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## SUPERINTENDENT TURNED SALESMAN

It only took a few minutes into my first public appearance in my new part-time job for me to recognize that I'm now a salesman.

The Toro distributor in Wisconsin has a bang-up equipment show and turf conference, and the Wisconsin Turfgrass Association was given space for a tabletop display. It was a perfect introduction to my new world as the executive director of the WTA. Since I was involved with the formation of the organization many years ago, I'm pretty well versed on what the duties should be.

I really prefer the title of ambassador, but when I tell people that I get kind of an odd reaction – sort of a “What’s he talking about?” look.

What I really am, regardless of any title, is a salesman. And I'm really proud to officially work for the group that was so helpful to me during my long career as a golf course superintendent.

The turf sales profession changed a lot over the 40 years I spent observing and interacting with it. Salespeople have become more professional, more educated and more organized. In ways, their progress has matched that of golf course superintendents.

Companies selling to golf courses always have recognized that it doesn't matter how great an item is if it doesn't move off the shelf.

What they have increasingly recognized is that success is more likely if the sales staff is educated in turf and extremely well versed in their products.

Nearly all of the salespeople I dealt with later in my career were university-trained in turf and had work experience on a golf course. Several had graduate degrees from our best land grant universities, enhancing their competence and credibility with customers like me. A career in sales

has become an option for undergrads as they map out their paths in the golf course business.

Changes in attitudes toward salesmen have been so great that many like myself looked forward to visits from them.

A good salesman is like a university extension agent in many ways – an excellent source of information from around the state or region he serves.

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They are usually keen observers of the golf course scene and can share information about what's working and what isn't, what problems are surfacing around the state, and generally what kind of season superintendents are having. Their extensive travel and their connections put them in a position to keep us well informed. And yet, despite the opportunity, they never share someone else's business when inappropriate; they know gossip isn't appealing.

Sales professionals have assumed an important role in our professional organizations. The Wisconsin Turfgrass Association would suffer greatly without salespeople on our board, in our officer roster and on our committees. The leadership and legwork they give to our field days and conferences

are essential, and their input makes these events significantly better.

As I consider the new circumstances I find myself in, facing new and somewhat unfamiliar responsibilities, I think about the qualities of the best salespeople who called on me – honesty, courtesy, enthusiasm, sincerity, knowledge, competitiveness and a good product.

In a way, I have the best product anybody could have to sell – turfgrass research at our land grant university. That notwithstanding, the economy we find ourselves in these days may put more emphasis on stewardship responsibilities and relationship building, but aren't these the things that good manufacturer or distributor representatives do also? Often, considerable effort is spent by sales staff to lay the groundwork for an actual sale that may come somewhere down the road.

I suspect that the most difficult thing for me to learn will be dealing with disappointment. It's inevitable that I'll catch someone at the wrong time or that I'll meet somebody who will be less than polite. I'll have to learn how to handle a certain amount of rejection and have to be patient when I am turned down. These are things that really good salespeople handle with aplomb, and they're some of the things about them I admire the most.

Role models for me abound – Hilliard, Abler, Neary, Werth and Wentz, to name a few from my most recent experience. They are all great salesmen, and they have set a high bar for me to clear.

Springtime often comes to Wisconsin in fits and starts, and superintendents (and golf players!) are all waiting for opening day. Me? I can hardly wait to make my first membership sale. **GCI**