing that is the same, expected, ordinary or usual?
• Switch it up a bit – what can be done differently?
• How can each golfer’s experience be made memorable? (An example Langhans has heard is playing music at the first tee box to ease golfers’ nerves)
• What services would be offered if this wasn’t a golf course? (Example: a hospital started offering valet service)

By doing something different, golf courses can do something remarkable—that is, something that is worthy or a remark, Langhans says. This is the best way to win customers, she adds, because the best marketing is word-of-mouth mention.

Langhans says this is the way to gain publicity rather than "doing" marketing, which is how many people often think of the process. "Branding isn’t something you do," she says. "You become a brand; you achieve it."

People often make decisions based on emotion rather than fact, so Langhans suggests marketers play to this tendency. Show potential customers the course has a personality.

"Describe the business as if it were a walking, talking person," she says. Is it a man or a woman? What usually is a golfer’s first impression of the course or facility? Is the course a wallflower or a mingler? "The best marketing in the world sounds like a letter from an old friend," she adds.

Langhans pushes the idea of a recommended daily activity-something managers or owners can do on a daily business to spread the word about the course. RDAs including attending networking meetings, calling wedding planners to get the word out about the facility and making one person’s day a little better are activities that can add to the daily promotion of the course.

Ultimately, she says, every employee is a member of the course’s marketing department. Each employee’s action has the potential to leave an impact on the customer and could determine whether the customer returns.

"Think of yourself as being in the people business rather than the golf business," she says.

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What can be done when golf course greens are struggling to grow in, resulting in less than desirable playing conditions?

How about creating a second set of greens?

That's how management of Willow Springs Golf Course approached the problem. The family-owned course outside of Fort Worth, Texas, experienced difficulties with a Tifgreen Bermudagrass grow-in, so the grounds management crew started fresh with a new set of Bermudagrass greens.

One set of greens is used in the summer and the other in the winter. Although the approach had its costs up front, the long-term effects have made it worthwhile, says golf course superintendent Troy Golden.

"The course lies out a little differently (every six months), so members enjoy the change," he says. "Some are laid out side-by-side, and others are separated by a sand trap. A hole might be par 4 in the summer, but have a different setup and be a par 3 in the winter."

Additionally, maintenance is easier and less disruptive when there are two sets of greens.

"We can do cultural practices such as aerification to the greens we're not using," he says. "We never have downtime because of major agronomic practices."

The summer greens maintenance routine usually starts in March, when the crew aerifies and verticuts them. After the greens heal, they're included in the regular routine with the winter greens.

"We ride-mow all our greens, so it's not that big of an extra effort," he says. "As soon as the summer greens are in good condition (usually in May) and I have ability to water and fertilize them more, we open them for summer."

Another advantage is that if one course's greens aren't at an acceptable quality, the crew can switch to the other set so golfers almost always find favorable course conditions. This ability has given Willow Springs an advantage when nearby courses have had trouble keeping greens in top form.

For example, Golden says that when nearby courses are losing