

COURSE MANAGEMENT

sign when they take out a cart relieves the course from liability. Only when there's true negligence in design is there a problem.

Golf course builders also require the owner to have the final say when it comes to cart paths. Scott Veazey, president of Tifton, Ga.-based Southeastern Golf, says many jobs he works on are a collaboration between the architect, builder, owner and subcontractors.

"Some architects flag out the path area, and we cut them in," he says. "They'll kind of do it, but they indemnify themselves from the final decision. Every course has a few critical areas. Some decisions have to be made, such as where the cart paths need to go, and that's where the owner is involved."

THE BOTTOM LINE

Considering the good and bad of cart paths, they still mean a lot to the bottom line of a course operation.

"What really affects the bottom line is when a public course has an outing that's been set up in advance, and it rains the day before," Benkusky says. "They can't say, 'No carts today,' because they'd lose the outing. That affects the bottom line."

Cart rentals represent a big item on a course's income ledger each year, with each cart generating several thousand dollars of fees during in-season months. Osterfeld says he put much thought into his cart paths when designing his layout because there's no question carts are a welcome and significant addition to the bottom line.

Mark Johnson, golf course superintendent of the TPC Craig Ranch in McKinney, Texas, says his operational line item for cart path repairs and his requests for capital dollars for cart path repairs is roughly \$50,000 a year for 7.5 miles of path. Johnson says it's worth it.

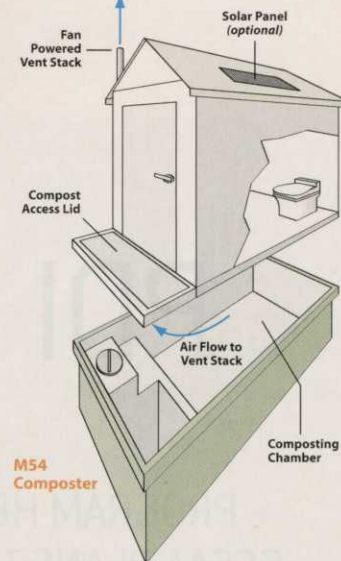
"If you get a rain day and it's walkers, you lose a lot of money," he says. "We are against them, but we manage them because they're always going to be here in this country." GCI

T.R. Massey is a freelance writer based in Columbus, Ohio. He can be reached at trm@columbus.rr.com.

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PDI PUSHES PROFES

PROGRAM HELPS SUPERINTENDENTS; GCSAA PLANS TO PROMOTE CLASS A STATUS

A title is only a word unless there's something to back it up. With this thought in mind, golf course superintendents throughout the country are in the midst of putting substance behind the term "Class A."

In 1971, the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America began a certification program for its members. However, it acknowledged the program, which bestowed the designation certified golf course superintendent on its recipients, was a rose that didn't smell too sweet.

Scott Woodhead was a superintendent in Montana for 25 years before becoming president of the GCSAA in 2000. Woodhead says all one had to do to become a Class A member was have a job as a superintendent for three years and pay annual dues.

"This was part of the problem superintendents had in terms of people's perception of them," he says.

With that criteria, it's difficult to challenge the notion that superintendents are little more than guys in muddy boots and jeans who mow grass. In contrast, people see PGA of America pros in a golf shop with a Class A designation, and the pros command respect because golfers know they had to meet certain requirements to earn that designation.

So, how will superintendents flip the script?

MUCH IMPROVED

In 2001, at the GCSAA annual meeting in Dallas, the membership passed a resolution to implement a new program called the Professional Development Initiative.

The mission was to improve the knowledge and skills of superintendents by instituting clearly defined competencies. This means members must pass certain standards every five years to be a Class A superintendent.

"Seventy-five percent voted for implementation of membership standards," says Woodhead, who now works for the GCSAA as the senior manager of governance/member standards.

To earn the Class A designation, members must have three years of experience as a superintendent, hold a job in that capacity, earn various degrees of continuing education points (based on prior formal education, such as a four-year agronomy degree) and pass an integrated pest management test.

