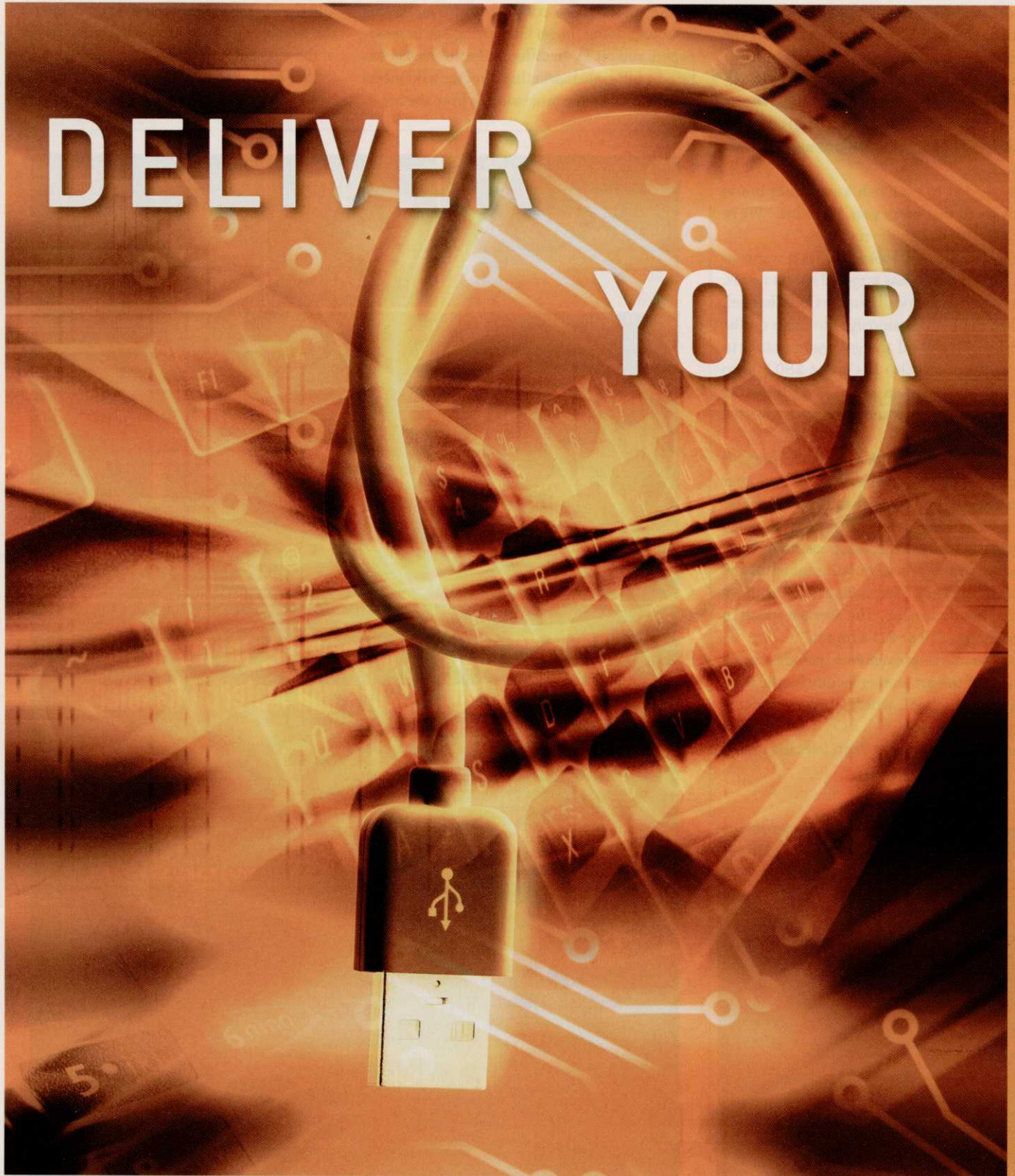


DELIVER YOUR



MESSAGE

Verbal and nonverbal communication methods improve superintendents' relationships with golfers

BY JIM
CONNOLLY

Every superintendent has heard it before in one seminar or another: Being able to communicate effectively to management, employees and golfers is a main key to success.

Communication is the process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs or behavior. Communication also is used as a foundation to build relationships and share ideas. Communication techniques, including verbal and nonverbal methods, can be extremely complex and challenging. The fact that there are thousands of books and even entire colleges dedicated to communication is evidence that it's one of the most vital human interactions affecting people's lives, personally and professionally, in a dramatic way.

Communication and public relations continue to be a weakness of some golf course superintendents. Effective communication is required in every industry, and while all superintendents can't be "the Great Communicator" as Ronald Reagan often was called,

they can use some simple techniques that will help advance their careers and increase their job satisfaction.

