

You may think that your local rep has life easy, but a look at the day in the life of a rep might change your opinion...

The grass is always greener

While the vast majority of greenkeepers are extremely attached to their jobs and content with their way of life; regarding golf courses as infinitely superior places upon which to carve a living, there is nevertheless something in their psyche, deep down, that causes them on occasion to cast an envious glance at the other man's lot.

Mild cases of envy are, of course, altogether acceptable human traits. Certainly they cause no harm, while the odds-on bet when it comes to a declaration of which man's grass is greenest, surprisingly often focuses on the machinery dealer. This is not altogether unexpected, for in the eyes of the greenkeeper, the dealer – or more specifically the dealers' representative – on the face of it does appear to lead a charmed existence.

To look into the dealers role and to present a more rounded picture, Greenkeeper International took the opportunity recently to spend a day in the company of a typical dealership – Ernest Doe & Sons – a firm whose solid, long-established foundation has just been celebrated by 100 years of successful trading.

To be fair, Ernest Doe's are an exception rather than the rule, for they employ the largest number of staff in any dealership by far – over 400 at last count – while irrefutably they are Ransomes' largest Professional Products dealers. With 14 branches and over 100 service vehicles, theirs is a web that expands visibly through sophisticated main-frame computer networking; for parts, machinery, accounting, indeed

every conceivable scrap of minutiae is logged and accounted for, plus a holding of over £300,000 in Ransomes' spare parts alone.

Though as old as the century, Doe's in 1998 are as modern as the latest apparatus shown on Tomorrow's World; clearly successful and set fair upon a spirited programme of continuing expansion.

For the purpose of producing this article, the visit was restricted to a single location, Esher, in Surrey, the youngest in a long line of Ernest Doe/Ransomes dealership bases, all strategically placed around the east, south, and south east of England. In serving parts of SW London, Surrey, West Sussex and Kent, the new Esher dealership is unique for Doe's in attending exclusively to the needs of the fine-turf industry. This is the first dealership within the company's empire not to deal also in the farm implements and agricultural machinery upon which much of Doe's success has been founded.

Guided by a general consensus of opinion and a peek at the EEC barometer, which indicates that farming in Europe is in a condition of 'slumber', aided, no doubt, by a strong pound, a decline in world wheat prices and a host of meaningless governmental restrictions, Doe's decision to plump for selling professional turf care products in exclusivity at Esher came as no surprise. Proof of their smart thinking can be seen in the healthy volume of business generated in just nine months since opening.

Perhaps the first question to pose might be 'what is a typical dealer?' Simply stated, the definition is one who buys and sells, thereby making a profit. Yet even the most naïve will appreciate that to succeed in dealing, a high level of investment by way of after-sales support is necessary. Service, repairs, maintenance, spare parts supply, product training, all serve to create the successful dealership make-up.

This typically is the case at Esher, where Branch Manager, Phil Bush, leads a team of nine skilled personnel, while continuing on occasion also to doff his salesman's hat in servicing

and cultivating special accounts. "Busy" is a word that's barely adequate to describe this man's working day, which begins at much the same time as most greenkeepers begin theirs, though for Bush it means a heart-in-mouth scramble round the M23/M25 racetrack, enough to strike terror in all but the very bravest.

Around 7am each morning he begins work on site by supervising the arrival of spares and equipment, delivered daily by Ransomes', aided by the very epitome of a human computer; spares wizard, Sue Kemp. Meanwhile salesman, Brian Ryder, initiates the loading of the first of several pieces of machinery contracted for hire – a Cushman aerator, a compact tractor, followed by a couple of golf cars, later a Ryan Sodcutter – all of which must be on site early enough to justify honest value from their hire. These will be trailer hauled behind a 4x4 Maverick, refreshingly used for its rightful purpose and visibly conspicuous as a proper working vehicle, especially among those who tend to favour 4x4s for fashion alone, never sully their Firestone's on anything that looks even vaguely like dirt.

It is at times like these that one realises the importance of the salesman's place in the maelstrom of everyday events. Indeed, far from having it cushy, the dealers' rep. is often expected to be in a dozen different places at once, which explains why splitting his day into planned segments and forever juggling with Old Father Time is a skill that makes the difference between success or failure.

The retail store must be up and running by 7.30am, the all-important parts salesman topped-up with essential supplies for his van before being dispatched on his rounds, while the workshop crew will be assigned work on essential machinery maintenance; mower blade grinding, the renovation of work-wear machinery, plus all manner of trouble-solving. In these departments there's rarely a dull moment, either.

Finally settled at his desk, Bush begins by surfing through e-mail, checking computer stock print-outs, listening to several overnight recorded



messages and returning each call promptly and impressively, this between taking live telephone calls and at all times demonstrating the wealth of knowledge essential to the running of an effective dealership.