Eighty-two percent of all GCSAA Class A and superintendent members who responded to the survey had a two-year certificate, an associate degree or a higher degree of formal education.

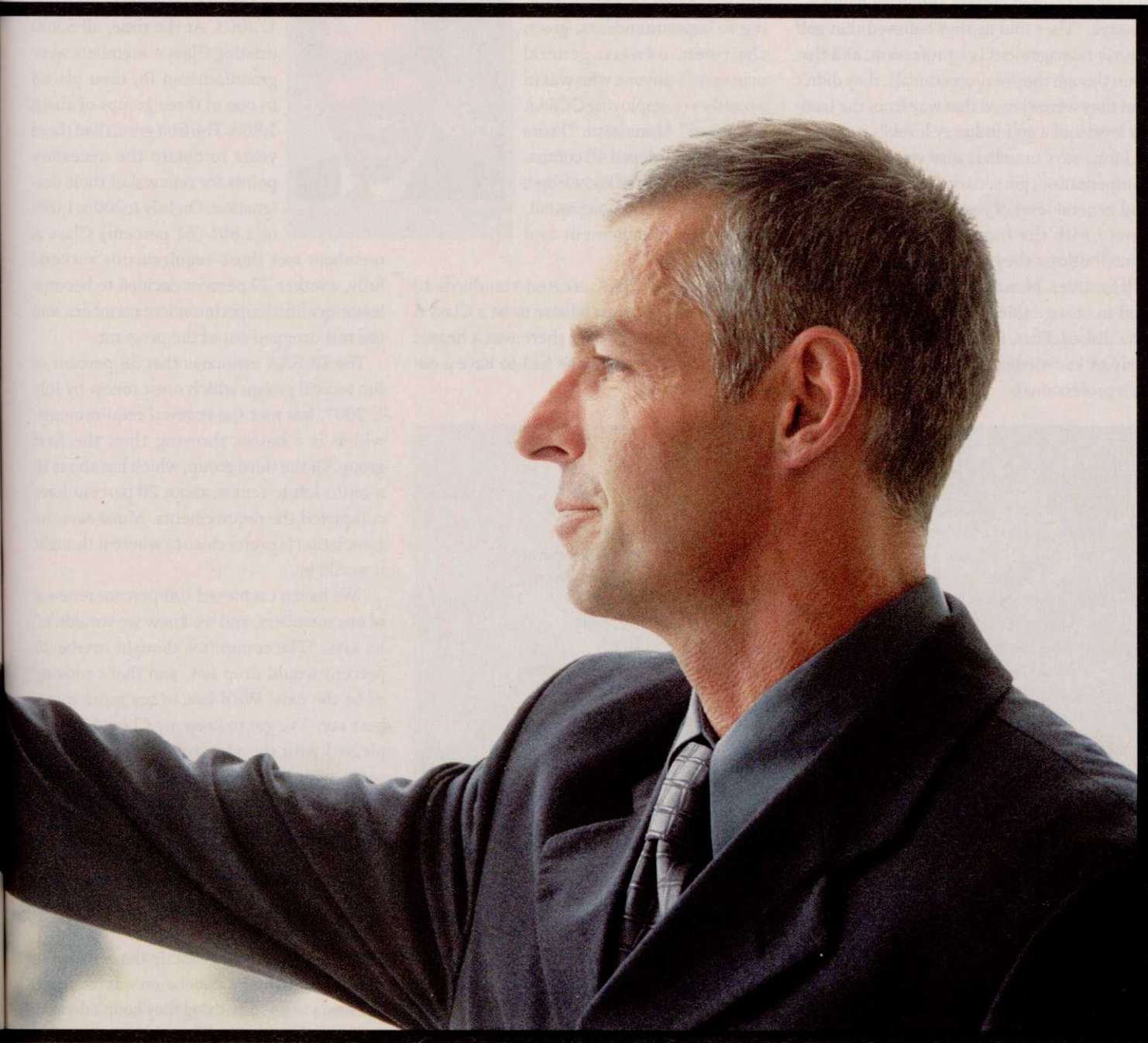
The process of establishing the PDI program, from broaching the subject to implementation, took five years, Woodhead says.