Each day, thousands of golf courses are maintained by people whose lives depend on the 30 million people who play golf in the United States. The leading factor for golfer satisfaction is course conditioning, according to a Golf Digest survey of core golfers. Golf course superintendents have the leading role – more than course design or customer service – in providing customer satisfaction. In fact, the same study shows that most avid golfers would pay 25 percent more to play a better-conditioned golf course than a better-designed course. The leading causes of dissatisfaction among golfers are other golfers' behavior followed closely by poor course conditions.

All of this proves the importance of the role superintendents play in the economic success of golf courses.

It's common for people to be intimidated by direct verbal communication and public speaking. Fortunately, there's more than

First Green is one way to demonstrate how golf courses benefit communities and how they can be used as environmental learning laboratories for students. First Green provides materials, literature and a video about introducing the program to students.

“It has been a great opportunity to present what a golf course really is, not what it’s often perceived to be.” - JEFF GULLIKSON

one way for superintendents to communicate their ideas to members and golfers. Here are a few examples of how superintendents are using various communication methods to relay positive messages about golf courses and their conditions, as well as improve relationships with a local community and various golfers.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH

One way to communicate the positive role golf plays in the community is through outreach programs. The First Green Foundation is an example. First Green started in 1997 in Washington state as a way to connect school classrooms to golf courses. Jeff Gullikson, golf course superintendent at Spokane Country Club, led the initial development of the program. First Green of Washington is supported by more than 127 high school teachers and has introduced more than 8,000 students to the many facets of the golf course industry.

Using the golf course as a learning lab, students are introduced to agronomy, environmental science, clubhouse management and the game of golf. Using his experience, Gullikson created lesson plans that are used by teachers and students during field trips to golf courses. Lesson plans were developed for:

- Golf course operations;
- Golf and the environment;
- Water quality management;
- Plants and the environment; and
- Wildlife and habitat management.

Working with the schools and teachers has

been fun and rewarding for Gullikson.

“They bring the energy needed to educate, and we provide the materials for them to use,” he says. “It has been a great opportunity to present what a golf course really is, not what it’s often perceived to be.”

Gullikson believes superintendents have an obligation to their communities and profession. First Green is one way to demonstrate how golf courses benefit communities and how they can be used as environmental learning laboratories for students. First Green provides materials, literature and a video about introducing the program to students.

Bill Griffith, turf management instructor at Walla Walla Community College in Washington, has operated the turfgrass management program at Walla Walla for 11 years, and dozens of his graduated turf students have entered the industry. He believes everyone has an inner need to give and receive recognition. Understanding that philosophy leads to a better understanding of how to please golfers. So, improving communication with golfers starts with an introspective review of superintendents’ attitudes of golfers.

Griffith says superintendents develop views of golfers that might fall into one or more of the following categories:



Griffith

- The customer is the whole reason why we exist as a maintenance organization. I'm looking for excited, enthusiastic golfers.
- The customer is important to the maintenance organization. I'm looking for satisfied golfers.
- The customer is a necessary evil that we, as a maintenance organization, must deal with. I simply want to coexist with the golfers.
- The customer is the enemy.



Gallardo

"Superintendents' attitudes about golfers will infiltrate their thinking and actions to the point where employees will adopt the same attitude," Griffith says. "It's important to honestly and sincerely adopt a policy in which you're looking for excited, enthusiastic golfers."

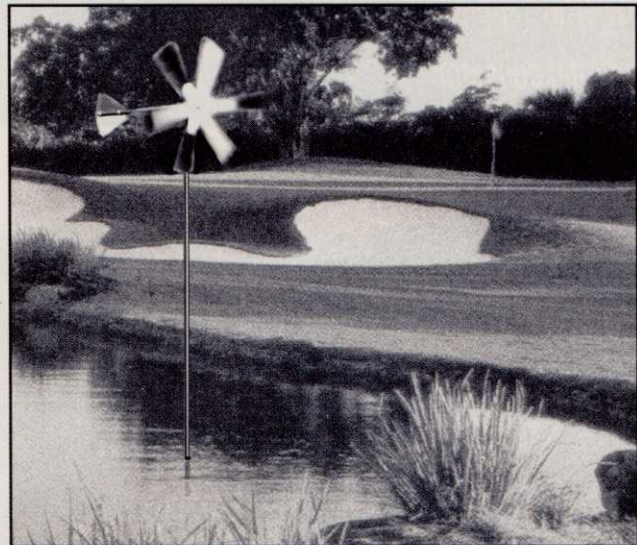
Griffith encourages students and superintendents to adopt innovative ideas for creating happy customers. Some are:

- Get to know your regular customers and their birthdays or anniversaries, and have one of the staff present them with a small gift to celebrate their special day.
- Hand out divot tools marked with the words "compliments of the maintenance staff."
- The staff always should present a positive and friendly demeanor to golfers.

LIGHTEN UP

Humor is another way to communicate with golfers. Martin Gallardo, golf course superintendent at Sage Hills in Warden, Wash., has found the power of humor in his annual "Martin's Revenge" golf tournament. Sage Hills is a public golf course with a faithful group of regular members. The event has grown to be one of the most popular and enjoyable events at the golf course. As part of the three-day event, men play from the ladies' tees, and women play from men's tees. There also are a variety of other amusing alterations to the golf course, forcing golfers to hit shots they never have a chance to hit during the regular season.

