



Smart management

Kerran Daly MG looks at how you can keep a well maintained golf course in times of austerity measures





In a profession where growth is an essential prerequisite for quality work and happy customers the last thing greenkeepers want or need is low or, even, no growth. Growth is an absolute necessity for the health of the turf and the development of smooth, true playing surfaces.

Out in the wider world of business the same rule applies. Very low or no growth in the national economy spells trouble for all. The recent recession and the current austerity measures illustrate the point well. More unemployment, less disposable income and less corporate hospitality all add up to less golf being played and less income for golf clubs. This, of course, does not apply in all cases but as a general rule times are difficult for the average golf club.

It is at times like these that golf clubs look very closely at their budgets in an effort to identify areas in which they can increase their income and reduce their costs. Greenkeeping budgets may come under even closer scrutiny with requests from clubs to reduce expenditure.

Proactive management

First and foremost the greenkeeping department must recognise that doing all they can to help the club financially is in their best, long term, interests. Trying to maintain unrealistic budget levels, which

were set in more financially sound times could be seen as negative and unhelpful by the club. On the other hand, a positive concern to assist in reducing the club's financial burden will be appreciated and gain respect. Indeed, in the most severe of cases it may also keep the club in business and protect greenkeepers' livelihoods.

Course Managers should therefore be proactive in developing realistic, sustainable budgets. Indeed the manager of any department in any business has a responsibility to produce the goods in the most efficient way possible. Under the current economic climate this has become one of the most critical aspects of the job.

Build in flexibility

It is important to note that it is not the Course Manager's job to set the budget. That duty falls to whoever is in charge of the overall finances of the club, be it the Owner, the Treasurer or the Chairman of

the Board. The job of the Course Manager is to prepare budgets for the Club to accept, reject or modify. Note the plural 'budgets'.

If you were recommending a new piece of machinery one method would be to put forward at least four options:

The most expensive, with all the bells and whistles, which you probably cannot afford.

The machine you want and think you can afford.

The cheaper option which has its disadvantages.

And finally, the 'staying as you are' option, without a new machine and the consequences for the condition of the course.

When constructing the budget the same objective should apply. While you do not need to put forward four distinct and different budgets, you should be giving as much variation and options for the club to suit its current financial position.

This may best be achieved by setting out your preferred proposal for each area of the budget in a spreadsheet as you would normally do and then listing the variations to your proposal immediately after each section, clearly stating the additional cost or the possible saving and the consequences it will have for the course.

See table.

Topdressing makes up the major part of the greens budget. If asked to make savings in the materials budget we could put forward:

Reduce topdressing for greens to 50 tonnes @£46.00 per tonne for this year only = £2,300.00. This results in a budget saving on greens of approximately 20%. This will slow down progress on soil exchange and improved surface drainage targets, but will not cause lasting damage as long as we return to optimum dressing quantities when funds become available.

Alternatively you may decide that maintaining the greens topdressing is imperative and decide not to put forward this proposal and instead suggest the necessary savings in other areas of the budget.

The four main areas of the budget are labour, materials, machinery and course improvements. Some points of note when you are being asked to make savings are:

Labour

It is clear that reductions in labour are the most crippling and will have the biggest impact on the condition and presentation of

Materials for greens budget (figures for demonstration purposes only):

Allocation	Area	Qty	Unit	Unit Cost £	Total Cost £
Greens					
Fertiliser	1 hectare	40	20kg	35.00	1400.00
Top-dressing	1 hectare	100	tonnes	46.00	4600.00
Seed	1 hectare	10	20kg	100.00	1000.00
Herbicide	1 hectare	2	litres	28.00	56.00
Wormkiller	1 hectare	4	litres	15.00	60.00
Insecticide	1 hectare	1.5	litres	25.00	37.50
Wetting agent	1 hectare	100	litres	12.35	1235.00
Fungicide	1 hectare	100	litres	15.00	1500.00
Conditioner	1 hectare	10	20 litres	41.60	416.00
					10304.50



any detrimental long-term consequences.

- Similarly as already mentioned above with topdressings. Indeed, it is prudent, if you are intending to deep scarify on a dressing-based rootzone, to remove a heavy application of top-dressing from the budget showing a saving of at least £1000 and simply recycle the rootzone which is brought to the surface by the scarifier. Make the point, in writing that this saving can be set against the cost for hiring a machine to do the work. (See photo)

- The cost of dressings for tees and fairway divotting may be reduced by sourcing local materials and mixing and screening on site. This could be investigated and costed out, as could the use of your own homemade compost.

- Spot treating or individually treating turf areas for weeds, pests, diseases and wetting agent for dry patch can reduce usage dramatically. One has to be alert and responsive but it is more efficient and less expensive if budget reductions are required. Blanket

the course, as such, they should be considered as a last resort. It is therefore most important that managers are in a position to justify the labour requirement as they will surely be asked to do.

