



# MEETING THEIR NEEDS

Golfer surveys reveal opportunities for better communications, long-range goals and easy-to-implement improvements.

By Marisa Palmieri

Across the country as superintendents head into spring, many of the programs they're implementing are based on the results of golfer surveys they conducted over the winter.

Referencing an off-season member survey, Jason Busch will be working with golfers to develop a formal golf course standards handbook this year. Busch is the superintendent at The Powder Horn, a 27-hole semiprivate golf course community in Sheridan, Wyo.

The goal of creating the document is to outline the standards the players expect within the budgetary and environmental/weather constraints under which he operates. It will include target green speeds, mowing heights and frequencies for various areas of the golf course – and anything else the membership would like to see included. His goal is to get as many members as possible involved in creating the document and reach a final consensus.

"The standards handbook talks about what we're going to do every year – the goals and how we're going to meet members' goals," Busch says. "Then we can be proactive with it and conduct a survey every year to see how we've met goals and develop a new set of standards."

More than anything, it's about meeting members' needs while providing them the facts about maintenance practices – especially unpopular ones like aerifying.

At The Power Horn, where Busch has been superintendent since 2007, the maintenance survey was conducted online via SurveyMonkey.com.

"We did it as a whole facility – not just the golf course," Busch says. "It went out to every member – I don't have the exact number, but the response rate was pretty high, so it was pretty effective."

On the maintenance portion of the survey, the goal was to get "as much feedback as possible," Busch says.

"I talk to them on a daily basis, but I wanted to see what the majority of people wanted as far as certain projects and the direction they want to see the club go," he says.

To elicit those responses, Busch used a mix of ranking-type survey questions, but also open-ended questions and two very targeted questions he was particularly interested in gaining feedback on:

1. What are the two things we could do to improve the golf course?

2. What's more important – a green golf course with wet spots or a fast and firm course with dry spots?

The results of question No. 1 didn't surprise Busch – he knew bunkers were going to be the issue. And he took steps in the off season to mitigate some of the problems and communicate to members that a complete overhaul isn't in the budget, but there are some things he has been able to do, such as eliminate and/or reduce the size of some out-of-play bunkers, add two mechanical bunker rakes to help soften bunkers on a daily basis and allocate more sand to be used in greenside bunkers to improve consistency.

But the response to question No. 2 surprised Busch the most. "They want the course to look good more than they want it to play well, which goes against everything we read as superintendents," he says. "So I was providing conditions they didn't necessarily want."

Busch was grateful for some small suggestions members made – these are inexpensive fixes he made right away to show he's addressing their needs. For example, one hole had a prism on it that measures distances, showing players how far they need to hit the ball to clear a creek.

"Some ladies asked for those on all the holes, which is something I hadn't thought

of," he says. "I was able to order those for less than \$100."

#### OPPORTUNITY TO COMMUNICATE

For Greig Barker, golf course superintendent at Highland Country Club in London, Ontario, some programs will be tweaked, but much of the focus is on ramping up his member communication efforts.

The greatest thing Barker learned from the survey his club conducted last fall is that he's already implementing many of the things his members want, but he isn't sufficiently promoting those efforts or explaining the club's policy on them.

For example, there was a comment in the survey that made him realize he needs to explain the process for practice facility maintenance.

"Someone said that every time they go out they're on the mats," he says. "We put the mats out one day a week and that day alternates between Mondays and Thursdays." So, the person with the gripe may be experiencing an unfortunate coincidence in routinely playing on the mats; Barker recognized it's an opportunity to better explain such processes.

The timing of the survey – late fall after the golf course was closed for the season – was such that a number of the requests were already taken care of but the members hadn't been on the course lately to know that.

## A green speed survey By Marisa Palmieri

When superintendent Mike Morris, CGCS, came to Thom Nikolai with the question, "Is it possible to maintain a consistent green speed for an entire playing season?" that got Nikolai, turfgrass specialist at Michigan State University, thinking. He helped Morris implement a green speed program with a survey component, which he presented as part of the "You Asked for It... You Got It!" session at the GCSAA Education Conference last month.