It becomes patently clear to the onlooker that information is the very life-blood of efficient dealing. In stocking a multitude of items – everything from a split pin to a fleet of Ransomes grass cutting machinery – there's no room for indecision. Thus "I don't know" translates more readily into "I'll find out and get back to you."

One is aware also that with a phone that seems never to stop ringing, infinite patience, unquestioned scholarship, product awareness, (both of their own range and those of competitors), keeps every team player very much on their mettle. Each tiny spare part must be understood by number or description, as also must the heart of its working parent. Product training days therefore are an essential part of a dealer's efficiency, and regular training periods are set aside, including tailor-made workshops staged by Ransomes at their Ipswich headquarters.

Forward and following the sales trail now; there are very few people as familiar with the maze of roads encircling London's airport than Brian Ryder. While negotiating uncharted back-doubles, Ryder speaks of his selling experiences, echoing much of what had been uttered earlier by Phil Bush. It's clear they're on the same wavelength, for one remark, "all things being equal, people would rather do business with a friend, so we cultivate friendships," made eminent good sense, yet we agree there are far too many horror stories of 'couldn't care less' attitudes, and these not always confined to the scapegoat public sector, either.

Ryder is firm in his opinion that people buy from those who make it easy to buy from them, so as common practice he and his colleagues work harder at accommodating any special customer requests. In that way, a trust is soon established between prospect and vendor, whether its an issue of price, quality or quantity. "It's a question", Ryder says, "of making people feel comfortable."

There's an element of cold-calling – knocking on doors – in every salesman's day, for this builds the basis for future growth. 'Make new clients but keep the old' is a familiar ditty. Ryder, it appears, is a clever inquisitor, rarely pressing for an order, but probing and pondering over a customer's perceived problems; how they may be solved, how his organisation might well provide the solutions.

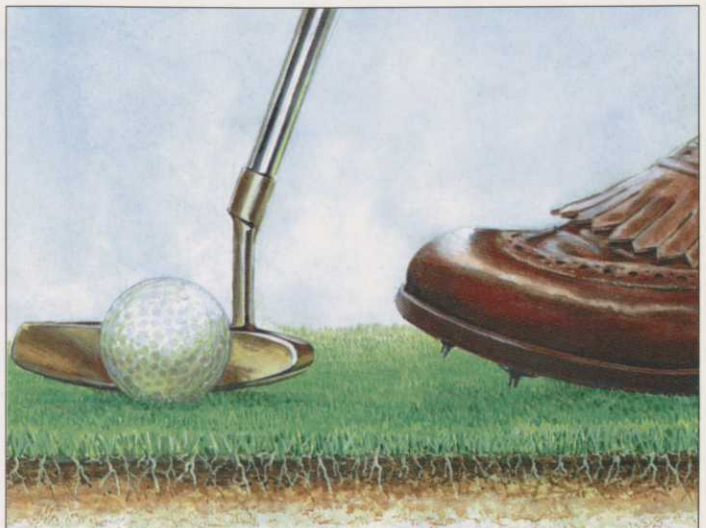


From the conception commonly held, it's easy to appreciate why greenkeepers' think of dealer reps as 'having it made'. The comfortable salesman's style is shown at its finest as the afternoon unfolds, with Ryder travelling next to Ashford Manor Golf Club and an appointment with Course Manager, Terry Huntley, an activist in BIGGA's Surrey Section and a skilled practitioner who holds forthright views.

There's an element of chewing the fat, of course, with Ryder showing a keen interest in Huntley's tastefully remodelled greenkeeping facilities. A whistle-stop tour is called-for, with time also to admire Huntley's spirited rebuilding of Ashford's 13th tee. Under such circumstances, commercial conversation evolves rather than being dictated. Huntley's business of the day is lightweight; nothing save a seasonal demand for a piece of kit, which Ryder will satisfy through a short-term rental contract. Yet in Ryder's display of empathy and understanding, the doors at Ashford Manor open yet wider and allow for many future sorties; a juicy prospect, in fact!

More miles now and it's approaching 4.30pm. The next hurdle is dodging through sprawling suburbia and traffic build-up, for there's one call remaining. Will the client still be there? It's best to check, so the essential cellular 'phone is cranked up and a voice crackles over the ether; "Hey, it's good of you to touch base, Brian, we guessed you'd been highjacked!" There's no hint of customer irritation, but for once it seems the clock has won the day, thus an appointment is established – right there and then – for a rendezvous "first thing in the morning." No, wait a minute, I'm sure he said "at first light"!

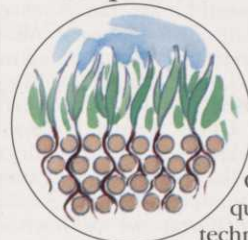
In focusing again toward the purpose of the exercise, the thought occurs that if this is a typical salesman's day, these dealers make their profit the old-fashioned way. They earn it.



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