



On the Soapbox

A vehicle for letting people within the industry express their point of view

I have been in this industry for more than 35 years and during that time have met countless greenkeepers at clubs, which are now facing increasing competition, and having to maintain the highest possible standards if they are to retain and attract new members.

In the early days it was a battle to get greenkeepers and groundsmen the recognition they deserved, but all that is changing – and that is largely thanks to the work of organisations like BIGGA and the IOG through their excellent training and education programmes.

We have come so far, but there is still a way to go. For today's turf managers, industry qualifications, keeping up to date with health and safety regulations, presentation expertise and management skills are now part of everyday life.

Machinery has certainly become far more sophisticated and is one of the key advances within the industry. As a result, the responsibility of the greenkeeper and groundsman has been dramatically increased with even a relatively medium-sized club having equipment which can add up to more than £200,000 in value.

There has also been a significant shift in the range of machinery each club will hold.

Thirty-five years ago it was quite common for fairways to be cut with gangs of mowers pulled by tractors. The idea of specialist fairway mowers was laughed at. Now they are the norm and clubs can spend more than £35,000 on a fairway mower. And where standards are at their highest, some clubs box-off the grass clippings.

Suppliers recognise the necessity for really good products and the need for demonstrations, training and follow-up contact with their customers.

On-site trials and tests with practical demonstrations are vital – as clubs are making a significant investment in equipment and want to try them out in their own surroundings to ensure they perform well and meet their individual needs.

A machine has to 'do what it says on the tin'. Facing tougher economic times, machinery companies recognise that it is not always possible for a club to make an outright purchase and are looking to offer a variety of business options – from no-interest payment deals to hire and leasing.

And after the sale, or lease, has been agreed the follow-up in service and spare parts for the equipment has got to be

exemplary. In this way we can secure repeat business.

Industry exhibitions. As manufacturers and suppliers we value our two main trade shows – BTME and IOG SALTEX – very highly. They are both at significant times of the year – with very different markets.

An outdoor show like SALTEX in September has a very wide remit for grounds managers with an extensive range of exhibitors taking part including those offering play equipment, nursery stock and heavy digging gear – with a demo area for all types of machinery, from chainsaws to trenchers.

But BTME in January is pitched just right for the sports turf market. Exhibitors and visitors can make an event of it, in a friendly environment, catching up with old colleagues in Harrogate to discuss the industry they love and the trials and delights of greenkeeping.

This business of large exhibitors deciding to do one show every other year is okay for them – but smaller companies want to do every single one as it is their lifeblood.

They have to be seen constantly by potential customers, and the contacts made at shows are vital for their survival.

I don't think the time will come when the shows will merge. And, in my opinion, that would not be to the advantage of either organisation – or the trade and visitors.

No one has to exhibit or attend, but those who want to, can. I think it would be unfortunate if this choice was removed. I appreciate that the expense of shows can be very significant but we as exhibitors have to evaluate what it costs against the value of orders taken at the show or subsequently.

By exhibiting there is also the added benefit of keeping up with existing customers and contacts, as well as meeting and greeting prospective customers.

Each show has its own particular place in the scheme of things and in the calendar they are important events for the sports and amenity industry.

The way forward Although we have tough economic times ahead we must plan for the future and always be prepared to go that extra mile for our customers. That goes not only for machinery and product suppliers but for golf clubs themselves.

The days of golf clubs being run by the old pals' brigade have virtually disappeared and hard-nosed business people are keeping business coming into golf clubs in a variety of ways – from encouraging youngsters and families, catering for events and offering pay-and-play visitors genuine deals.

Innovative ideas and new ways of thinking will need to be introduced to keep the golf industry moving forward.

In Germany one golf course holds annual summer camps for more than 1,000 youngsters who spend their holiday learning to play golf – using the course's facilities, and hopefully becoming future players and members.

Golf clubs here must look at every opportunity to encourage the next generation of members – and keep their current membership happy, to make sure numbers do not dwindle when the annual subscription request comes round.

Times are changing and we must all change with them to survive.

Tough times ahead but we must invest in the future



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