

A survey form is visible in the background, featuring a grid of checkboxes. The words "satisfaction" and "good" are partially visible. A red pencil is positioned diagonally across the right side of the page, pointing towards the bottom right.

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**

“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, 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.


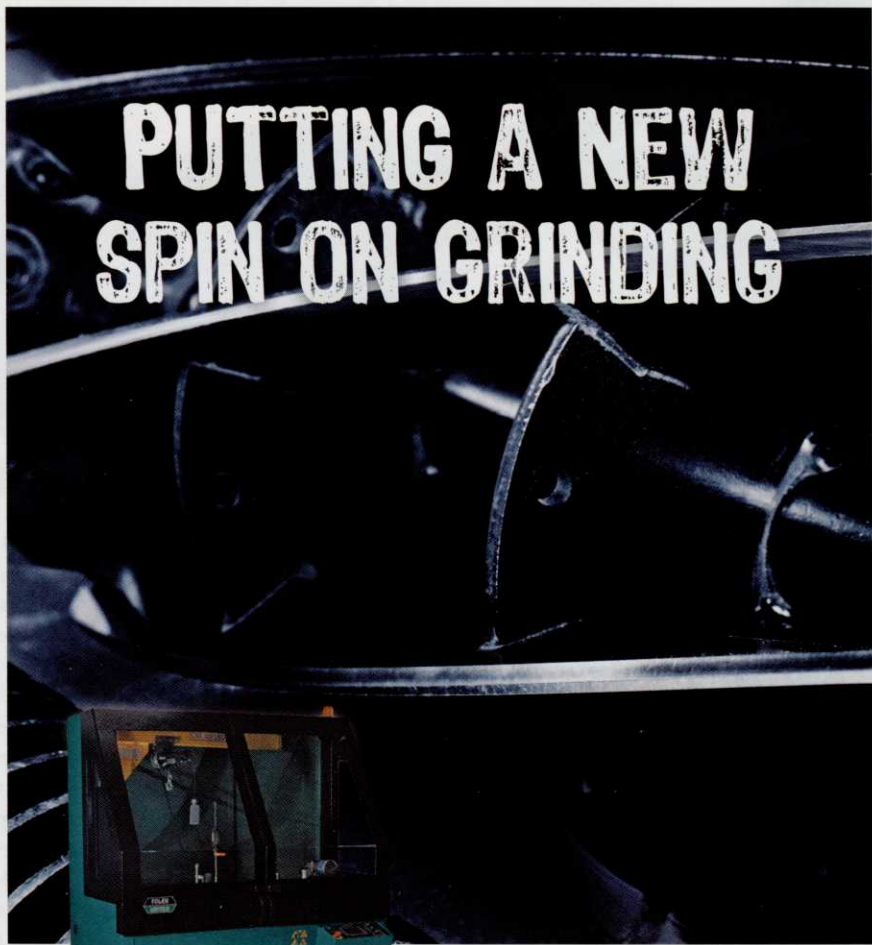
“I think it gave them a chance to be anonymous and voice concerns without us thinking

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

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