Managers should carry out a straightforward exercise in totalling man-hours currently available. This is a simple matter of multiplying the number of men by the number of days they work per annum and the hours they work each day. Remember that they do not work during rest breaks. This will give a total man-hours figure per annum. It is simpler if weekend overtime is justified as a separate item.

It is then a case of listing each area of the course and all operations carried out. It is easier to do this in two separate blocks of April to September and October to March as the work carried out in these periods is quite different. For each job state the man-hours it takes and multiply it by the number of times it is done.

Eg. Triplex mowing greens (April to September) = 1 man x 3.5 hours x 120 times = 420 man-hours.

Topdressing greens (April to September) = 3 men x 6 hours x 6 times = 108 man-hours

Add the totals for the two six month periods together to get the total annual man-hours required to maintain the course.

The result of this exercise should clearly show that all staff are gainfully employed and any cuts will

have severe consequences for the course. Having these facts and figures to hand will greatly strengthen your position in any negotiations on staffing levels.

Weekly time sheets are also very useful in justifying these figures and clearly showing the work carried out. Staff should be encouraged to see the benefit of having a record of the work they do.

It is also prudent to discuss with the staff any financial pressure and remind them that their importance to the club will be all the more apparent if they are multi-skilled and fully professional in their attitude. Taking on new skills and training will increase their value and their work opportunities for the future.

Materials

Material purchases can be an area where greenkeepers tend to follow what for them has been a successful formula year on year and there is a reluctance to change greatly from it. This is the entirely understandable 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it' syndrome. For this reason it tends to be the last area to look for savings, apart from ensuring you get quality products at the best price from suppliers. However, areas to look at might be:

- Reduction of the intensity of an overseeding programme, cutting down to half rate or missing one year altogether will slow up improvements but should not have

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applications where they may not be strictly necessary can be very wasteful of resources and money.

- Fertiliser rates may be historic and therefore it could be worthwhile suggesting experimentation with reduced rates as a trial. High fertiliser rates on large areas such as fairways eat up the cash. It is important to be sure that this is strictly necessary.

Reducing excessive growth may also have knock-on effects in reducing fuel bills, machinery wear, fungicide requirement and the need for expenditure on PGR's.

Machinery

In difficult financial times the machinery replacement budget is often the first to be hit. Greenkeepers are asked to make machinery last just one more year but this can be costly in repairs and downtime and can lead to a serious decline in the fleet, which can prove even more expensive to rectify the following year.

- Dealers should be asked for competitive tenders for hire purchase, lease hire or contract hire as these are essential in offering the club an alternative funding strategy.

- Rather than replacing machines, which are used less frequently, it may prove cheaper simply to hire them until funds for purchase become available. Another alternative might be to purchase such machines by agreement with one or two other clubs in the local area for multi-site use.

- Suppliers should also be asked for all figures related to repairs and running costs as this should be a serious consideration, more especially as fuel costs continue to rise.

As an example, where funds simply are not available to replace a ride-on fairway mower, which needs extensive costly repair, then it might be worthwhile costing out a tractor-mounted hydraulic, or set of gangs towed by a tractor which is currently standing idle most of the summer.

While these machines are not as efficient as ride-on mowers, they are much cheaper both to purchase and to run and produce a good, and in some cases better finish.

They are also much easier and cheaper to maintain and if cash flow is the problem they may fill a gap, which your club may appreciate. Such alternatives, while not ideal, may greatly reduce the necessity to look for savings elsewhere in the budget such as staffing levels.

Course Improvements programme

Course improvements eg new tees, tree planting schemes or bunker refurbishment should not take funding priority over basic maintenance of the main playing surfaces. It is not for Course Managers to decide this but it is important to make the case so that all are aware of the consequences of building new tees, which you then do not have the resources to maintain properly. Some may not see it this way but they may thank you later for pointing it out even though it may seem obvious to you. Spending time and money on a conservatory when the house is falling down is not good business.

Serious budget reductions can be made by doing course improvements in-house, as opposed to contracting out. The cost of training staff and hiring machines or purchasing used machines is soon recouped with construction works coming in at a half to two-thirds less than the contracted out price. There is the additional benefit that staff derive greater satisfaction from learning and practising new skills and completing a whole job rather than tidying up behind others.

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Don't forget

Staff are the main asset in any organisation. You can have the best school facilities in the world but if you do not have enough well-trained, qualified teachers the kids will learn nothing, so budget reductions should be aimed at those areas which will least affect the course and have minimal long-term detriment.

If asked to produce 10% savings, aim to produce 15% and offer several ways of achieving this.

Be clear, by explaining in writing, the consequences of any proposed reduction and in stating the need to return to optimum budget levels as funds become available.

Matching budgets to income can be a stimulating, creative and rewarding endeavour. Remain positive. Some of the best quality courses have historically been run on a shoestring. This could be why they are some of the best quality courses.

Kerran Daly MG, is Senior Consultant for Greensward Sports Consultancy

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