SURVEY SAYS…

The powers that be in the golf industry will throw some astounding numbers at you. They will tell you that golf has a $76 billion annual economic impact in the U.S. – bigger than the furniture or motion picture businesses. They will further say course maintenance alone accounts for $9 billion in spending and payroll. That suggests the average maintenance budget at the average American course is about $500,000. Take labor and overhead out of that equation and it means that the "typical" course spends about a quarter of a million dollars a year on stuff.

That's a big number for some of you and a pittance for others, but that's the average. The real question – no matter what budget you have – is what kind of stuff do you buy and from whom do you buy it?

By my estimate, there are about 300 companies that actively sell products to golf course superintendents. Beyond the actual performance of the product, the bottom line when superintendents choose products nearly always comes down to reputation and relationships. You buy from people you trust who represent companies you respect.

Pat Jones
Editorial director and publisher

So, we asked you which companies you admire and trust the most, and the results of this first-of-its-kind study are presented in this month's cover story. Our goal is to benchmark your opinion of the reputations of the companies that serve you.

We sent out 4,000 online survey links to superintendents randomly selected from our circulation and received about 350 valid responses. We asked folks to choose the 10 companies they admired or trusted most from a list of about 100 companies we identified. (By the way, we randomized the multiple choice lists to prevent people from just checking off the biggest companies, the same companies or the first 10 on the list.) From there, we compiled the data and sat on it. We didn't share the data with anyone – including our own sales team. We decided against using it to go sell self-congratulatory ads to the companies that did well in the ratings. We could have, but it seemed tacky. We hate tacky.

In some ways, the results weren't surprising. The big brands that dominate the consciousness of the market generally performed well. But, there were surprisingly small companies that exceeded my expectations and some huge ones that didn't do as well as I might have expected. So, what's the takeaway? You get to see how your opinions compare to those of your colleagues around the nation and ponder how your views impact your purchasing decisions.

If this study is a measure of corporate brand reputation, here's what it is not: It is not a measure of market share or total sales. Yes, companies with better reputations sell more stuff, but just because Company X ranks higher than Company Y in our study doesn't mean that Company Y isn't kicking Company's X's butt in total sales because they have better distribution, different pricing or more "must-have" products.

It's not necessarily a measure of how much each company spends on marketing. There's definitely a correlation between advertising/marketing and overall reputation but, again, there were smaller manufacturers that ranked high compared to their ad budgets.

It's definitely not a measure of how much advertising each company buys in GCI. We compiled a list of the industry's most visible companies based on multiple sources (ads in all magazines, trade show booths, sponsorships), and we allowed for write-in responses. Many companies that don't advertise with us were included and a few of them did quite well.

All that said, publishing this scares the crap out of me. We've never been afraid to be candid but this feels like risky business for a magazine that relies on the kindness of the very companies we've rated. But, given our reputation for telling it like it is, it's riskier business to ignore the fact that brands are meaningful in this market and your perception of those brands is a big part of their success as companies. Comments are welcome. You know where to find us! **GCI**

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GOLF COURSE INDUSTRY
Serving the Business of Golf Course Management

Vol. 23 No. 12

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