Crystal Downs' green chairman asked the questions, "What are the speeds day-to-day?" and "What's the best speed for our golf course?"

To answer those questions, Nikolai and Morris developed a four-step process:

1. Determine daily speeds by collecting data;
2. Survey golfers to develop a target;
3. Evaluate maintenance practices; and
4. Communicate.

The first step, data collection, is typically easy to incorporate into the morning set-up process, Nikolai says. He recommends superintendents always measure the same area on the green. Morris collects data in both the morning and the afternoon, which is a great time to interact with golfers and get direct feedback from them.

The next step is surveying players. Nikolai advocates the "Morris Method,"

which entails selecting a pool of about 20 golfers from a variety of different demographic groups (high handicappers, low handicappers, ladies, etc.) and asking them to rate the green speeds every time they play on the following scale: too slow, slow/OK, OK, fast/OK or too fast.

Morris and his team discovered that 80 percent of their golfers thought the greens were either fast/OK or OK when they were in the 9.5-10.5 range. So, that's the a green-speed range they shoot for.

The third step entailed evaluating all the maintenance practices that would allow them to achieve the desired green speed and tweaking those practices as necessary.

The final step is communicating the results to players. The best way, Nikolai says, is a simple sign that says, "The established range of green speeds for this golf course is 9.5-10.5 or whatever it is." And then simply indicate whether the day's green speed is below the range, within the range or above the range.

"They don't need the actual numbers," Nikolai points out. He says many superintendents with members upset about green speeds begin this process and then stop several weeks in just because the members are satisfied that their needs are being paid attention to. Others follow through with all four steps and see great results.

"If you do it and they're happy then you're the hero," he says. "And that means you should make more money." **GCI**

In combining focus groups with surveys, group members not only can help provide topics for surveys but importance rankings and survey question distribution. If you want to assess your members' needs beyond simple questions and answers here's how focus groups can help.

Focus groups are typically composed of four to five pre-screened members who meet criteria you specify. They are assembled in one room to discuss and react to specific topics relevant to your golf course business.

Consider this: You are planning your next year's annual budget and would like to learn what your members think about conditioning on the golf course before bring the plan to the board for approval. You could hire a company to conduct a survey beginning with a series of focus groups and a survey to follow but that can be very expensive. So how can you get this information more affordably? You can attempt to do it yourself.

Clearly, any research you do yourself will have limitations when compared to studies conducted by professionals, but if you are seeking some general guidance about important topics of interest, you can get good information for a nominal cost.

The goal is to explore the general attitudes of the participants to the topics selected for inclusion in the session and ultimately to aid in the construction of survey questions. Focus groups are intended to generate macro information, whereas quantitative survey research seeks to provide micro information. Use the focus group to help formulate your survey questions.

There is no rule as to the number of focus groups to be conducted on a specific topic but two or three groups of different age, handicap and gender usually will work fine. This raises one of the most important issues relative to the implementation of focus groups: the definition of the participants. In any focus group session it's vital that the composition of the group is as homogeneous as possible in terms of key demographic characteristics. For example, if course conditioning is the topic there would be major differences in attitudes between high and low handicappers, social and full golfing members, men and woman and participants who are under 35 compared to those over 65. Not only will the participants have different views on a topic, but getting participants to share their attitudes will be much easier if they are not placed in an environment where some might be intimidated by others due to age, skill of the game or gender. Therefore, it's important to conduct at least one group with each constituent group of the same gender and of different abilities.

Before the focus group's meeting, develop a very clear and precise written statement of the objectives for conducting the research. It's essential to have a well-thought-out target for the study, which will form the strategic basis for the project. It could be titled, "The Importance of Conditioning as It Relates to Annual Budget Preparation at Pleasant Fairways Golf Club." A brief explanation of the plan should accompany each written statement. Be sure to give these statements to each participant in advance of the meeting.

