

First things first

I'm not a big fan of those cliché-ridden management books written by super-wealthy executive types. It steams me to drop \$28 at Barnes & Noble for 300 pages of chest-thumping egotism punctuated by the occasional business success "secret" (e.g., "Hire good people and let them do their jobs" or "Make sure your parents are millionaires before you're born").

But, there is the occasional useful tidbit among all the buzzwords and other leadership tripe. One that stuck with me and has been on top of my mind lately as I'm building a new business, is Stephen Covey's maxim: "First things first." Covey, the author of "The Seven Habits of Highly Successful People" and a zillion other self-help and time-management tomes, makes the deceptively simple point that you should always put the toughest, most important things on the top of your to-do list every day.

In my previous careers, that usually meant personnel issues were first and foremost. Addressing the needs and problems of employees immediately is critical. I've managed staffs as big as 20 people, so I know what it's like for superintendents who seemingly spend the majority of their day dealing with people issues. In short, it stinks.

In my new life, working from a home office as an independent business consultant, my staff issues are much different. As president of Flagstick LLC, I have only four direct reports:

- Executive vice president of finance and chief soccer mom (Mrs. Jones);
- Vice president of fetching daddy a cold one (Michael, age 12);
- Vice president of beating the snot out of daddy at Nintendo (Ryan, age 9); and
- Director of canine affairs (a not-so-bright Airedale terrier called Indy).

As a result of assembling this lean and highly qualified team, I'm able to focus my attention outward, on my clients and customers. Balancing their satisfaction with my financial and operational goals now is first on my list. (That and going fishing a lot more.)

My question to you is: What's first on your list?

It seems that the first waking thought for many superintendents is "What fires will I have to put out today?" It's a natural question in any occupation, but considering the vagaries of Mother Nature

and Murphy's Law, it seems to come up more often for those engaged in the art and science of greenkeeping.

But, I'd suggest your first waking thought ought to be, "What can I do today to balance turf health with golfer satisfaction?" The two things aren't mutually exclusive, but sometimes it seems like it. Achieving both is a difficult and elusive task. It's also a transitory thing ... a moving target that flits from place to place like a hummingbird in a flower garden.

I can't speak much to the turf side of that equation. The daily habits of my director of canine affairs have pretty much made any attempt to grow a nice lawn at Flagstick's global headquarters a futile effort. But, I have a few ideas about golfer satisfaction you should consider.

OK, let's stipulate golfers are knuckleheads. Their expectations are silly, their demands ridiculous and their tastes in fashion often bizarre. But never forget that they are your knuckleheads. Like it or not, these goofballs are your customers. They're the consumers of your product, and they're not showing up at your place because the snack bar makes a mean patty melt.

They're also consumers who can afford to shop around and be more choosy than moms who choose Jiff. Why? Because we built way too many golf courses during the past 15 years. We went from, "If you build it, they will come" to discount programs, bargain-basement initiation fees and otherwise begging for rounds.

So the bottom line is that all of us – superintendents, owners, developers, golf professionals, etc. – need to get over the idea that golfers are a necessary evil. We need to embrace the same philosophy and methods used by retail marketers to survive and thrive until the golf market corrects itself.

For golf course superintendents in particular, that means taking a new look at courses with a consumer's eye. Consider the following questions:

What frustrates players? Are there unmaintained areas or underbrush along fairways that eat balls like trees eat Charlie Brown's kite? I know it frustrates me, as a high handicapper, to spend my day looking for (and likely losing) golf balls. What other

maintenance-related, but fixable frustrations are there on your track?

Also, think about what delights players (other than playing better than usual). Think about simple things, such as sprucing up tee boxes, improving signage – heck, adding better beverage-cart service or drinking water stations – that will stick in the mind of Joe and Susie Hacker.

Most golfer satisfaction studies I've seen come down to perceived value for the dollar. Sure, it all starts with the quality of your putting surfaces, but little things can matter. So, contrary to the old saying, sweat the small stuff. Better yet, assign an assistant to sweat it for you. It's an excellent exercise in reality for a young person who wants to be the head guy some day.

So, I return to my original question: What's first on your list? Given the economy, overbuilding and extreme competition, isn't it time that we make golfer satisfaction our "first thing"?

Just one humble scribbler's opinion.

Speaking of which, this is a good time to speak about what a friend of mine calls "the elephant in the living room." It's his phrase for asking an obvious question to which everyone wants to know the answer. The elephant, in this case, is my rather unexpected presence in a

different venue.

I'm delighted that, after six years at another publication, I've been offered the chance to rant, vent, editorialize, antago-

nize and otherwise open a vein in a brand new place. To me, *Golf Course News* represents something very important in our industry: a forum for business ideas that attempts to address the interests of today's complete golf business, including superintendents, owners, developers, architects, builders and the guy who parks your car at the club (just kidding).

My role with *Golf Course News* is a perfect complement to the establishment of my new business, so it's a great fit for me. I hope it's also a great fit for this magazine, which continues to improve with every issue. Most importantly, I hope my presence with this magazine serves as an invitation to continue our long strange trip together. I'm loving the journey, and I hope you are too. GCN

MOST GOLFER SATISFACTION STUDIES I'VE SEEN COME DOWN TO PERCEIVED VALUE FOR THE DOLLAR.



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