

Treading the boards

Scott MacCallum examines the value and success of BIGGA's Website Bulletin Boards

Where would you think to go if you wanted some information on out of bound markings; or whether smooth or grooved rollers are preferable for fairway mowers, or even help with problems with herons?

Of course, you could visit your local library (if it still exists!) or Google it and take your chances with what that turns up, or, much more sensibly, you could log onto the Members' Area of the BIGGA website – www.bigga.org.uk – and place a posting on the Bulletin Board.

Those three issues were recent topics on the Boards and for each one of them the poster was rewarded with some excellent responses and some superb advice.

The Bulletin Boards were introduced to the website around six years ago and quickly established themselves as a popular feature, offering the chance for members to pass comment; share the odd joke with fellow greenkeepers and, perhaps most importantly, request advice or information from the wealth of human resource within the Association.

"The Boards are not limited to technical information. They are also heavy on the human issues in greenkeeping," explained regular Bulletin Board visitor and Past BIGGA National Chairman, Paul Worster, Course Manager at Minchinhampton Golf Club.

"Anyone under pressure or stress at work can find instant empathy and helpful feedback on dealing with the situation. We may work alone in isolated golf clubs but there is no need to isolate ourselves from the world. The old adage is very true 'A problem shared is a problem halved'," said Paul.

Another regular visitor and contributor is De Vere Mottram Hall Hotel & Golf Club Course Manager, Stuart Stenhouse, who says he visits the Boards three to four times a week.

"I'll have a general read or follow up on an interesting thread if there



have been more replies since my last visit," explained Stuart, who has also posted questions.

"I always find that you get pretty well thought out responses and in general terms they are courteous. I am also surprised at how often I get a reply and it turns out to be something that has never crossed my mind before. It has had a practical impact on how I have done things on my course," he admitted.

He is a huge fan of what the Bulletin Boards can offer.

"They are invaluable because it is a great way to learn and it doesn't cost a penny, other than your membership subscriptions. They are a source of education and I think that fact is sometimes lost on people.

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Paul is even more effusive in his praise of the Boards.

"I was recently asked by the President of a well-known Kent golf club what I felt was the biggest change, or innovation, I'd seen during my career. I think he was

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expecting me to say the strimmer or plant growth regulators but I replied, almost without thinking because to me it was so obvious, that it was communications – the speed at which we can contact a colleague or industry professional to gain assistance," he said.

And the great thing about the Bulletin Boards is that they can be viewed from anywhere and comment can come from any part of the world.

One of the most regular contributors is Sean Sullivan, Superintendent at The Briarwood Golf Club, in Montana, who says he logs on at least four times a day.

"I've posted questions several times when I'm looking for techni-



cal information that I feel the UK greenkeepers will have a unique answer or solution to,” explained Sean.

“Following the responses I’ve received I’ve re-formatted my maintenance programme and blended some American methods with some UK methods and my members have made positive comments concerning the condition of the golf course which coincides with me joining BIGGA and starting to gather information from the Boards.”

Sean has posted questions about the use of fescues on golf courses, the use of seaweed extract, fertiliser usage and about rain gear.

“I have even used the Boards to find a greenkeeper to come to the States and give a presentation on sustainability and I have asked greenkeepers to post pictures of their courses for me to look at,” he said while he also admits to having made a controversial post concerning club pros, which generated a large number of views.

“If someone has a problem or a question there is almost always an answer or solution generated in less than 24 hours. If there are several qualified greenkeepers corroborating info then I feel confident to follow their advice. For me, I normally look at the solution, then check to see if there is an American equivalent. If not I have had product shipped from the UK.”

The most popular thread in the history of the Bulletin Boards came under the heading “2mm all summer” on the Talking Shop Forum. So large it eventually came in two parts the first containing 111 replies and the second containing



ABOVE: TOP TO BOTTOM: Paul Worster, Stuart Stenhouse and Sean Sullivan

101 replies. Such was the interest generated that it was the catalyst for a major seminar on the Continue to Learn programme at Harrogate in 2010.

“I got involved in the 2mm debate on the Boards and actually went down to visit Greg Evans (who promotes cutting at 2mm) at Ealing Golf Club to see it first hand,” said Stuart.

“I do believe that Greg came in for unfair criticism. He makes people think and it is just another option. No-one is actually forced down that route.”

Stuart has also formed firm friendships with members of the Gingerbread Men group, despite taking opposing agronomic views on the Boards.

“I remember my little spats with the Gingerbread men from a few years ago, but to be honest we are all great friends and there is a lot of mutual respect but people don’t see that side of it.”

On the other side of the Atlantic Sean would heartily recommend the use of the Boards to anyone, with one reservation as being the only BIGGA member in his region gives him a competitive advantage over his neighbouring golf clubs.

“At some time or other we all need help or information so why not get it quickly from qualified experienced individuals. I would suggest that everyone uses the information on the Boards as a starting point but that you must also do your own research to make sure the solutions are safe and have merit.”

Paul also offers some advice to those who may be reticent about “opening up” in public.

“Rest assured the Boards are monitored and instances of inappropriate or bullying responses are very rare.”

Indeed Paul comes in for praise from Stuart for his contribution to the Boards.

“One guy who always stands out to me is Paul Worster. No matter who it is who is asking a question Paul’s answers are always very courteous and to the point. In fact I really like reading his answers myself and I get a lot practical help out of them.”

If there was one tweak Stuart would like to see it is something to assist the younger members.

“I’d like to see more of the younger guys posting but currently it is difficult for them as the response when they ask a question is often ‘Why haven’t you asked your Course Manager?’.

“I’d like to see a section of the Bulletin Board purely for them with a small panel of established members designated to answer their questions. That way they can build up their confidence and they can move on to making greater use of what is out there,” said Stuart.

So if you want to know about nemasys, or log splitters, or just want to share something that’s been on your mind log on to www.bigga.org.uk and head for the Bulletin Boards.

BIGGA is committed to developing the Website and the Bulletin Boards, so if you any ideas or comments to make about them, please email Scott MacCallum, scott@bigga.co.uk