Create a discussion guide outline that contains all the topics you hope to cover in a focus group. The discussion guide is the most important tool in focus groups and is as vital to the novice as to the experienced moderator. The guide is intended to provide a logical flow to the discussion, so that all topics are covered and there is consistency across all the groups in a series

relative to the information discussed. Golf course superintendents know the steps involved in different types of course conditioning, member golfers do not. Explanations of the differences in course conditioning and budget preparation are helpful in the discussion. To this end, it's helpful to provide a time estimate for each of the topics as a guide for the moderator and to ensure that everything gets covered, but also for those interested in the output of the research.

Ensure the group does not go off on tangents, wasting valuable time. It is the responsibility of the moderator to direct discussions so that all topics are covered.

View the group discussion as a way to obtain interaction among the participants. It should not be a series of questions directed at each individual. One of the key benefits of the focus group methodology is to have participants react to each other as ideas are presented, so it is possible to determine the differences in attitudes among participants.

Finally, use write-down exercises to initially lock participants into a position about a particular topic, so they are not swayed by the effects of group dynamics in which a dominant personality can influence the flow of the discussion. Essentially, a write-down exercise is a vehicle whereby the moderator raises a topic (e.g. reaction to increase in green speeds) and each person in the group is asked to write their point of view in 30 words or fewer on a piece of paper prior to discussing the topic. If this is done, the participants will be more honest about their responses than if they were asked to respond to the question without having written down their views first.

Focus groups are helpful because the participants can be probed for the reasoning behind their opinions, and conversations can be generated around a particular topic, giving you what's known as "rich data" as opposed to, for example,

the finite answers you get from survey questions alone.

As the name implies, these are focus groups, keep the subject matter narrow to the immediate task at hand. For example, if you want the focus groups to guide you to areas on the course that need attention, in their opinion, ask the group a specific question and give them specific choices.

"In your opinion, what single maintenance item needs to be accomplished to help our club compete with other clubs in our region?"

- 1) Improve green speeds
- 2) Replace bunker sand
- 3) Add more cart paths
- 4) Renovate rest rooms on course
- 5) Level tees

Then, discuss these items and take copious notes. From the feedback you'll discover the "hot button" items that should be uncovered from the focus groups passion about the subject as well as the solutions these members might have. Remember, *bite your tongue*; this is not the forum to rebut criticisms and comments!

Equal weight should be given to each group; so often the low handicappers are the driving force for change on the course. The women, juniors, seniors and weekend-playing high handicappers must be involved in the process or the questions placed in the survey will not be appropriate or statically valid for the good of the membership as a whole. **GCI**



## USING FOCUS GROUPS

By Mike Vogt, CGCS

“Someone said the grass is very thin on some of the fairways and landing areas and that two dead trees needed to be taken out,” Barker says. “We had sodded the problem areas after the golf course was closed and we already had those trees marked.”

Similarly, a number of commenters asked about recycling – why aren’t there recycle bins on all the tees?

“Well,” Barker says, “We do recycle, we’re just doing it behind the scenes.”

“I’d say 50 percent of the things we got suggestions about we’re already doing – they just don’t know about it,” Barker says.

Overall, the survey showed Barker there was an opportunity to improve communications. To do so, he’s planning a series of posts on his blog, [highlandccgroundsdept.blogspot.com](http://highlandccgroundsdept.blogspot.com), to directly address comments and complaints that arose in the survey.

“I’m going to start explaining all of our processes for everything now,” he says. “Maybe all of these people aren’t reading the blog yet, but at least the information will be out there.”

When questions arise Barker, staff members or other club members can point them to the blog to see what the policies are.

Highland’s survey takes place facility-wide every three years. A third party conducts the survey online, tabulates the results and formats report cards for each department. For golf course maintenance, 10 categories were evaluated. Barker’s not sure of the exact costs because it doesn’t come out of his maintenance budget.

