

Public Relations: Getting Out of the Barn

I am currently involved in a program, sponsored through the GCSAA Foundation, called the Chapter Leadership Institute. This is a pilot effort aimed at developing the leadership skills for current and future chapter board members. Twenty-two superintendents from around the country are involved, and I've enjoyed meeting them and sharing information about the challenges that lie within our respective chapters. I must also congratulate current and past leaders within our own chapter; it is very apparent that the level of professionalism within our chapter and standard of service offered by the MAGCS is at the top of the heap.

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Prior to meeting as a group last November, all participants took the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator test. This is a test to determine one's psychological type and was pretty interesting. I had never done this and the results seemed very accurate—almost a little scary. While everyone has his gifts, my make-up certainly comes with potential pitfalls. I also realized that some of what being a superintendent requires isn't naturally part of my make-up.

In Lawrence last November, we spent two days evaluating our Myers-Briggs results, discussing problems within our chapters and breaking down the process by which these problems could be addressed. The process is called "action-learning," and I was required to choose a mentor to help me with my project. Because I feel a few areas exist in which our Association can improve, I chose "improving our media relations" as the issue I would address throughout the 16-month program.

Why? What is so important about having a good relationship with the media? The media obviously has a huge impact on public perception and perception is reality. I'm sure television coverage of golf has impacted everyone at their own courses. Golf course conditions have improved dramatically over the years and it isn't all due to better equipment and increased research. The tools we have are better, but the public wants (think they want?) better conditions. They want to play the same type of golf they see on television. I'm not telling you something you don't know.

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What may come as a surprise, is the number of golfers who don't know who we are. In fact, many avid golfers still think of the superintendent as the "greenkeeper" or "groundskeeper." In survey results provided by GCSAA, most have heard of the title superintendent, but were not necessarily sure to whom the title applied. About half of all avid golfers (you would assume that "avid" players would be the most knowledgeable) perceive that the superintendent is the third man in the hierarchy of golf course management. The news isn't all glum. I don't catch a great deal of television golf, but when I do, I now regularly hear the golf course superintendent's name mentioned. Most of the time, it is in conjunction with a comment along the lines of, "So-and-so and his or her staff have the course in great shape this week." That didn't happen as recently as a couple years ago. Golfers are beginning to recognize that superintendents are the most important employees at a golf course facility. The dramatic surge in popularity of the game, references on television and a more competitive industry are important factors in this ascent of the superintendent.

I feel like I've spent a great deal of time rationalizing my effort. Let's get to what needs to be done. First of all, an association (whether it is GCSAA, MAGCS or the Bird-Lovers Club of America) can't do everything necessary to promote the superintendent. The individual needs to be more proactive; the same survey conducted by GCSAA last fall concluded that managers and golf professionals wanted their superintendents to "be better communicators and a part of the team." This is especially necessary at public or daily fee courses, where the clientele tends to change from day-to-day. A few suggestions include:

- Be more visible to golfers: Spend time at the first tee on the weekends and say hello. Use those locker-room bulletin boards to promote yourself, the business and communicate course conditions.
- When is the last time you got behind the microphone or megaphone to address that large outing? After the pro lets the players know the rules of the day, take a moment to introduce yourself and let the golfers know what kind of conditions to expect.
- Host a "Meet the Superintendent" day at the course. With the right amenities such as hors d'oeuvres and drinks, golfers will attend. At private clubs, consider participating in the new-member orientation process.
- Offer a "Play with the Superintendent" day (or several). You can explain the techniques of course conditioning as you play.
- Sometimes getting an article in the local paper isn't any harder than calling and discussing whatever it is you find newsworthy about your efforts at the golf course.
- How about the old "Suggestion Box" idea? We need to know what golfers are thinking!
- Several superintendents have their name and title right on their golf cart. That's a great idea and the new MAGCS sticker with the 75th anniversary logo would be a nice touch. Let me know if you need an extra one.

I know many of us, myself included, are not always comfortable doing these types of things. It's not always as difficult as it sounds; we are already communi-

cating everyday with a large staff of employees. With few exceptions, superintendents already possess most of the skills necessary. Additionally, this isn't all about getting proper recognition and compensation. This is about being the go-to person at our respective courses and eliminating scenarios like being a third party in the conversation about closing the course to carts on a rainy day. Are you still the last to find out about that shotgun being moved up an hour or that tent that needs to be erected in the backyard of the clubhouse? "I didn't know you had some irrigation over there . . ." We've all been on the frustrating end of moments like that. This is also about offering a more respected opinion when it comes to business decisions about the future needs of your facility. Do you continually fall short when looking for new equipment or trying to implement conditioning changes? Stepping up our communication efforts can also make your audience a little more understanding in a summer like '95.

What can be done at the chapter level? To date, a few items have been addressed:

- A very nice press release highlighting our chapter's 75th anniversary was distributed to several media contacts.
- A roster of superintendents is phoning in weather information to Paul Konrad, the morning WGN weather anchor. Let's hope this brings some positive exposure to our profession.
- We have been taking better advantage of the opportunities the CDGA's *Chicago District Golfer* magazine affords us. Cathy Miles Ralston deserves our thanks in this effort.

Ideas and/or work in progress includes:

- We hope to garner some coverage as the Midwest Golf House opens. It is my understanding that the Board of Directors will be invited to the grand opening later in the spring.
- I am looking for members whose courses have Web sites. I would like you to please consider adding our chapter Web site to your list of Web site links.
- I am working hard to make sure some members of the media attend a monthly meeting this summer. Despite some effort in the past, this has been difficult to succeed with. Additionally, do you know members of the media or someone that does? Invite them and a guest out for a round of golf at your own club. So many of these efforts can be done at the grassroots level.

- We are also working to have a superintendent as a guest on the local CLTV Friday night golf show. At minimum, developing a relationship with these groups may make this possible at a later date.

In closing, this has been a learning experience and I recommend you give one of these ideas a try. If you don't see anything that meets your fancy, GCSAA has a larger list of options. I would also like to thank Oscar Miles for mentoring me in this effort. I hope to look back on this and see some positive results. I'm writing this for the May issue, so it is still early. Reach out and touch your golfers while the season is young. Let them know that you help keep the game alive!





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referrals. There are a lot of questions to be asked, both in how to set up good procedures and what the membership would want and except. Don't be surprised if I bug all of you a time or two with questions. I will welcome your help and suggestions.

And finally, just a friendly reminder to sign up as soon as you can when wanting to attend a golf outing. The sooner the better, as your host needs time to set things up properly. With that said, I hope each and every one out there has a great year and may the grass be greener on YOUR side of the fence.



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