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Is Perception Reality?

We're employed in an industry that serves millions of people annually. It can be a very rewarding career — when everything goes right and all is well in the universe. Unfortunately, this cosmic alignment rarely happens. The problem is that for many of us this is expected — everything going right and perfect conditions are expected daily. Why does this happen? Why are we subject to such scrutiny?

Recently, I attended the 38th annual Wisconsin Golf Turf Symposium, and some of the top turfgrass experts in the country were featured speakers: Joe Vargas and Ron Calhoun from Michigan State University; Frank Rossi from Cornell University; Craig Currier from Bethpage State Park; Bruce Clarke from Rutgers University; Mike Morris from Crystal Downs Country Club; and Michael McNulty from the Philadelphia Country Club.

Currier, director of golf course maintenance at Bethpage, said something that most of us know, but very few of our customers understand: “It took six years to prepare for one week of golf.” Yes, I know this was one of the Major events. But isn’t this expected — everything perfect, why can’t they have the same speed as at their local country clubs? Their perceptions are flawed into thinking that if the turf at Bethpage Black, Olympia Fields, Medinah and Oak Hill looks so great and perfect, why can’t they have the same conditions at their courses?

With the advent of television taping everything, these events must portray “grainless” greens or be subject to the scorn of Johnny Miller. The perception must be perfect. But even with millions of dollars and hundreds of volunteers, the reality is that these fabulous swaths of pristine turf are often pushed to near death. And if Mother Nature deems it, turfgrass dies.

So what can we do? When handed a handful of lemons, how do we make lemonade? This is a challenge with which we are all faced with, especially now with our slower economy and golf rounds spiraling. Morris, the certified superintendent from Crystal Downs Country Club in Franklin, Mich., had some interesting comments. He took the offensive approach. He talked to members and asked them their expectations of the course. He took the initiative and collected data to determine what his daily green speeds were. He surveyed his golfers and asked them what target green speeds they would accept. Surprisingly, when he sped them up for a club event and tried to maintain the same speed afterward, the members asked him to get them back to normal.

I believe we are our own worst enemies at times. One of our greatest deterrents is our lack of communication. I know that we preach to the choir in triumphant choruses, but are loath to carry the message to our employers. How well do we know that the squeakyest wheel gets the grease? Well, why not intelligently gather some data as Morris did and start squeaking?

Our livelihood demands the best of our abilities. Most of us strive well beyond the expectations of our clientele, but at what cost? Maybe we could all save a few gray hairs and save our employers some money if we took the initiative to assess our customers’ expectations. Maybe that is the reality of our careers and our lives.

Tony Rzadzki
Irrigation Technician/PGA Construction Specialist
Whistling Straits Golf Course
Sheboygan Falls, Wis.

We want to hear from you. You can e-mail your letters to Frank Andorka at fandorka@advanstar.com, fax to 440-891-2575 or send them via snail-mail to: 7500 Old Oak Blvd., Cleveland, OH 44130. Make sure to include your name and phone number for verification.
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A s faithful readers and golf history buffs probably know, the original *Golfdom* was launched in 1927 by a pair of Chicago brothers named Herb and Joe Graffis. For nearly 50 years, the old *Golfdom* was the leading source of innovative business information for greenkeepers, club managers and golf professionals alike.

More importantly, for our purposes, the Graffis boys used their magazine as a bully pulpit to improve the lot of greenkeepers. Herb, in particular, lobbied for better education and organization in the fledgling profession. He’s even credited with pushing for the use of the title, “greens superintendent,” as a better indicator of the level of skill needed for the position.

Eventually, the visionary brothers grew old and sold the magazine. Predictably, without the guidance from its fathers, it lost its “edge” and voice, and died a largely unlamented death in the late 1970s. When we launched this thing in 1999, we gulped hard and “borrowed” the title of the legendary old journal. That worked out OK, so now I’m once again going to invoke a name from our past to, I hope, accomplish something positive for the future.

I hereby announce the creation of a new award, The GrafFie, to be presented to those members of the mainstream golf media and establishment who “get it.” In other words, we’re going to regularly pay tribute to writers, players, association types and other influencers who seem to understand the realities of golf course maintenance and are willing to be credible messengers for the cause.