**BLIND SURVEY?**

“I give our GM a lot of credit,” Barker says. “When they launched the survey they said for members’ comments to be included, they had to attach their member number to the comments. So I can see who it’s coming from and say, ‘I noticed you commented about X, and this is why we do things this way.’ It keeps people from putting ridiculous comments and you can take them into context. We have over 500 members. If we make everyone happy, we’re probably in more trouble than we know. A private club does require a lot of communication – it really helps to know if that one person is never going to be happy. They could ruin your day every day.”

At the Powder Horn, the survey was completely blind – with no members’ names or numbers attached to the results.

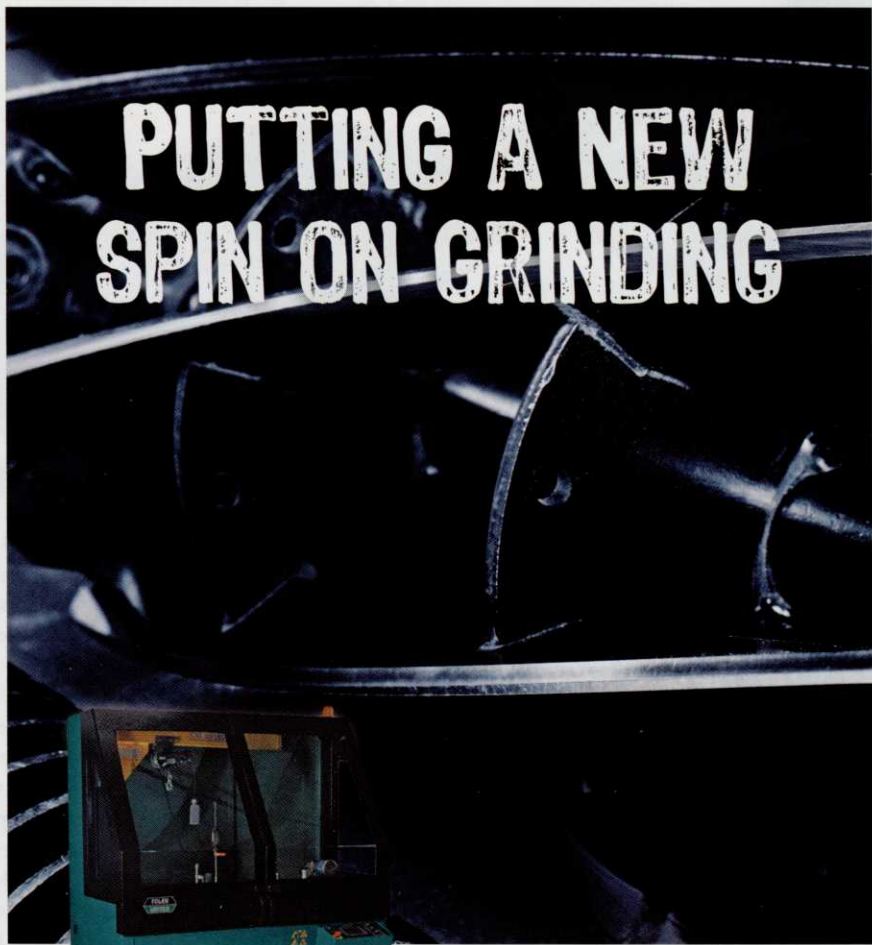
“I think it gave them a chance to be anonymous and voice concerns without us thinking

less of them,” Busch says. He adds that the open-ended survey questions likely got a better response because of their anonymous nature. “I thought there were some things people would just go off about, but everything was really constructive. Surprisingly, there was nothing rude at all.”

All in all, Barker applauds Highland’s board for conducting the survey. “Our club is doing

relatively well for these times,” he says. “Our board is doing what they should be doing – working for the membership.” GCI

**For a sample copy of a golf course conditions survey from consultant Mike Vogt, CGCS, visit, [scribd.com/doc/27353301/Golf-Survey-Conditions](http://scribd.com/doc/27353301/Golf-Survey-Conditions)**

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