



A keen understanding

Lori Russell works to make chapter associations more valuable

By Pat Jones

BASE

Local chapters are dealing with a lack of volunteer leaders and financial support, says Lori Russell. Photo: Mark Bryant

FOR THE RECORD, LORI RUSSELL argued vehemently that she didn't want me to write a profile about her.

"Why don't you write an article about one of our members," she asks. "Nobody wants to know about me. I'm not very interesting. I'm afraid."

Obviously, I won that argument.

Russell runs three superintendent chapters in the Northwest and is one of a handful of paid local association managers in the country. She's a veteran member of GCSAA's Chapter Relations Committee. She's constantly on the go, organizing meetings and events throughout six states for the Peaks & Prairies, Inland Empire and Idaho GCSAs. She's a mom to three teen-aged kids, and she's been married to a golf course

superintendent for 25 years.

It's fair to say Russell has a good perspective on the daily life of golf course managers and their families and that she has a keen understanding of the challenges and opportunities for chapters at a time when local and state associations are struggling to increase meeting attendance and keep revenue flowing.

Russell was in high school and working in a clothing store in her native Billings, Mont., when the owner told her about a guy her husband played softball with who might be fun to date. The guy was Tom Russell, an aspiring golf course superintendent. They met in June and were in love by July, but, as she recalls, "It took me four years to finally hook him."

Thus Russell began life as a superintendent's wife in tiny Shelby, Mont. Just before their second child was born, she left her job at a local bank to be a full-time mom. Shortly after, the person who'd managed the local Peaks & Prairies association for 20 years retired, and the chapter was advertising for an executive director. Another superintendent – a friend of her husband – called her and told her she'd be perfect.

"I was their second choice because I didn't even have an office, but I got the job eventually."

That was 15 years ago. She took on management of the Idaho GCSA eight years ago after a couple board members attended a Peaks event and were impressed with her abilities. She added the Inland Empire association about two years ago and solidified her reputation as the undisputed queen of the Northwest chapters.

She and Tom now live in Missoula, Mont., where he's the superintendent at Missoula Country Club. Their oldest is in college, but they still have two at home. In fact, their 15-year-old daughter helps Lori with chapter business, making it truly a family affair.

What are the typical problems facing chapters and chapter managers?

Lack of volunteer leaders – which is no surprise – but also competition from other groups in the turf industry that offer continuing education. Chapters aren't the exclusive source for seminars and networking anymore. We're extremely lucky (in our chapters) because neither of those is a big problem. We have a great volunteer base and, because we're kind of isolated, we're still pretty much the primary education source for superintendents.

Is it tougher financially than it used to be?

Money is often an issue because industry support has pulled back. We need to find ways to be more creative with fund-raising. For us, it's important we keep dues and fees as low as possible to allow everyone to participate regardless of budget.

What else are chapters dealing with?

Trying to move ahead with technology. Peaks & Prairies just held its first webcast recently. We worked through the GCSAA for a fee, and it set up the webcast, but it was just for our members. We promoted it and arranged it with Roch Gaussoin of the University of Nebraska. It was a great chance to discuss last year's agronomic

challenges at a time when members had time to breathe. It was so successful we had to cut off the questions. The GCSAA said it was one of the most interactive webcasts it has ever seen.

So the digital age has arrived for chapters?

We're constantly trying to drive members to Web sites. It used to be difficult to get e-mail addresses. We're also using e-blasts for announcements and newsletters. We'll still have a hard copy newsletter, but other chapters (e.g., the California GCSA) have gone strictly electronic. When chapter managers meet, most of our conversation tends toward technology. It's

and to keep offering the education for them to grow. Some chapters are using GCSAA's new field staff or asking about financial assistance to bring someone on as a paid manager.

I can't believe any chapter can't afford somebody. Why not start small and see how it goes? The position usually will pay for itself at the least. When I started with Idaho, it didn't have the money in the bank to pay me for a full year. It was a gamble, but it paid off. Everyone benefits.

What else can chapters do to reach out?

Chapters can vote into their bylaws another classification – a "facility membership" for the

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faster and cheaper, but we can't do it overnight because not all members want it.

The first time the chapter relations group met in Lawrence (in the early 1990s) and said it was developing a Web site just for members, it was shocking. When I told the board, it thought I was nuts. Few of our members even had computers. We were just trying to get fax machines. We've come a long way since then.

What is the national doing to help chapter executives?

The GCSAA hosts two meetings for us – one at the GIS and one in Kansas. It used to bring us in every other year. Now it's a limited group coming in every year with one of its volunteer chapter leaders. It's useful to spend a day and a half with volunteers to get to know them better and learn at the same time. The GCSAA also puts on webcasts and dedicates part of the site just to us. It offers a lot to help us continue our education. It's a shame everyone isn't taking advantage of it.

Why don't other chapters participate?