**Prevent damage from
Canada geese.**
**Windmill looks like flapping
of wings of birds in distress.**



Wind driven blades scare geese in ponds with uv light. Covers up to one acre area. More info and eagle kites & "AwayWithGeese" strobe at...

\$79 each

Call: (800) 555-9634

www.geesedamage.com

sisis
TURF EQUIPMENT

www.sisis.com

SISIS VEEMO -
maximum thatch removal - minimum surface disturbance

SISIS ROTORAKE 600
goes down to 2 ins
24 in working width
powerful 13hp engine
optional collector

SISIS FLEXIBRUSH -
17ft 6 ins wide for fast coverage

Full details from: SISIS INC, PO Box 537, Sandy Springs, SC 29677
Phone: 864 843 5972 Fax: 864 843 5974 E-mail: sisisinc@bellsouth.net

www.golfcourseindustry.com/readerservice - #31

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Gallardo sets up the course in the fashion of Dante's Inferno with hole locations in the most diabolical locations. This year, Gallardo plans to put three flags on several greens with only one actual hole. The golfers won't know which flag to aim for until they are on the green. During the event, golfers also take delight in hanging a dummy of Gallardo from a tree near the clubhouse. It's all done in good fun, resulting in an improved relationship between the superintendent and golfers.

USE A THIRD PARTY

Communication with golfers at resort golf facilities presents a unique and difficult challenge. Unlike private and public golf courses, resort courses might only have a few days of direct contact with the same golfer.

The Coeur d' Alene Resort Golf Course in Idaho is known as one of the best-conditioned courses in America, and golfers arrive with high expectations. This situation places a huge emphasis on nonverbal communication reflected almost entirely by course conditioning.

Many resort superintendents face the daunting task of maintaining excellent conditions every day. Resort courses rely heavily on word of mouth and do all they can to make the experience as pleasing as possible. The task of meeting the expectation of immaculate turfgrass at Coeur d' Alene falls to golf course superintendent Kevin Hicks.

"Knowing our clientele is where it starts," Hicks says. "The average handicap of our customer is 23. We focus on pace-of-play and strive for very true putting surfaces. Green speeds more than 10 feet would cause slow play and unhappy golfers."

Of all the staff members at the resort, the caddies have the most face-time with the golfers. They're with them for almost five hours, whereas the rest of the staff might talk to golfers for only a few minutes.

"Green speeds more than 10 feet would cause slow play and unhappy golfers." - KEVIN HICKS

Hicks uses this opportunity to communicate course conditions to the caddies, who park their cars at the maintenance area where Hicks has a chance to talk to them every day. Hicks is able to get his message to the golfers by discussing course maintenance objectives and practices with caddies and the staff during monthly meetings.

OTHER RESOURCES

Poor communication can send the wrong message. As Mark Twain so aptly stated, "The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug." But superintendents have a plethora of resources available to them to improve their communication skills and prevent poor communication. For example, the GCSAA published a manual, "Communication: the Cornerstone of Professional Relationships," that includes 36 tips about building successful professional relationships. The tips include:

- Playing golf with your employer;
- Hosting meetings at the maintenance facility;

- Keeping a photo journal;
- Writing a letter to the club champion; and
- Publishing a monthly newsletter.

For many superintendents, communication skills don't come naturally. It takes work, study and practice to be a good communicator. Superintendents shouldn't be intimidated into thinking the only way to communicate is through public speaking or being a great orator. There are many ways to communicate through writing, informing others to spread the word and through innovative events that show the good-will of the maintenance staff.

Superintendents also can use communication tools provided by the GCSAA, USGA and other professional associations and educators. Additionally, there are educational seminars hosted by organizations such as Toastmasters, the GCSAA and community colleges.

Some superintendents have developed excel-

lent verbal and written communication skills and have no hesitation using their abilities. Others shy away from attempting any type of communication for fear of being embarrassed. The only way to overcome the fear of public interaction is to improve communication skills through education and experience.

If all of that sounds too difficult, superintendents should use others at their golf course to assist them. Golf professionals and club managers are trained to communicate effectively and can provide valuable assistance and advice.

Make it your goal to enlist them, as well as the aforementioned resources, in your quest to improve your communication to golfers, members and your community. Your future will be brighter for it. **GCI**

Jim Connolly is president of JCC, Ltd. A former USGA agronomist, he's a consultant and can be reached at jim@jcturf.com.



Gullikson



Hicks

TERRA SPIKE® XF (Extra Fast)

eXtremely Fast

High Productivity

Decompact and aerate your turf at an operating speed of up to 3.7 mph.

Wiedenmann
North America, LLC
Savannah, GA

Phone (912) 790-3004
Toll free (866) 790-3004
Fax (912) 790-3005
www.terraspike.com



Faster than a speeding bullet (almost).