

Recent trends have hurt association affiliation at the chapter level.



Once the backbone of a superintendent's professional life, can chapters cope and remain relevant in golf's new age?

GCI Columnist Monroe Miller provides his analysis.

ARE CHAPTERS DYING?

Time marches on, trends appear and all things change.

So it should come as a no surprise to anyone that the industry's 80-plus GCSAA-affiliated chapters would be not be insulated from the economic, cultural and political influences that have shaped our world in recent years. All across the country chapters face many questions. True, they might differ in degree and detail, but all deal with a common denominator – rapid change.

Brett Grams, during a conversation this past fall, brought many of these issues into focus. As executive director of the Wisconsin GCSA chapter, Grams is stewing over the costs of his association's annual golf turf symposium. Rooms, meals and speakers – it all adds up. He wonders when attendance will take a hit. Factor in dicey off-season weather and his fears escalate.

Grams also laments about the chapter's annual autumn golf and dinner-dance weekend, a long-standing tradition. It has gone from a robust event in years past to one attended by just seven couples this year. Brett and the chapter officers wonder if they should keep it going.

One veteran chapter director tells of planning the annual family picnic, and the only ones who attended were him and his wife.

Conversations with execs from a broad cross section of chapters – large and small, metro and rural – all reveal that national trends have influenced their successes and shortcomings.

For example, consider the cultural changes that have altered the dynamic of the American family. Today, it's not unusual for both parents to have careers, and daycare is a part of life. Men play a more active role in child rearing. As a result, many younger members don't attend chapter meetings. Instead, you're more likely find them at the local soccer fields, at band practices or shuttling someone to swimming lessons.

Something has to give, and at the chapter level it has been participation. For a superintendent it's extra time versus attending chapter meetings. Recent generations chose the latter, but at a cost. Today's superintendents are keenly aware of these burdens because they make accommodations for their workers.

TRICKLE DOWN. Recent trends have not been kind to the golf course industry. Because golf is a discretionary item for many consumers, the trickle-down effect seeps into the local chapters. Economic disasters the likes of which haven't been seen since the Great Depression have resulted in fewer rounds played, depleted rosters at private clubs, more golf deals and lower fees. The result: decreased facility income. Budgets get slashed, workers get laid off and fewer and fewer turf stewards remain in the golf industry and support their local association chapters.

For some reason, the first place sought out for spending reductions is the golf course budget. It also seems the largest reductions are in the golf course expense lines. And within the framework of the operational budgets, travel/dues/education accounts have been easy targets. The

logic is that you have to have fuel, you need fertilizer and you must have staff to operate. But does the golf course superintendent really need to play golf out of town every month, or absolutely have to attend the Golf Industry Show 2,000 miles away in San Diego or Orlando? These questions are answered by owners and boards, and the result is reduced or eliminated accounts.

It has been the perfect storm between golf and the economy.

Conduct a simple straw poll among superintendents in your market and most say these changes are here to stay. Some believe we have seen golf's zenith and many have worked in the best of times of the game. We aren't going to be going back to the time when golf leaders declared, "We need to open a new course every day if we want to keep up with demand."

Heck, we will be lucky if we don't have to close one course a week before the economy and our industry experience some serious recovery.

CHAPTERS SCOPE. So, how are local golf course superintendent chapters dealing with these profound changes?

Two obvious issues requiring immediate attention are declining memberships and lax participation at chapter events.

Chapter execs say they are facing these problems with optimism and determination. They remain confident that members still value their association with their local chapters.

One particularly positive chapter manager suggested that stretched golf course budgets might actually benefit local chapters. The logic is that reduced travel and education budgets encourage local events be-

cause they are less expensive and less travel is involved.

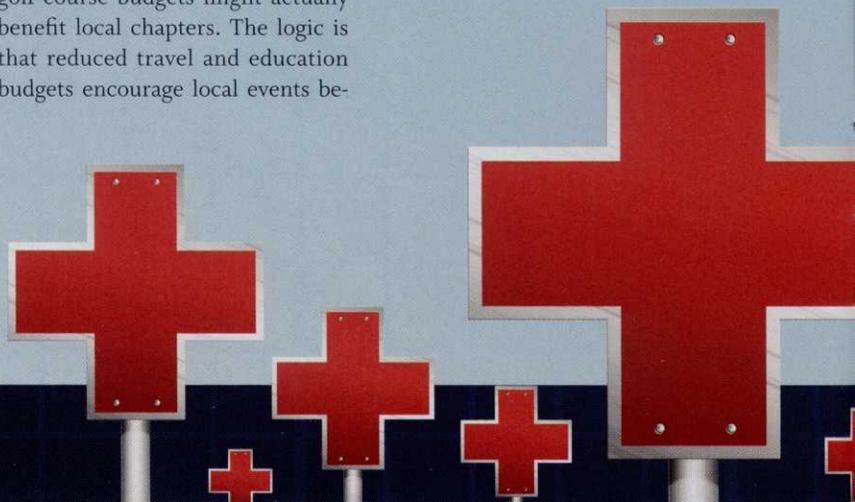
Many wonder if GCSAA membership is an issue and, if clubs or courses won't fund dues, does the dual membership come into play?

