



# BIGGA market research study: The story to date...

As readers will know from reports in Greenkeeper International earlier this year, BIGGA commissioned specialist golf consultancy MW Associates in March to carry out a detailed market research study on behalf of the Association. Funding for the research was provided by the R&A, whose financial support is gratefully acknowledged. Many people also assisted with the study, either by completing questionnaires or by taking part in telephone interviews, and a good number expressed interest in hearing about the findings of the research – and how BIGGA planned to follow up the study. So, in the first part of this article, Mike Williamson, the Director of MW Associates responsible for the study, describes how the research was carried out and summarises his main findings and conclusions. BIGGA's Board has discussed these findings, both with Mike Williamson and at its own meetings, and, in the second part of the article, BIGGA's Executive Director Neil Thomas highlights the priorities the Board has identified for more detailed assessment and follow-up action.

Mike Williamson takes up the story...

The general aim of the study was to establish how BIGGA, and its current policies and activities, are regarded by its members and the major companies and organisations in the golf industry that it has dealings with. A further specific aim was to identify ways of tackling problems, and exploiting opportunities, in the areas of marketing and revenue generation.

A key element of our survey work was a detailed questionnaire sent to a sample of just over 2,000 BIGGA members, representing all membership categories and all regions of the country. 574 completed questionnaires were returned – a response rate of 28%.

In addition, we carried out about 150 telephone interviews, which covered:

32 potential BIGGA members, ie greenkeepers who have not joined BIGGA;

31 lapsed BIGGA members, ie greenkeepers who had previously been, but were no longer, BIGGA members;

BIGGA Board Members, senior staff, and regional administrators;

32 commercial contacts, ie representatives of Golden and Silver Key company members of BIGGA, companies advertising in Greenkeeper International, golf operating companies, media etc;

14 representatives of golf organisations, ie golf unions, the colleges, professional associations, GTC, STRI, etc;

23 representatives of golf clubs, ie representatives of Association of Golf Club Secretaries and individual golf clubs.

The completed questionnaires and telephone interviews yielded a great deal of information and opinion – some of a strategic nature and some at a very detailed level – and this is reflected in the structure of our report. We highlight a number of general, and common, themes that emerged from many of the questionnaires and interviews, but also list the many detailed comments and suggestions – often made by only one or two people, but well worth considering nonetheless – relating to specific BIGGA services or aspects of Greenkeeper International or BTME.

The 'big issues' that emerged from the research can be summarised as:

## The Way Forward?

A feeling came across in many of the interviews – perhaps prompted by the very fact that the research was being carried out – that, having come a long way in its first 14 years, BIGGA had reached a point where important decisions had to be made about its future direction, and at a time when finances are tight in the golf industry generally.

## Membership – quality or quantity?

On balance, the research supports the direction BIGGA is already taking, ie introducing a minimum qualification for full membership and focussing on education and training as the core membership service, with the aim of positioning BIGGA clearly as a professional association for greenkeepers at all levels and stages who want to pursue greenkeeping as a professional career. This could enable BIGGA to play a key role in co-ordinating the design and delivery of all levels of education and training, and strengthen the Association's relationship with the commercial sector.

## Policy priorities

Two BIGGA services clearly emerged from the research as the top priorities in terms of spending any extra money that becomes available, and being protected against any cuts if savings have to be made. These were education and training – locally delivered so far as possible – and working to improve the professional status, and the pay and conditions, of members.

## A centralised or devolved organisation?

BIGGA now has a large and very dispersed membership, who are looking for membership services (as well as recruitment efforts and liaison with employers) to be as locally based as possible. Having smaller (and therefore more) regions each with its own administrator could help, while members need more information about 'who does what' in BIGGA HOUSE, and how all the work done there contributes to member benefits.

## Funding and the relationship with the commercial sector

Much more of BIGGA's funding now comes from BTME and Greenkeeper International than from members' subscriptions. With financial pressures in the commercial sector, businesses looking for more commercial return on the money they spend with BIGGA, and some unease among members about potential over-dependence on commercial funding – but all combined with an expectation that BIGGA will continue to expand its services to members – there are clearly financial challenges to be faced. Efforts should therefore be redoubled to obtain more funding for greenkeeper training in particular from the people who ultimately benefit most from it – professional and amateur golfers.

## Working links and public relations

The research suggests BIGGA should strengthen its working links with colleges and the GTC on education and training, and with the PGA and the Association of Golf Club Secretaries as the other two associations representing the professionals in golf management. The evidence also suggests BIGGA needs to devote more resources to professional PR to raise the profile of the Association and get its messages across more effectively to members, golfers, and companies and organisations in the golf industry.

## Greenkeeper International and BTME

While these are both clear success stories, there was a strong body of opinion in favour of the magazine having more technical, research, educational, and business management content – and with more of this being related to 'ordinary' golf courses.

BTME is seen as providing excellent service to the industry and good commercial opportunities for companies. While Harrogate is generally accepted at present as the most appropriate location for the BTME, this needs to be regularly reassessed while there needs to be a focus on attracting members from further afield to Harrogate as well as ensuring that fresh faces and as many potential buyers as possible appear from year to year.

## A final word from Mike Williamson

This brief summary has had to leave out most of what is in our 40-page report, but hopefully it will give a flavour of the broad findings. Again, my thanks on behalf of MW Associates to everyone who completed questionnaires or took time to speak to us.

## Neil Thomas continues the story...

BIGGA's Board of Management has given detailed consideration to the market research study and has identified the following as priority areas for more detailed assessment and follow-up action as a result of the market research.

More effective communications and public relations, including the possible use of professional PR services to "get the Association's message across" to its various target audiences, closer working relationships with other bodies where mutual interests could be clearly identified, and more use of techniques like roadshows and contact with employers at the County Golf Union level to promote membership recruitment, services and general support for BIGGA.

A review of BIGGA's current three-tier structure, particularly with the aim of identifying cost-effective ways of strengthening the Association's local "identity" and service delivery.

A review of the commercial funding generated by the Association, including a review of the concept of Golden and Silver Key company membership, in terms of features like the number of companies involved, the level of payment to BIGGA and the services offered in return.

Further strengthening of BIGGA's key service of education and training, including the funding of this service and the role of the Association in relation to the colleges and the GTC.

For the Board's next meeting in December I have a brief to make recommendations as to how the Association should proceed with the assessment and any follow-up action. There is no doubt that this will involve, as it should, members at all levels when we will need to look back at BIGGA's operation over the last 14 years and then decide on how best to take the Association forward in the years that lie ahead.

The work involved will be significant and while there will be expectations, there also needs to be a degree of realism. There will be no quick fixes and we are certainly looking at a medium/long term process whereby we can envisage coming to decisions, and implementing them, over a period which may be in excess of two years. It also needs to be said at the outset that there will undoubtedly be resource implications to consider and this will be a major factor in determining the timing for implementation of recommendations once approved by the Board of Management.

This should, therefore, be an exciting period when, far from resting on its laurels, BIGGA will examine its progress and development since 1987 and look to move forward progressively for the benefit of its membership in this new century.