

Wow your green committee

Effective communications help foster a relationship
with your green chairman and beyond.

The success of a golf facility lies foremost in the condition of the course. Superintendents and their staffs strive for quality and consistency every day. But dealing with agronomics and Mother Nature is only a fraction of superintendents' jobs. They must build the all-important rapport and interactive relationship with the green chairman and beyond.

It's paramount to communicate regularly and effectively with the green chairman and to receive buy-in of the maintenance program and an understanding of realistic expectations of course quality. This close relationship is vital to gaining unwaver-

BY KURT LAWTON



ing support of both the chairman and green committee.

Once that relationship is well established, the superintendent and green committee can face their larger challenge of keeping locker-room advice and politics at bay. This team must support the greater good of a best-laid golf course maintenance plan compiled by the superintendent, so it won't be derailed by critical non-experts (golfers).

JOINED AT THE HIP

Since the green chairman often sets the stage with recommendations to the board of directors, regular and consistent communication is a necessity, especially during times that interrupt or impair normal play.

"A successful working relationship hinges on two key ingredients – a superintendent who's incredibly talented and organized and a committee that provides input from the entire membership while supporting the superintendent with all members," says green committee member and project coordinator David Tier-

ney, who worked closely with superintendent Tim Anderson during the award-winning renovation of Naperville (Ill.) Country Club.

"We were joined at the hip, Tim and I, in order to pull off such a huge renovation project," Tierney says. "And thanks to Tim's excellent 'master sergeant' role in both agronomics and communications, we were able to overcome numerous challenges, keep the members informed and achieve success in increased membership."

This \$2.75 million reconstruction of the course (\$8.5 million including all infrastructure changes: buildings, parking, irrigation, etc.) truly tested the patience of members.

"We employed many communications tools to help engage the members so they understood the vision to become comfortable with the entire project – from start to finish. Communications every step of the way is vitally important, because we took away members' 'beloved golf course' for over a year and they deserved transparency on every aspect of the project," Tierney says.

The green committee enlisted five members with communications experience to help both Anderson and the green committee keep the rest of the membership informed.

"We used biweekly newsletters, produced videos and displayed project boards with photos and more. And we kept the clubhouse open for food – so everywhere a member turned, they saw and understood what was going on with their golf course," he says.

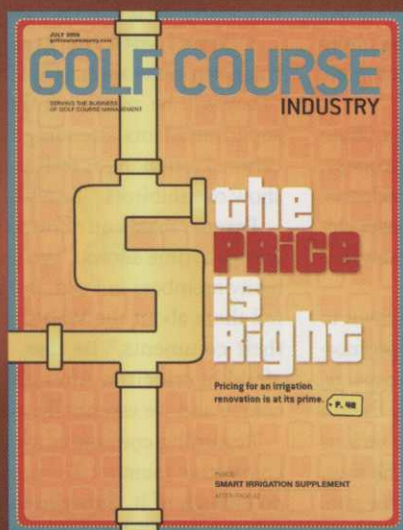
WEEKLY COMMUNICATION

While major renovations put good communications to the test, many superintendents rely on regular communications beyond the green committee to all staff and members.

"I started a weekly report back in 1988 at the insistence of a new GM when I was superintendent at a course in Kansas City, and it became a successful ritual everywhere I've worked," says Pat Finlen, superintendent at The Olympic Club in San Francisco. "I learned early on that you cannot always rely on the golf shop to tell our message and portray it in the correct man-

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ner. It's a very tough job placed on them, so I've learned it's best that I put the message out the way I want, directly to everyone, using print as well as e-mail. This direct communication gives readers a chance to respond back to me via e-mail."

Finlen and his two assistants put together the e-newsletters. Each issue begins with club event news for the week. Next they discuss anything new or unusual that's happening on the course, explaining why and how they're handling the situation.

"And we always make a special point to alert members of upcoming special or regular projects that impact their course, such as aeration, well in advance so they can plan accordingly," he says. "By incorporating photos and basic agronomic explanations, it has helped members not only learn themselves, but take an active role in telling other members about what they read."

Finlen initially sent his e-newsletter to all golf course committee members and all club managers (80 to 90 people) at the 5,000-member, multisport athletic club, but the list has grown to 500 recipients.