"We know superintendents are staying on top of their game," he says. "We just made a mechanism so we could report back to golfers



PROFESSIONALISM

BY T.R. MASSEY



and employers to tell them exactly what their superintendent was doing.”

Steve Mona, c.e.o. of the GCSAA, attended his first national meeting in that capacity in 1994. He says delegates from all 104 chapters discussed emerging issues and the direction of the association.

“The members were clear to the board that they wanted certain things to happen,” he says. “They told us they believed that golf course management is a profession, and that even though they’re professionals, they didn’t feel they were viewed that way from the facility level and a golf industry level.”

Mona says members also stated that their compensation, job security, job opportunities and general level of respect wasn’t commensurate with the formal education and the contributions they make to the success of golf facilities. Mona and the board agreed, but said to change things, two criteria had to be established. First, there must be a recognized body of knowledge that one must master to be a professional.

“You can’t just hang out a shingle and say you’re a doctor or lawyer,” Mona says.

Second, there must be a requirement to continue to claim a professional designation, which means ongoing education. The GCSAA hired the Stanford Research Institute to determine the contents of the body of knowledge.

“For about two years, they did extensive research, talking to superintendents, green chairmen, owners, general managers – anyone who was in a position of employing GCSAA members,” Mona says. “From that, they developed 48 competencies, the body of knowledge, such as resource management, personnel management and many others.”

Next, the GCSAA created standards to which members must adhere to be a Class A member. As part of that, there was a heated debate about whether one had to have a degree, Mona says.

“At end of the day, we voted ‘no’, but we created a sliding scale,” he says. “You must achieve a blend in five areas: formal education; continuing education; job experience; service to local chapter, community and the national organization; and a pesticide license or [a passing score on] a test that’s equivalent to it.”

The PDI program started July 1, 2003. At the time, all 5,400 existing Class A members were grandfathered in, then placed in one of three groups of about 1,800. The first group had three years to obtain the necessary points for renewal of their designation. On July 1, 2006, 1,099 of 1,801 (61 percent) Class A

members met those requirements successfully, another 29 percent decided to become lesser-qualified superintendent members, and the rest dropped out of the program.

The GCSAA estimates that 38 percent of the second group, which must renew by July 1, 2007, has met the renewal requirements, which is a better showing than the first group. Of the third group, which has about 18 months left to renew, about 20 percent have completed the requirements. Mona says the association is pretty close to where it thought it would be.

“We haven’t achieved 100-percent renewal of our members, and we knew we wouldn’t,” he says. “The committee thought maybe 20 percent would drop out, and that’s proving to be the case. We’d like to see more members say, ‘I’ve got to keep my Class A.’ We’re pleased with the response, but we’d like to see it higher. Ideally, everyone would do it except those who are leaving the profession or retiring.”

Woodhead says the contentious part of the debate came when members voted for the PDI program, but since then, there haven’t been many complaints.

“I don’t know what exactly the arguments were, other than the association was requiring members to do something they hadn’t done in the past,” he says. “Just having requirements



