

Is Perception Reality?

I, along with many of you, happen to be employed in an industry that serves millions of people annually. It can be a very rewarding career, when everything goes right and all is well in the universe. Unfortunately, this cosmic alignment rarely happens. The problem for many of us is that this is expected. Everything going right and perfect conditions are expected daily. Why does this happen? Why are we subject to such scrutiny?

Last fall I attended the 38th Annual Wisconsin Golf Turf Symposium. Some of the top turfgrass experts in the country were featured speakers. Dr. Joe Vargas and Dr. Ron Calhoun came from Michigan State University, while Dr. Frank Rossi from Cornell University and Craig Currier from Bethpage State Park flew in all the way from New York. Dr. Bruce Clarke from Rutgers University, Mike Morris, CGCS from Crystal Downs Country Club in Frankfort, Michigan, and Michael McNulty from the Philadelphia Country Club also came to share their thoughts on this year's topic: "Poa Twenty Years Later."

Called upon to share his opinion on local *Poa* control, the venerable Monroe Miller of Blackhawk Country Club in Madison, Wisconsin, who only missed two of these symposiums in his lengthy career, took the opportunity to declare, "This is the best one yet!" Bob Vavrek, our local USGA agronomist, echoed Monroe's words as he rounded up the day-and-a-half event.

As I listened to everyone speak, but especially while Craig Currier was presenting, I was really taken aback. Craig said something that most of us know, but very few of our customers understand. "It took six years to prepare for one week of golf!" Yes, I know that Craig was discussing one of the 'major tournaments' that seldom come along to any of us. But that is the point. What the golfing public sees weekly on television, especially viewing a major tournament, is definitely not the reality that they can or should expect at their local club. Their perception is that if the turf at Bethpage, Olympia Fields, Medinah or Oak Hill looks so great, so *perfect*,

why can't we have it here? That perception is flawed.

Even so, take the major tournaments out of the picture. What of the weekly Tour events? With the advent of television taping *everything*, these events must portray 'grainless' greens or be subject to the scorn of Johnny Miller. The images must be perfect. And even with millions of dollars and hundreds of volunteers, oftentimes the reality is that these fabulous swaths of pristine turf are pushed to near death. And if Mother Nature deems it . . . turfgrass dies.

So what can we do? When handed a handful of lemons, how do we make lemonade? This is a challenge that faces us all, especially now with our slower economy and golf rounds spiraling down the stairs. Mike Morris (Crystal Downs C.C.) had some interesting comments. Mike took the offensive approach. No, he didn't take a week off to go fishing or tell his members to all take a hike. Mike realized, as we all should, that this is the information age. He talked to his clients, his members, and asked them what their expectations were. He took the initiative and collected data to determine what his daily green speeds measured. He surveyed his golfers and asked them what 'target' green speeds they would accept. Surprisingly, when he increased speed for a club event and tried to maintain those speeds afterwards, the members asked him to get them back to 'normal.' Last, Mike evaluated his maintenance practices. He evaluated what he was doing to reach his 'target expectations.'

If you haven't heard Bruce Williams, CGCS of Los Angeles Country Club speak about communi-

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cation and time management, you have missed something. And if you *have* heard him speak . . . then practice what he is preaching. That is where I, and many others, fail.

I do believe that at times, we are our own worst enemies. One of our greatest detriments is our lack of communication. I know for a fact that we preach to the choir in triumphant unison, but are loath to carry the message to our employers. How well we know that the squeakiest wheel gets the grease. Well, why not intelligently gather some data as Mike did and start squeaking?

Our livelihood demands the best of our abilities. Most of us strive well beyond the expectations of our clientele, but at what cost? Maybe we could all forego a few gray hairs or losing them, and save our employers some money on the way, if we took the initiative to assess the expectations of our customers. Maybe that is the reality of our careers and our lives.