"The newsletter has been a really big success here," he says. "The initial committee and staff members that received it began forwarding it to their member friends. Now, many of the regular members who found value have signed up to receive it."

"It's truly helped explain to members how our job is much more than mow, water and fertilize," Finlen says. "It's been a great tool to interact with members, who regularly send me five to 10 questions every week."

He spends about 15 minutes answering these questions early in the week.

Finlen values the importance of meeting and talking to as many members as he can on a regular basis, but he realizes he cannot be up in the bar and grill every Saturday fielding questions.

"But the interesting thing, thanks to this e-mail newsletter, is that people in the bar who get the newsletter can answer most questions, and take pride in sharing their knowledge," he says.

Transparency is the best policy, Finlen says. "Don't be afraid to divulge any issue with the turf or about the course, or even admitting mistakes and how they were handled," he says. "You're taking care of their golf course, not yours, and members have a right to know."

Finlen also recommends tailoring the message, so it's readable for the entire

membership; avoid getting too technical or too in-depth.

Don't forget to hand deliver communications to key members as well as post printed forms of communication with photos in locker rooms, on bulletin boards, in the pro shop and at other key locations. And for special projects, consider using outdoor educational posters near tee boxes.

"We've found pedestal boards extremely beneficial, not only to tell why the work is being done, but to show project timelines and photos," Finlen adds.

ON THE WEB

Some superintendents are taking communications a step further by developing Web sites and blogs to keep members up to date. One such passionate assistant superintendent, Bryan Bergner at Westmoor Country Club in Brookfield, Wis., took it upon himself to design, write and shoot all photographs for his Grounds & Greens department Web site (westmoorgrounds.com).

"I came up with the idea to visually show the progress of our course reconstruction, which tied in with our general manager's weekly newsletter, by adding a link to the photo page. I would take pictures every day during construction and upload new photo galleries every two to four days, complete with captions," Bergner says.

He didn't stop at including just a photo gallery of the reconstruction process. Bergner writes a blog, produces podcasts, lists employment opportunities, posts videos and posts HTML files of every newsletter (that he designs and writes).

"I do all this on my off hours as a favor to Westmoor because I really enjoy promoting our course to members and prospects, showing my photography and giving them a glimpse of the lighter side of all the serious work we do for their golf course," he says. "And members are really enjoying the site, and more are going there as I do e-mail blasts to highlight what's new on the Web site."

BE VISIBLE

Being highly visible to everyone at the golf course is equally as important – if not more

so – than written communications. Dave Fearis, GCSAA director of membership, offers several tips that often benefited him during his 28 years as a superintendent.

- Play golf with committee members and other key members to really understand their thoughts about all aspects of the course and learn about any good or bad agendas they might have. "You can head off or even extinguish a lot of potential fires even before they happen," Fearis says.

- Each day, personally drive the course backwards and talk to as many groups as possible to find out their thoughts. "Offer personal touches to early golfers, such as bringing them coffee before the pro shop opens," he says. "And personally congratulate all top tournament winners."

- Present a notebook of past years' green committee minutes to any new members – and spend quality one-on-one time answering questions. "Make sure they

understand and buy in to the master plan and maintenance plan," Fearis says.

- Always listen and be open to ideas from members. "We must remember it's not our course, it is their course and we ultimately need to satisfy them," he says.

- Travel with the green committee chairman to the annual Golf Industry Show. "They will be amazed at the thousands of superintendents attending dozens of educational seminars, as well as the huge trade show of exhibitors," he adds.

Bergner makes an effort to meet as many groups as time allows. "I go up and talk to as many members as I can, introduce myself, tell them about the Web site and listen to their comments," he says. "You can't be afraid of criticism. After all, it's their golf course and we essentially work for them."

Regarding communications, says green committee member Tierney, "You cannot do enough of it. Superintendents succeed by helping members understand what's going on, what's going to happen next, where we stand and why we're doing it." GCI



Westmoor Country Club publishes Greenside News and posts hard copies in the club house and a digital version online.

Kurt Lawton is a freelance writer based in Eden Prairie, Minn.