Mona

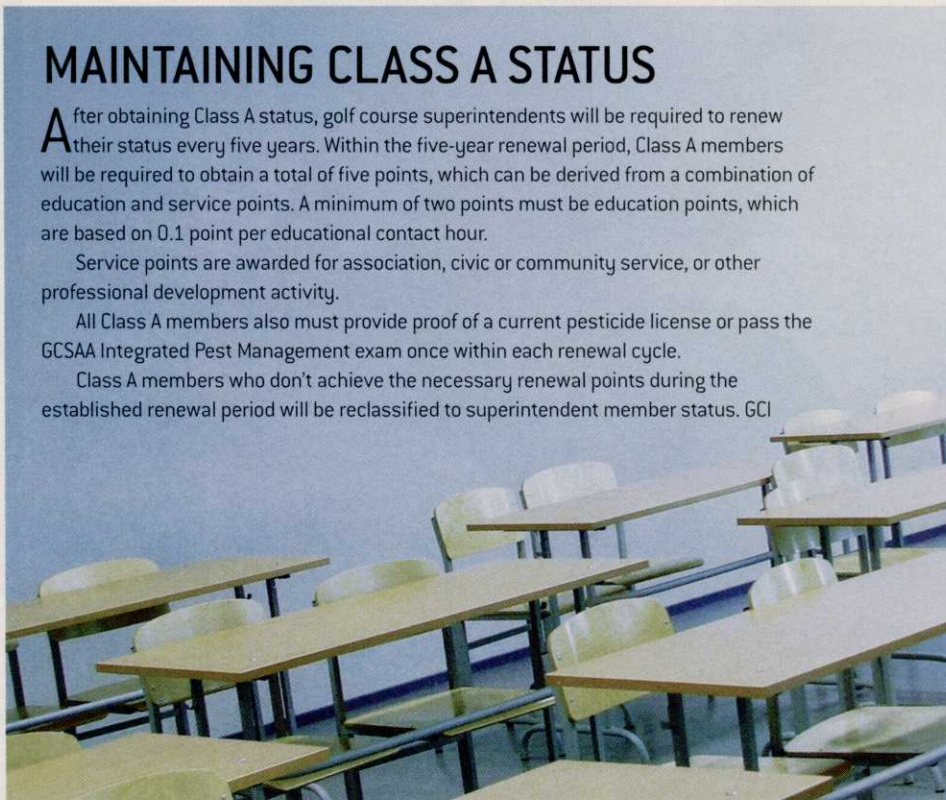
MAINTAINING CLASS A STATUS

After obtaining Class A status, golf course superintendents will be required to renew their status every five years. Within the five-year renewal period, Class A members will be required to obtain a total of five points, which can be derived from a combination of education and service points. A minimum of two points must be education points, which are based on 0.1 point per educational contact hour.

Service points are awarded for association, civic or community service, or other professional development activity.

All Class A members also must provide proof of a current pesticide license or pass the GCSAA Integrated Pest Management exam once within each renewal cycle.

Class A members who don’t achieve the necessary renewal points during the established renewal period will be reclassified to superintendent member status. GCI



was the problem for some.”

Mona knew some would oppose the program – those who didn’t want to be told what to do or didn’t believe it would impact their employment.

“That’s fine, but for the most part, people are saying they asked for it, and they wanted definitions,” he says.

MEMBER FEEDBACK

Keith Pegg, an international member of the GCSAA who’s currently working in Japan, doesn’t think much of the program.

“The PDI is a joke,” he says. “We had certification that was great, and we didn’t need PDI.”

But Pegg seems to be in the minority.

Richard Staughton is president of the Georgia chapter of the GCSAA and golf course superintendent at Towne Lake Hills Golf Club in Woodstock. Though he hasn’t renewed his Class A status, he claims to be a continuing education geek.

“It’s always a good thing,” he says. “It comes down to continuing education. You have to stay on top of current trends.”

Gary Carls, golf course superintendent at Sunnyvale Golf Course in California, is in the third renewal group and thinks it’s great to have member standards.

“In some ways, I wish it was even stronger,” he says. “But once it gets rolling and the guys get renewed, the standards will get tougher down the road.”

Carls says the profession has changed a lot since he started in Michigan in 1978. Twenty-five years ago, degrees weren’t required. One just joined a crew and worked his way up.

Nowadays, most of those coming into the business have an agronomy degree.

“When I started, I was out mowing and working with crews,” he says. “Now, there’s more budgeting, managing and meeting with the board and the shop about how to drive rounds and the business side of it. It’s not just about growing grass anymore.”

That’s why Carls believes the Class A designation has to mean something.

“They’re just starting to promote the Class A designation now that the first group has been renewed,” he says. “During the past few years, we’ve talked about its value, and the owners have come back with the idea that they might use this designation as hiring criteria.”

