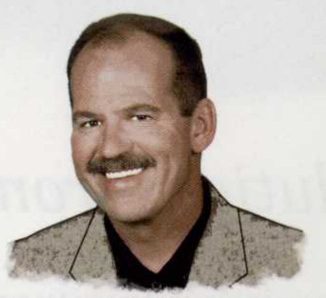
LEAN & MEAN

About every 10 minutes during the jam-packed 2011 GIS, someone would say to me: "I can't remember a national show where you could stand in the middle of the floor and see the walls at either end." I could indulge in all manner of evocative metaphors ("The walls are closing in on the market!") to describe this phenomenon, but instead I'll say this: It is what it is… get used to it.

Orlando was notable for many things, but it was most noteworthy for its sheer reality. It was a microcosm of the new golf market. It was lean and mean.

Among my observations, there was much ballyhoo about "adjusted attendance" and seminars being up. Hosts said there were about 5,700 "qualified buyers." They are loathe to admit how many actual superintendents registered, but it was probably around 2,500. That means only about one-sixth of all U.S. courses (plus some international) were represented, but it obviously tends to be bigger-budget courses with higher maintenance standards and an appetite for new products. That, kids, is not bad.



Pat Jones
Editorial director and publisher

Okay, try not to faint, but kudos to the GCSAA for being straight about the overall attendance numbers and not blowing smoke about how massive the show is. The glory days of show expansion are over. But, thankfully, so is the attendance freefall. Orlando was a benchmark for the new normal and the association and the exhibitors need to deal with it. The new reality of the post-recession GIS is leaner, meaner, smarter and maybe healthier in the long run.

The CMAA's departure clarified and focused the event. It's once again a turf show, not a "turf plus napkins and wine glasses show." As painful as the divorce may have been, the vast majority of exhibitors were relieved to be dealing with their core customers instead of a weird mix of turfheads and food/bev guys.

Attendees were focused on being there for solid business reasons. Sure, there was partying and mucho camaraderie, but guys I talked with had a PLAN for their trip. They had selected seminars to help their facility or their careers. They hit the floor with an idea of what they needed to see.

Within days after the event, I started seeing supers' blogs outlining for their members/owners exactly what they'd seen, done and accomplished at the show. That's a smart way to document the facility's ROI in sending their guy to the event.

Maybe it was just me, but it seemed to be a "mature" group of supers in Orlando. I wonder if the younger guys stayed away because they're less secure in their jobs or didn't have the budget to go. Or, perhaps, they just don't connect with a big show because they have their own virtual network of buddies, self-education and suppliers back home.

Nearly everyone I spoke with was "cautiously optimistic" that the market is rebounding. Hell, I told everyone I saw I was cautiously optimistic. But, other than a few small budget studies that show some uptick in spending and a sense that capital budgets (equipment, remodeling) are starting to flow a little, there's little evidence to support that feeling. I believe it's mostly a sense of hope. As in, I am more hopeful that my facility won't go belly-up.

You should have seen the line of people in our booth waiting to talk with Tim Moraghan, Bruce Williams and other GCI contributors who happen to be connected to the "big job" recruiting network. Like I said, the supers in Orlando had agendas and getting advice from these guys was near the top.

There was much Tweeting and Facebooking and social media buzzing. It was a lot of fun… for all 200 of us doing it. We sometimes forget that 85 percent of y'all aren't at this thing and most of the people who are at the show are not spending all of their time waiting for me or anyone else to prove our brilliance in 140 characters or less. Yet, look for much more of this as our market becomes more personal.

I'll conclude by saying with absolutely no modesty that my team kicked ass at GIS. We cranked out outstanding content, covered everything that deserved to be covered, shot hours of cool video and, yes, Tweeted and blogged our tails off. Why? Because like you, we know the same old crap doesn't fly in the brave new world of the golf course industry. **GCI**

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