Although retroactive Graffies should certainly be presented to favorites including Arnold Palmer, Tom Watson, Jim Nantz and David Feherty, I’m going to award the inaugural honor to David Owen of *Golf Digest*.

His piece in the April issue (“Let’s go retro — bring back shaggy greens”) is simply the most accurate, sympathetic and well-constructed article about green speed to ever appear in a sticks-and-balls publication. If you haven’t already seen it, go find it, read it and put a copy on every bulletin board and in every locker in your facility immediately. Just a few quotations to illustrate the magnitude of this public-relations slam dunk:

- “Slow greens require as much putting skill as fast greens do — maybe more.”
- “Dialing back the putting speed on almost all golf courses would be good for the game.”
- “Like almost all the world’s ills, greens that are too fast for their own good can be blamed on TV: Announcers obsess about putting speed, so you and I obsess about it, too.”

Johnny Miller, are you listening?

So, Mr. Owen, it’s an honor and a pleasure to make you our first GrafFie recipient. That, however, begs the question of what the actual award should entail. I’m thinking we’ll get an old cup cutter, spray paint it gold, do the proper engraving and ship it off to the winner. It would, at very least, be a nice conversation piece in the winner’s cubicle. “What’s that?” a visitor to his office would ask. “Why that’s the coveted Golden Cup Cutter, of course,” our hero would answer.

(By the way, I’m also considering starting an Anti-GrafFie for those who consistently demonstrate that they don’t “get it.” Johnny Grainhead is an obvious choice, as would be noted Pothater and club slammer Tiger Woods. Instead of the Golden Cup Cutter, they would receive a bag of fertilizer — natural bovine fertilizer, if you catch my drift. But I digress …)

I hope you’ll join me in congratulating David Owen and thanking him for using his bully pulpit the way Herb did half a century ago. He can be reached at david.owen@earthlink.net if you’d like to share your digital congratulations with him. He may appreciate your kind words even more than the stupid yellow cup cutter he keeps stubbing his toe on.

Pat Jones is the publisher of Golfdom. He can be reached at 440-891-3126 or pjones@advanstar.com.
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The acceptance speech for the career-recognition award was limited to three minutes. Danny Quast, a veteran superintendent of 38 years and the recipient of the award, could probably talk for three hours about the memories and highlights of his illustrious career.

So what would Quast cram into an 180-second speech upon receiving the GCSAA's 2004 Distinguished Service Award? Would he reminisce about his 12 years at Medinah Country Club, where he staged a PGA Championship? Or would he talk about all the fabulous people he met in the business over the years?

When Quast stood in front of the microphone stand to make his speech, he kept his thoughts closer to home. He didn't talk about the glitz of hosting a Major or working at one of the most revered clubs in the nation.

Quast's speech for the award, the crowning achievement of his career, focused on his mother, Hazel, who died in January at age 90. Quast said he wanted to share his award with his mom, who inspired him to go out in the world and make something of himself.

"When I look back over my life, it was my mother that made it all happen for me — by her examples and her attitudes," the 60-year-old Quast told me. "Her encouragement over the years is what put me up on that stage to accept the award. She was the most influential person in my life."

Quast told the thousands attending the awards ceremony, held during the Opening Session of the GCSAA Conference and Show in February, that his mother quietly went about doing God's work during her life but received little recognition for her efforts.

"She inspired us to be adventurous," Quast says.

Hazel also inspired her sons through her generosity. Danny was moved by his mother's altruism while growing up.

He says Hazel had a heart of gold — she was always volunteering and helping others at various social centers. Even when she was in her late 80s and living at a nursing home, Hazel would take the elevator to the Alzheimer's ward and help out.

"I hope I can walk in her shadow and do as she did for others," Quast says.

Shortly before she died, Hazel, who had $144 to her name, told Danny, "I'm sorry I'm not leaving you anything."

To which Danny replied: "You left me everything. You left me the ability to go out and do something."

Indeed, Quast was "something" — one of the top superintendents in the business. But Hazel also left Danny with something else: She taught him about humility and nobility through her actions.

Think about it: The fact that Quast recognized his mother during his three minutes in the limelight says a great deal about the man — and the way he was raised.

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