Bill Davidson, golf course superintendent at Naples Grande Golf Club in Florida, was in the first renewal group and says it was exceptionally easy.

“If you just go to monthly meetings with your local chapter and take a limited amount of continuing education units to keep up your license, you can get enough points,” he says. “The biggest problem is that guys rely on people to do things for them. Guys get points and don’t turn them in. You have to manage your own certification. You can’t just go to a meeting and hope.”

FINANCIAL BENEFITS

There’s evidence the program is paying dividends financially. According to a recent GCSAA salary survey of superintendents, annual compensation rose from \$44,000 in 1993 to almost \$69,000 in 2005. The average salary of those who’ve earned a Class A designation rose to \$80,489 in 2005, an increase from \$56,994 in 1995. Class A superintendents’ salaries averaged 15 percent greater in 2005 than superintendents without a Class A designation.

Mona says GCSAA research shows the perception and favorable opinions of superintendents are on the rise.

“The two main messages are, one, that having a Class A designation is a key to the economic vitality to the golf course,” he says. “Second, superintendents play a crucial role in the golfers’ enjoyment of the game. What makes a round enjoyable? The golf course itself, in the end, is the primary differentiator of the quality of the experience. Golf course conditions influence your enjoyment of the game.”



Carls

Mona says the GCSAA board promised its members to market them if they passed the PDI.

“If we can get these messages communicated, recognition and respect and job security will take care of themselves,” he says.

Mona acknowledges the jury is still out on the recognition and awareness campaign.

“We have great research data that shows we’ve raised the level of awareness of our members,” he says. “But the long-term goal is still out there. Ultimately, when an employer hires a superintendent, we want them to say, ‘I have to have a Class A GCSAA member because the risk of not having one is too great.’ And we want golfers to know who their superintendent is by name. We want them to say the work they do is having the most impact on their enjoyment of golf. It’s not a competition between pros and superintendents, but we want our fair share of the recognition.”

In that regard, Mona says the association targets employers and avid and influential golfers to send the message about the importance of the Class A designation.

“They understand in general terms what it takes to be a Class A member and what it takes to continue, so they can ascribe value to it,” he says. “We are communicating to these people where they live. We’re targeting different media outlets they tune into.”

The GCSAA has made a substantial investment with the Golf Channel this year via ads and other programming that will begin in March, Mona says.

“We’re also running particular ads in publications focused on golf course decision makers,” he says. “The message is that the Class A GCSAA member brings certain attributes to the facility, and employers should insist on a Class A member. It all loops back to where we started, when we said we want respect, job opportunities and security.”

When that happens, a title is more than just a word. **GCI**

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BUSINESS BOOSTERS

Acquiring information from golfers helps focus marketing and increase rounds

Presently, many golf course operators are faced with the challenge of growing their businesses. They're trying to increase the number of rounds played at their courses.

But competition – with other golf courses and other leisure activities – as well as a lack of targeted marketing, can hinder that growth. Societal factors that have a major impact on the golf business are:

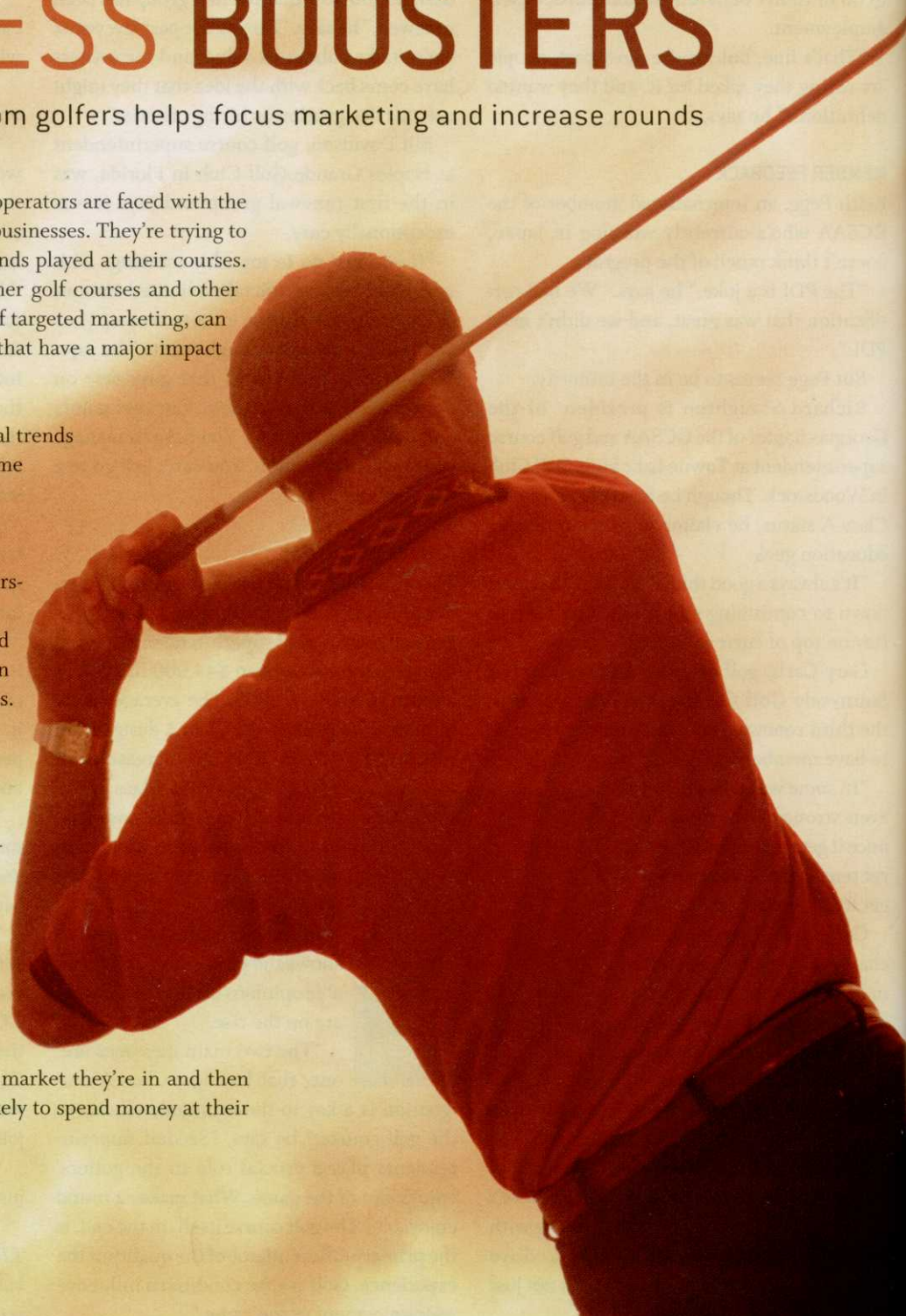
- A changing economy
- Demographic, social and cultural trends
- Availability and use of leisure time
- Technological trends
- Environmental trends
- Political and legislative trends
- Competition from other golf courses and other leisure activities.

Yet, there are opportunities and market segments golf operators can target to help improve their businesses.

Those include:

- Youth development
- Family development
- Senior services
- Universal access to and the design of golf courses
- Diverse population groups
- Opportunities to address social trends such as health and wellness, lifelong learning and technology-based recreation.

To better their businesses, owners and managers need to research the market they're in and then market to consumer groups most likely to spend money at their facilities.



Attendees at the National Institute of Golf Management held last month at Oglebay Resort in Wheeling, W.Va., received tips about that. The event was sponsored by the National Golf Foundation, Club Car, the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America and Oglebay.

Looking at the macro golf market, NGF expects a net loss of 30 golf courses in 2006 once stats are finalized. The bright side, however, is that loss is alleviating competitive environments, says Ben Fowler, golf facility research and consulting sales manager for NGF. NGF predicts 2007 will be flat – there won't be a negative supply of golf courses – and Florida, Texas and California will experience the most growth.

