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CALL ME BACK!

For the past quarter of a century, I've made my living largely by calling up you boneheads and asking you dumb questions. Weird way to earn a paycheck, huh?

The questions I attempt to ask you have progressed over the years as my level of industry knowledge has grown a bit. In my early days, it was "What kind of cup cutter do you use and why do you like it?" Then I moved on to, "Have you had any instances of fungicide resistance?" Next it was, "What job-related things keep you up at night?" These days it's, "Why in the hell are you still doing this crazy job?"

So, the subject matter of the questions has evolved through the years. But, one thing has remained constant in my quest to ask you dumb things: You guys don't call back very often.

Yes, I know that a few of you will occasionally return a phone call...sometimes, maybe, if you feel like it, after a couple of days...but you know as well as I do that many of you don't. C'mon, admit it: The voicemail box at your place is a black hole, a giant sucking vortex with no exit.

If the caller isn't a buddy from another course within 10 miles and who doesn't have your mobile number, they might as well be leaving a message for Amelia Earhart or Jimmy Hoffa. God forbid they're a salesperson.

The guys that do tend to return calls also tend to be the top guys in the business. Why? Because they're the top guys in the business and they understand that it is a business. These are the people who are using their Blackberrys and iPhones for more than just keeping track of their fantasy football teams. They understand that communication, networking and responsiveness are just as important as nitrogen, fungicides and cutting heights.

In short, it all comes down to external

relations. You may do a great job of communicating with your internal team – directing your crew on maintenance activities, running projects, keeping the mechanic organized, etc. – but you're not so great at getting your message out to the rest of the world. In my experience, that can be deadly. I've said it a million times: Way more superintendents have been fired for poor communications than poor turf.

For example, here are a few of the most common communications mistakes I've witnessed after 25 years of working with superintendents.

Hiding in the barn. Okay, you and I know that it's not a "barn" and you're not "hiding," but unless you're visible around the rest of the facility, that's the way members and players perceive it. I'm stunned at how often I meet someone who's a very active member at a club and, when I ask him who his superintendent is, he can't name you. If you're not doing regular visits in the grill room, dropping in the pro shop at peak times or otherwise making yourself a visible part of the organization, you're nothing more than a ghost who cuts greens at some ungodly hour. Bottom line: if you don't schmooze, you lose.

Assuming you have nothing to do with marketing. Guess what? Nobody ever joined a golf club or chose to play at a daily fee because the kitchen cranks out a great BLT. Conditioning, according to every no-duh study ever done, is the No. 1 reason golfers select a particular course. And that's on you, pal. Talk to your players. Find out what they like and what they don't like. Consider surveying to get the nasty opinions (you know they're out there). The point is that you need to understand your customers' perceptions of your work to do the best job possible. Don't let the opinions of a few – or just your opinions

– dictate your conditioning standards.

Being a "Cool Hand Luke." Remember that Paul Newman movie where he's a convict in a Southern prison farm? At one point when he's ignored the rules, the warden says, "What we've got here is failure to communicate." If you fail to communicate your practices to your customers, you fail. Period. If you don't let golfers know when you're aerifying, when you're closing a hole for irrigation repair or whatever other disruptive practice you're planning, you have failed to communicate. I'm not saying you'll end up on the chain gang in a hellhole of a prison for this, but you may end up on the unemployment line.

Forgetting to bang your own drum. Do you have a personal marketing agent at your facility? Has the GM or owner got your back when it comes to complaints? Do you get the credit you deserve? I'm guessing not. You have to take responsibility for your own reputation at your course. Take advantage of the chance to write a quick item for the newsletter or the Web site. Make sure you're there for big outings or member/guest events. Don't assume that people will know that you – yes, you – are responsible for the conditions they're enjoying that day.

Avoiding the nasty stuff. In all my years of interviewing and talking with successful superintendents, one trait comes shining through: honesty. If something is wrong, tell the boss. Don't hide it, just get it on the table. The only thing worse than bad news is hiding bad news. Don't do it.

And, last but not least, calling people like me back. I might just be an idiot columnist, but who knows, I might actually be nice to you and feature you in an article. Then again, you may not want to call me back for that very reason. **GC**

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