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REALITY CHECK

A new pipeline of understanding will lead to a more connected GCSAA.

I'm writing this from seat 5B inside a big metal bird blasting over the Rocky Mountains on my way back from the Peaks & Prairies GCSA annual conference and show in Billings, Mont. It was an awesome event, but also a reality check. Allow me to explain...

I've always loved the chance to participate in chapter events and regional conferences. I get to see old friends and make new ones and, unbelievably, I'm often given the chance to rant and rave about some industry topic for an hour. I've been giving the same speech for 25 years and, incredibly, no one has caught on. Go figure.

It's tougher and tougher for me to get to regional events as my job description has gotten broader, but I could not say no to the fabulous Lori Russell, the empress of the northwest chapters, when she asked me to meet with her board to talk about the evolution of chapter publications, websites, newsletters and social media.

I've had similar conversations with leaders from other chapters – big and small – and the short version is that it's really difficult for associations led by volunteers to come to grips with the new member communications model that's emerging. They all feel pressured right now by all sorts of factors (key members, sponsors, etc.) to abandon their printed publications and materials and go all digital.

I'll tell you what I told the Peaks & Prairies board: It needs to be a planned transition, not an overnight switch. You have to communicate across multiple platforms these days: print, website, email and social media. It's "cheaper" but harder and even more time-consuming than just killing trees and printing newsletters. If you're a chapter leader and you want to learn

more, give me a call and I'll be glad to dispense my usual free opinions about the issue.

This is daunting stuff for small association like Peaks & Prairies – and dozens more like it out there – but it's just the tip of the iceberg in terms of challenges faced by local associations these days. Here are the really big concerns:

- How can you establish (or re-establish) the value of local networking/education events in the minds of clubs and course owners? The recession shrunk or killed professional development budget lines at many facilities. How do you get those back?
- How can you engage younger members who don't necessarily understand the value of the chapter and who tend to network via texting and social media? The value of chapters can be enhanced by Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook, but it also makes it less important to attend meetings and interact in the minds of younger folk. Plus, who's going to pay for those younger guys to join and participate in chapters? And where will the next generation of leaders come from?
- How can you get butts in seats at chapter meetings and regional trade shows? Healthy attendance drives revenues but it's tough in an era of smaller budgets and a nagging perception that being away from the course for "fun" things like shows makes you vulnerable to criticism within your organization.
- How can you demonstrate the value of your association to sponsors who want metrics to validate the investment they make in your chapter? Remember that about 20 companies directly or indirectly fund about two-thirds of all the sponsorships, advertising and trade show participation in the entire industry. Their budgets are

gradually shrinking. How can you show them that your group still deserves a piece of that ever-shrinking pie?

Those are serious issues, many of which will require significant change in the way chapters have historically done business. It's going to be a long and difficult evolution to the new model. That's one reason I'm heartened to see the direction the GCSAA chapter outreach program and field staff program is taking. They've hired a good group of people for those regional positions. I know many of them and they are hard-working, passionate guys with a down-to-earth sense of the support they need to provide to the local associations and to individual members.

What's really cool about the field staff concept is it's a two-way conduit. In addition to the help they provide in the boonies, they do something else that's important: They communicate what's going on out in the real world back to GCSAA leadership in Lawrence.

I've always felt that the headquarters staff was pretty insular and disconnected from the "real world" of working superintendents and that too much of their effort was directed at the needs of the top 20 percent who serve on committees and come to the national show. My sense is that's changing thanks, in part, to some new voices on the board and the reality check provided by having staff out in the field every day.

I sincerely hope this new pipeline of understanding leads to a more pragmatic and connected GCSAA in the future. If it doesn't, we risk becoming more fragmented and having the chasm between the haves and the have nots grow wider. That would inevitably spell the end of the sense of fraternity that's always made this business special. Let's not let that happen as we rush toward the future. **GC**