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BACKFIRE

Someone once defined “proactivity” as climbing out of your foxhole to get a better look at the enemy. By attempting to get ahead of the game, you put yourself at risk of getting shot.

In three decades of participating in/covering the industry’s attempts to communicate its environmental story I’ve seen plenty of examples of well-intentioned efforts backfiring.

Back in the late ‘80s, a bunch of Long Island courses volunteered to be a part of a groundwater study to see if chemicals were leaching into their sandy soils. The results showed only trace amounts – parts per billion – were detectable in the water table and they were well below EPA standards. Good news, right? Nope, the state’s attorney general issued a scathing report called “Toxic Fairways” indicting us for poisoning the Empire State’s drinking water.

Not long afterwards, we shot ourselves in the foot with the release of the infamous University of Iowa study of mortality among superintendents. The concept was good: use the association’s insurance program – which paid a small death benefit to the widows and orphans of deceased members – to track whether any “pesticide-linked” cancers or conditions were higher than the rest of the population. The theory was we were the canaries in the coal mine and if we weren’t dropping like flies, no one else should worry. Good plan until the research kind of, maybe indicated higher-than-average rates of non-Hodgkins lymphoma and brain cancer and the media and regulators had a field day. Again, the road to hell was paved with the good intentions of proactivity.

There have been dozens more “oops” moments since, but the latest

was a Bloomberg news item from last month in which their cynical reporter decides to turn an environmentally positive press release from a golf management company ass-over-teakettle and chide us for not doing more. The whole thing is at bloom.bg/NtWIVQ, but here’s his response to the positive statistics the release cited about golf:

“Now, if you squint, turn your head a bit, and look really hard, you might see this instead:

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- 23 percent of 18-hole golf facilities have taken no steps to conserve energy.
 - 9 percent of acreage on an 18-hole golf course is not considered “green space.”
 - Almost 15 percent of golf courses tap municipal water facilities.
- “The most telling part of the announcement is what’s missing: the lack of brag-worthy efforts to control fertilizer run-off at U.S. golf courses. It’s not like nobody’s aware of the problem.

“Nitrogen and phosphorus runoff from fertilizer are a large-scale environmental problem in many parts of the U.S., and the world. Rivers carry these compounds to the ocean, or bays. Algae feast on the nutrients. Their populations bloom and crash, depleting oxygen and leaving ‘dead zones.’ The annual Gulf of Mexico dead zone, an oxygen-depleted, lifeless area that forms in spring and disappears in the fall, reached 6,765 square miles in area last year, fed mostly by Midwestern agriculture.

“In the absence of gob-smacking accomplishments, maybe golf official-

dom can encourage course superintendents to raise awareness about systemic national environmental problems, and popularize best practices without interfering with the game. That way, golfers can even become more mindful about fertilizer use for their residential lawns, which dwarf golf courses in total acreage. Green, for lack of a better word is good, but not when it’s helping algal blooms create toxic assets.”

So we’ve now killed the Gulf of

Mexico... and we’re supposed to be educating Joe Homeowner about responsible weed-and-feed use. Egads!

I feel sorry for the PR folks who sent that nice release and got a public ass-whoopin’ for their trouble. Hey, I’ve been there, done that and got the scars across my posterior to prove it. Proactivity hurts sometimes.

That’s why I worry any time GCSAA or other organizations do big studies to benchmark water, fertilizer or chemical usage. These studies are initiated with the best of intentions until you consider the guaranteed, automatic, every-single-friggin’-time response activists, government and media have to those studies: “Cool...thanks for the benchmark data. Now tell us how you’re going to reduce those inputs by 50 percent within 10 years.”

My point is that no matter how well we tell our story, there are people who simply won’t believe it or will spin it in whichever way suits their agendas. That is the inherent danger of proactivity. Yet, it shouldn’t stop us from trying. Just be prepared for the fact that there’s always a bunch of guns pointed directly at our foxhole. **GCI**