



Within the Leather

by David Kazmierczak CGCS

I had the privilege of attending the MGCSA affiliate

appreciation day recently, and was able to address the group concerning this magazine. I would qualify the encounter as a success, with more than a few members talking to me afterward expressing the desire to submit articles for Hole Notes. I had never been to the affiliates meeting before, so the thought of that many “salesman” in the room with me, one of the few superintendents, initially sent a slight shudder down my spine.

OK, I’m kidding. I truly am at ease talking to anybody about anything. However what did cross my mind as I drove the hour or so from Waconia back to Woodbury was could I ever envision myself stepping into those shoes- the shoes of supplier to the turf industry.

The truth is that if you polled the affiliate members a majority of them would tell you they did just that. They started out working on the golf course in some capacity and for whatever reason decided to take the supplier path as a means to earn a living. I have always had a sense that some in the industry look down upon that, and it is a concept I never really understood. Suppliers are here essentially for two reasons- earn a living, and help us. The more they help us get our jobs done, the better they are able to realize their own business. Seems pretty cut and dry, and who would be better

served to help you in a time of need than somebody who might have gone through similar experiences in the past.

I started my journey home, and quickly came to the conclusion that I could handle the job of being a sales representative just fine, as I slowed to avoid a tractor, just before turning onto Highway 212. Heck, I have the gift of gab and everybody loves me. I’m well organized, resolve conflict well, and am well rounded. My turf knowledge is immense. I have all the answers when our members or neighbors ask me stupid questions. Yes, I would be a natural.

But as I cursed the Audi that cut me off in Eden Prairie, I started thinking about some of the suppliers I know and what it really took for them to be successful.

First of all, I guess I would have to get used to the word no. As in: “No I don’t have time for you,” and “No I don’t need any right now,” and “No, I already ordered it from Joe Blow an hour ago.” Considering my love for the word in the form of “No I’m not going to stay on the cart path,” “No, you can’t topdress it’s ladies’ day,” and “No, I can’t make it in this weekend,” I guess I would put that in the “Something I have to work on,” category.

And as I came to a screeching halt in Bloomington in the middle of a highway designed to move vehicles at 70 miles per hour, not five, there would be the issue of travel. Lots and lots of travel. I suppose I would have a nifty company vehicle to drive around in, but not to get too comfortable with. Seems I would be trading it in every couple years because it will be worn out. Kind of like the guy who is driving it.

As traffic picked up I started thinking those two hurdles would be tougher than I first

realized, but I would relish the turf talk with my future customers. That would make the job fun all the time. I would just walk in the offices and there would be meaningful conversations. The customer would tell me his or her problems and I would tell them mi.....

Oh yea. I don't have problems, at least not any that a customer would want to hear. They do not care that my profit margin is down and my boss's blood pressure is up. They do not care that I have to rush something to another customer causing me to miss dinner and my kid's soccer match, and really don't care that the warehouse botched my order and sent the wrong product. All they care about is that I fix it- now.

The Wacouta Bridge meant that my travel from west to east was almost complete, and my green haven called Prestwick was almost in sight. I concluded that is truly where I belong and the transition to a turf-related sales job would not be the slam dunk I thought it might at the start of the trip. Then one more thought popped into my head. When was the last time I had bought a beer, or a lunch, or even said thank you to one of my suppliers? When was the last time you did?

I am not suggesting that you owe any supplier anything, and yes I am quite aware that most of those things are turned in on an expense report. However, if you have built this relationship of mutual trust and understanding why not show that appreciation every once in a while. I have already been in binds twice this season because I did not take the time to plan ahead or just plain did not pay attention. My suppliers bailed me out and had what I needed or found it right away, no questions asked. Is it their job to do that? Well, yes but realize constantly having to do that can get really old,

fast.

I think many of us on the green side kind of take for granted the unique abilities of our suppliers. Not everybody is a good turf supplier. I imagine it is a skill set that has to be part natural, part learned and definitely honed through a period of time. They have to be super organized, even more so than us. They have to be part mother, part father, part psychologist, part negotiator. They have to be understanding and completely versed in their products successes and failures. They always have to have cheery disposition, or at least fake it well, and they always have to have their ears open. That is not always easy to do. Superintendents tend to be a grumpy bunch when push comes to shove, and on top of that the customer is always right.

We always hear in our industry how a given superintendent is a great grass grower or an outstanding superintendent. How he or she is an innovator or a motivator of people. When was the last time you heard somebody say that somebody was a fantastic sales representative? I am sure their superiors can see it, hopefully not just in numbers. I happen to think I have, or am working with a few outstanding turf suppliers, and I know I would not be as successful as I am without them.

We come to expect the thank you from them for the sale. We take for granted the customer dinner or sponsorship for the association. Their job is often thankless, so take the time every once in a while to thank them. Who knows, it could be you on that side someday, and you reap what you sow.