Regarding rounds, NGF predicts 502.5 million will have been played in 2006. Comparatively, there were 499.6 million played in 2005, 499.7 million in 2004 and 495 million in 2003. Weather, the economy, competition and reduced demand are reasons for the stagnant number of rounds, Fowler says.

To weather the storm, it's critical for operators to have loyal customers who they understand, Fowler says. Knowing this is the first step to increasing the number of rounds. If owners and managers aren't surveying their golfers, they should. According to Fowler, a good base of knowledge should include:

- An understanding of your customers. Get their profiles.
- An understanding of performance measures, your share of rounds in the market, and programs such as The First Tee and Play Golf America.

- An understanding of loyalty. Have a perceived value and a perceived relationship (a good feeling). Measure loyalty by determining if a golfer would recommend your course to a friend or relative.

- An understanding of how your share of the market relates to loyalty.

- A competitive analysis. Know where else your golfers are playing and how many rounds they're playing at each course.

"If you find out where your customers are coming from, then you can market specifically to them in the areas where they live," Fowler says. "You get more bang for your advertising buck."

It's also crucial to know the relationship between satisfaction and importance factors. It's not very beneficial if golfers have a high satisfaction rating of aspects of a facility that aren't very important to them. The goal is for golfers to have high satisfaction ratings of things that are most important to them.

Getting feedback from golfers is key to bettering one's business. Fowler cites two examples. The first is a premium daily-fee facility in Indiana. It needed to renovate its bunkers but the board pushed back. So the golf course superintendent quantified responses from golfers about the bunkers to

show why the renovation was needed. The board approved the renovation after hearing the golfers' feedback.

The second is a management company in Washington state that sent out an e-mail blast to the previous day's customers. It was trying to determine why certain customers had a bad experience, remedy that, and convince them to return.

However, acquiring golfer feedback isn't always easy. For example, one NGIM attendee from a municipal golf course says he has been having a hard time getting golfers to respond to his surveys. He's sending surveys to their homes through the mail, but unfortunately, he's had to resort to giving away a free round of golf to incentivize people to respond.

Irene Khattar, manager of communications and public relations at Cape Breton University in Sydney, Nova Scotia, Canada, and a member of the board of regents for the NIGM, says operators need to contact golfers twice a year. She suggests putting a survey in the tee packet so golfers can fill them out while waiting to tee off at the first tee. Effective elements of a golfer survey include:

- Keeping it to one page
- Taking no more than five to seven minutes to complete

National Institute of Golf Management is a week-long educational seminar about golf facility operations taught by various golf industry experts for golf course owners, operators, managers, superintendents and PGA professionals. The NIGM, which has been around for more than 25 years, is held every year in January at Oglebay Resort in Wheeling W.Va. For more information, visit www.ngf.org/nigm.



Understanding as much about the golfers who play their courses as they can helps golf course operators focus their marketing efforts and spend their marketing dollars more wisely.



- Generating actionable information
- Asking neutral questions
- Not asking double questions
- Asking one open-ended question.

"You need the research first so you can spend your money more wisely and effectively," Khattar says. "If you're going to spend money on research, you should use it at every available opportunity. You need to reallocate marketing dollars because most likely budgets won't increase.

"We're not simply in the golf business," she adds. "We're in the entertainment business. We're competing against a lot of other options such as hockey, movies, soccer, etc. We're not just competing against golf courses."

When trying to solicit information from golfers, incentive programs such as sweepstakes don't work, Khattar says.

"You need to conduct market research on an individual level," she says.

Survey methods include the Internet, mail, paper/pencil and e-mail. Khattar says 300 completed surveys in 30 to 60 days is a good goal to validate a survey. One can track a survey, for example, by having a coupon on the facility's site that golfers have to print out and bring in to receive the reward.

Khattar recommends facility owners who have tight budgets share marketing expenses with others in the area to ease any financial burden.