Some people mention the dual membership requirement as one of the factors in lower chapter membership. However, most chapter executives do not feel it is significant. Some propose a suspension of dual membership – an affiliate holiday, if you will – during these difficult economic times, but a GCSAA committee has ruled it doesn't hinder chapter membership.

A wealth of ideas are under consideration by chapters to boost their activities. Foremost might be the recognition that there may be too many events. Chapters need to refocus and eliminate poorly attended events. Initially, it may be an unpopular move with some members, but this needs to happen.

In addition, there need to be more efforts to create greater value for meetings, attempting to make as many of them as possible "can't miss" or "afraid to miss" educational events for members.

Some managers say they are considering a more regional approach, especially in states where travel times play a significant factor. Others are considering multi-day, high-quality events that could make long travel times worthwhile. More effort is being made to move chapter events around the states to make travel time equitable.



Every chapter is exploring ways to keep their costs down. Venue selection, local or regional speakers – such as university and extension personnel, as well as superintendents – and even Web-based meetings may all find a place in chapter planning.

However, competition remains from commercial members – primarily distributors – and the educational meetings they occasionally host – typically in the off-season – are issues mentioned with a fair amount of frequency and is causing frustration at the local level. They have resources chapters do not have to choose exciting sites and invite well-known national speakers. In addition, they are able to offer superintendents GCSAA CEUs that apply toward PDI requirements, just as chapters do. These meetings are popular with chapter members and unpopular with many chapter executives who believe the uneven field is unfair. Many question whether GCSAA fully appreciates this conflict.

There are no easy answers, though.

A few years ago, for example, I attended, at no cost other than transportation, one of the finest educational meetings in my long career. LESCO had assembled faculty turf pathologists from Wisconsin, Michigan State, Chicago District Golf/University of Illinois and Purdue. The venue was a new Jack Nicklaus golf course in eastern Wisconsin and the meeting was held in the off-season. It was packed. The gratis lunch was superb. It was great to see colleagues and network. There wasn't a superintendent who didn't leave grateful, making it difficult to argue against these educational meetings. Some suggest we shouldn't even try.

Local distributors often put together great meetings, especially in the slow season. Our local Toro distributor organizes a huge show and conference every other year. In the alternate year, small educational meetings are held in all quarters of the state in the winter and they are well attended. The cost for the big

show is minimal and the small meetings are free. They are popular and offer real value to superintendents. Thus the dilemma to chapter execs concerned about chapter activities.

It should be noted, though, that there has been some pullback from commercial members in membership, and chapters realize they have to keep their needs in mind during this change process, as well.

MAKING PROGRESS. There is an acute awareness that networking is the most important feature and function of a gathering of golf course superintendents, and anything they can do to facilitate and encourage it works to everyone's advantage.

Organized phone call trees, e-blasts, newsletters, chapter publications, Websites and special invitations are all used to communicate with members. Execs, officers and directors are more carefully planning calendars to eliminate conflicts. They recognize the need to get calendars to members early to better accommodate individual travel and attendance schedules. No one wants last-minute surprises to negatively affect attendance.

Chapters are also increasing their overall value by broadening their importance to those on golf course staffs – assistants, spray techs and equipment managers, for example – and subsequent overall increased value to superintendents. Some chapter managers see that down the road services like travel assistance through an agency, credit card endorsements and insurance company promotions may have a place in adding to their bottom lines.

GCSAA obviously recognizes the value of affiliated chapters and has developed tools and programs to help them. Seminars for chapter execs and a pilot program for regional offices and field staff to assist chapters with programming are two prime examples. GCSAA has also responded to its own reduced membership and declining GIS attendance by reduc-

ing its staff and controlling costs.

The 15 percent decline in membership over the last few years has led to very open reductions in personnel, many of them familiar long-time employees, in addition to programing elimination. Even turfgrass research support has taken a well publicized hit.

Superintendents have never been busier, and that isn't going to change any time soon. Neither will the pressure felt by many: "What disaster can happen at the golf course when I am gone?" And despite cell phones and Blackberrys, their comfort zones have diminished, usually due to some economic reasons.

However, the fact remains that there has always been a core group of chapter members who show up for everything, serve committees and chairs and in offices. They are the ones who strongly believe in the cause of their chapters, regardless of good times or bad, and will lead the way through the changing circumstances facing golf.

One of the most inspiring stories of a person stepping in at a critical time is that of Leo Feser. Namesake of the annual GCSAA Leo Feser Award, Leo, a founder of the Minnesota Greenkeepers Association and its longtime secretary, is honored yet today for his efforts to keep GCM magazine's forerunner – Greenkeepers' Reporter – alive and relevant almost single-handedly during a tough three-year period in the 1930s.

Many of us could look into our crystal balls and see individuals taking a page out of Leo's book by doing the same thing for their home chapters and specific programs.

Regardless of the challenges facing this industry, many are convinced the local chapters will come through this transition time looking different than they do now, and ready to become even more relevant to their members. **GCI**

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