A lot of the onus isn't on the national. It tries, and it has things in place, but many chapters don't use the resources, don't have paid staff, etc. The GCSAA needs to communicate the value of having any kind of paid staff person in place

small-budget courses chapters haven't been able to reach. A primary person at the facility is designated to receive the mailings. This classification has been defined by the GCSAA and, although it has been available for the past couple years, many chapters haven't implemented it.

Some chapters seem to have an arm's-length relationship with suppliers who sponsor a lot of stuff. Is that true for your groups?

We have an outstanding relationship with commercial members. It's not an "us and them" thing, it's a "we" thing. They need us, and we need them. It's a partnership. We don't just put out our hand and take the money and walk away. They have input, and we value what they say. Some chapters even have commercial representatives as full board members.

We can't depend on them to finance the association without giving them a chance to participate and have a voice in what we do. We also try to create different opportunities – big or small – to give them a chance to help. Not everyone can afford to be a major sponsor.

What else are you doing for funding, given the pressure on sponsors these days?

We've been successful with an auction in Idaho the past few years at the Boise golf show. We have

a booth, and we auction off golf rounds and host a silent auction. Even the general golfing public contributes. It's a great fund-raiser for us. We're trying to do the same thing for the Inland Empire GCSA at its consumer golf show. We're also lucky to receive significant contributions from our local golf associations and PGA sections to help fund continuing education. It's win-win.

We're constantly looking for more funding and promotion ideas. It's a challenge because we cover such a large geographical area.

What legislative or regulatory issues specific to your region are you dealing with?

We haven't been as proactive as we should be on that front. Water issues are huge, and we're trying to coordinate with other chapters in the area and the national. Fortunately, we haven't had some of the intense political pressures that other areas of the country have faced.

Our biggest challenge is the same with all

three chapters: facing the fact there's no labor pool from which to draw. Montana, for example, has the second lowest unemployment rate in the U.S. Couple that with expanded playing seasons and superintendents are being called on to do more with less labor, higher demand for conditions, etc. One side effect of that is it's forcing us to reevaluate the timing of the meetings. We're changing the big meeting and trade show for Peaks to allow more people to attend. Because everyone's so busy, attendance isn't growing at the same rate as the membership and we need to do something about that.

That must make it difficult to schedule anything.

That's not the half of it. We also have to deal with weather, hunting season, fishing trips – you name it. The guys love the outdoors. They entered the business because they love being outside, and their playtime is spent outdoors. We have to work

around the various hunting seasons.

Do the same people volunteer for everything?

There's been a lot of discussion about not "re-cycling" volunteers. Some chapters have serious problems with generational differences. We're lucky we have a lot of young guys who want to be engaged, but I know other chapters struggle with it. For us, it's mostly a matter of what stage of life they're in and other things (family, etc.) they have going on. As a chapter, we're competing against our member's personal time and their professional time. We have to make sure we make it worth their while to participate. It's not generational, it's all about time. That's where technology helps us be as inclusive as possible.

What's it like to be married to a golf course superintendent?

If Tom was here, he'd be telling you how hard

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it is to be married to a chapter executive. He's passionate about his profession. We all know it requires a substantial amount of time. We lived right on the golf course for years in Shelby, so our family time didn't suffer as much as most.

He loves his job. He takes it seriously. But what I admire about him is he leaves the job at the job. He doesn't bring work home, but he wasn't always that way. He was inspired about the story of the "worry tree" (a tale about a man who "hangs" his worries on a tree outside of his house before he comes home), and it made a big impact on him. We've been lucky because of that. He's just as passionate about his family as he is the job.

Now, my job is demanding. I usually put in 50 hours a week plus travel. What's important is that we both respect when we need to work. We're not obsessive, so when he says, "I have to go back to the course," I know he means it, and I don't give him a hard time. It's also been extremely

helpful because there are times when there are things about the business I don't understand. He's my constant sounding board. He's much better at dropping things on the "worry tree" than I am. When he's home, he's home. That's not so true for me.

So you haven't had some of the typical "superintendent's wife" issues?

I receive that feedback from members' wives. We were so fortunate our house was on the course and the kids were able to see dad at work. He came home for lunch, took the kids to work, etc. Ours wasn't a typical scenario.

I know other superintendents and their families really struggle with this. My advice to those spouses would be to remember the time they spend at the course putting out a good product isn't time they're intentionally trying to be away from their families. The expectations and the pressures are probably higher than you

understand. You have to help them make sure they have a balanced life. It boils down to the fact they have to understand they don't want to not be with their family. It's part of the job.

What message do you want to send to superintendents and others in the industry?

I want them to remember there's tremendous value to having paid staff. I serve on the chapter relations committee. We're focusing on chapter/national relationships and what the ideal model should be. I see what a huge difference having a paid staff person has made to the smallest association. They're far more productive and proactive.

Final thoughts?

What I do, I don't do alone. We have great boards, committees and support. I'm not a superwoman. It's a team effort. That's the only way small chapters can succeed. GCI



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