"Competition isn't always your enemy; it can be your ally," she says. "Sharing ad dollars can benefit all courses. Keep in mind that every lost tee time is lost revenue."

Khattar also cites an owner who was asked what the most scenic part of a golf course is. The owner replied: "a full parking lot."

Owners and managers also need to look at all aspects of their businesses and develop target action plans for each. Some areas to evaluate include:

- Marketing plan
- Operational improvements
- Capital expenditure schedule
- Yield management
- Loyalty programs
- Accountability/ performances bonuses
- Tournaments/outings.

Monitoring, comparing and enhancing an operation are keys to a better business, Khattar says. Owners and managers need external benchmarks and internal goals.

"Hold yourself and your staff accountable," she says. "Set your benchmarks against other

regional or national benchmarks. It can be convincing and persuasive."

BUDGETING, FORECASTING

Generating revenue isn't easy, and because of that, the revenue side of the budget is where all the forecasting and planning take place.

"The expense side is so easy a caveman could do it," says John Potts, a consultant from Chillicothe, Ill.

Before the budgeting starts, a facility's framework needs to be firmly established. That framework includes core values, a mission, a vision, key trends and opportunities, core competencies and strategies. Some golf attributes facilities could include as part of their framework are:

- Strengthens the community
- Protects the environment
- Fosters human development
- Supports economic development
- Provides friendly competition
- Promotes health and wellness
- Provides an activity.

A business plan is needed for a facility to succeed, says Rich Richeson, owner of Richeson Player Development LLC and director of Adams Golf Learning Center in Plano, Texas.

"A business plan is a roadmap to reach a destination and adds focus and clarity for ideas and goals," he says.

Operators need to take the time to write a business plan before budgeting, make it accessible and readable, and reference it throughout the year, Richeson says. And when forecasting, operators should identify key focal areas. For example, he suggests operators call their suppliers and ask what they'll be charged for items the following year. This will help make the budgeting process easier.

"Use the budget numbers to get what you need," he says.

Also, software can be used to help budget, forecast and plan. Software can track what each golfer spent in one year in each area of the golf facility, such as the pro shop, the food-and-beverage area and the golf course itself. **GCI**

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MAKING IT FAST AND F

Ron Bivens, golf course superintendent at the private Country Club of Salisbury in North Carolina, often gets pulled aside by members telling him they were hitting a 150-yard shot on a green during the spring and they're hitting a 170-yard shot after the same drive during the summer and wonder why.

"They don't understand the firmness they had on the fairways changes with the season and grass conditions," Bivens says. "I'm always educating members about what we do with greens and fairways."

Such is part of the life of a golf course superintendent. In short, members want and expect only the best course conditions any time of year. It might be a generalization, but it's safe to say private club members want the conditions of their courses fast and firm, while those at daily-fee facilities prefer less-severe playing conditions. Where greens at a private club might be rolling 11 and above on average, the normal Stimpmeter reading for a daily-fee facility is around nine.

"I don't think there's any question that members at private clubs want their greens firm and fast," Bivens says. "We can get them running 12 and even 13 if we want."

Jeff Shafer, golf course manager at the municipally-owned Las Positas Golf Course in Livermore, Calif., says greens there generally are 9.5, and are 10.5 at various times of the year.

"We think that's a good speed for a municipal course," Shafer says.

At Aberdeen Country Club, a resort course in North Myrtle Beach, S.C., golf course superintendent Dan Connolly tries to keep green speed at 9.5, and everyone seems pleased with that.

"Why would I want to keep them faster for first timers?" he asks. "With the undulation we have on our greens, I would have people four- and five-putting. They would never come back."

USGA INPUT

The U.S. Golf Association issues no guidelines for green speeds but discourages superintendents from going to extremes to make their putting surfaces as fast as marble countertops, says James Snow, national director of the USGA Green Section.

"If you make your greens too fast, you'll discourage mid- and high-handicappers from playing your golf course," he says. "And while the better player likes a tight lie in the fairway and firm ground for more roll on drives, older players, especially ladies, want a little more of a fluffy lie."

