

by Bruce Williams

# ions?

Golf course superintendents face many challenges and recent economic conditions have warranted either keeping budgets flat or decreasing them to adjust to decreased rounds, lower revenues and declining membership/participation. As is the mantra around this industry, most are forced to do more with less. This creates an opportunity for superintendents to develop a crisis communication plan.

If a facility had a staff of 16 people in 2007 it is likely that staff, by now, has been reduced. At the very least, their hours have decreased. And depending on the financial condition of the golf course, this staffing reduction could be 10-20 percent. That would mean two to three less people or that equivalent reduction in man-hours. While a few less people may not seem like much it equates to 2,080 hours per person. Take into account a 10-20 percent staffing reduction scenario and the loss could be between 4,160 to 6,240 man-hours per year. This has a significant impact on the ability of the superintendent to provide the conditions that golfers were accustomed to before cutbacks.

Changes must be made to survive in this economy and superintendents are very good at adjusting their operations.

However, with the potential for altering course conditions, it is paramount a message be crafted and communicated effectively to players.

Problems associated with the recession are not just a golf course maintenance problem, but they are a problem of the facility. All of the people in leadership and management should spend the time to face the issues of the facility and develop a plan to get through the tough economic times. These plans can surely include marketing and opportunities for increasing revenues. They would also likely include reducing expenses in golf course maintenance and other areas of the facility. Those facilities that recognize the changing economy will be better positioned after making the appropriate adjustments.

Now, each facility will have its own message, the following guide gives you a general idea of how to develop a clear and concise message during a crisis and how to deliver and communicate it effectively.

#### **AVOID THE BLAME GAME**

Problems arise when the message is not developed properly and communicated properly to all of the stakeholders at a facility. People are more understanding if they know the issues at



hand. When not informed they will come to their own conclusions and the blame game begins.

So how is this avoided?

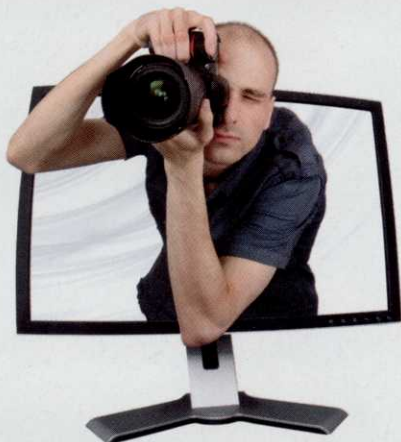
First, define and discuss the challenges that face the golf facility. The entire management and leadership team should be involved these

discussions and their outcomes. Next, as soon as a plan is developed it must be shared with all pertinent individuals – members, customers, staff. This message should address not only golf course maintenance, but all areas impacted by changes in operations.

Next, form a crisis communication team. It

is just as important to share responsibility for the effort as it is to share a unified message. As such, while it's critical for the golf course superintendent be a part of this team, it is imperative that management and ownership be involved, as well.

Given the proper direction the superin-



## Knock, knock... It's a news crew

**H**ave you ever wondered what you would say or do if confronted by the media regarding your golf course? The time to think about that is before they call because now you can develop a strategy and plan to effectively communicate your message.

- Who will be the spokesperson for your facility regarding turf and environmental issues?
- What is the chain of command for releasing information?
- What forms of media and what media outlets and publications do you want to speak to?
- How do you develop a positive relationship before a crisis occurs?

- How do you turn a potential negative into a positive?

Each golf facility should designate the appropriate individual to discuss with the media any questions, concerns, info requests, etc. When it comes to the golf course and environmental issues that person should be the golf course superintendent. It may require approval but the green chairman, GM or club president but that should be known in advance of any crisis. Media requests are usually done directly with the golf course superintendent and the industry publications and outlets. However, when it comes to local and regional newspapers it may require approval at a higher level.

Think about all the possible areas of crisis communication and prepare some bullet point responses. An example may be the use of water for irrigation on a golf course. A good response would be that many golf courses are using effluent water, where available, to be part of a major recycling effort across the country. Additionally, golf courses have a sophisticated irrigation system that monitors weather and uses computer technology to apply water only when and where it is needed. Golf course superintendents have advanced training in irrigation control systems as well as soil physics and chemical properties. Actually, the use of effluent water is environmentally sound as it filters any pharmaceutical contaminants from treated wastewater and allows it to be filtered, through the turf, back to the local aquifers.

Remember to make your remarks brief and targeted. A 30-minute phone call may end up with three sentences of quotes. Additional crisis communication bullet points should be developed for items such as:

- Weather problems such as flooding, tornadoes, hurricanes, ice sheet damage, etc. depending on your susceptibility to these things;
- Today's economy and how it might impact course conditions and I know this is common amongst municipalities;
- Environmental issues including pesticide use and this should include an overall pest management program including IPM and habitat enhancement;
- Overall state of golf, but this should only be dealt with by the golf course superintendent if they have the proper data to share. Otherwise, this is best left to the GM or golf professional.

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tendent can be very creative and develop appropriate strategies to accomplish the goals of the facility. Whether it comes from a finance committee, an owner or management there is usually a request to reduce expenses for golf course maintenance by a certain amount or percentage.

Most superintendents are charged with the responsibility of prioritizing the areas that will be affected. Any significant adjustments in labor or materials will have a definite impact on course conditioning.

The ability to attain the standards that were formerly achieved will be impacted, as well. This will require an in depth analysis of written standards and programs for golf course maintenance.

#### COMMUNICATING THE PLAN

Superintendents have implemented a variety of different labor-saving items that will allow them to cut back on their staffing. These could include raking bunkers three days a week instead of seven, mowing greens with riding greensmowers rather than walking mowers and decreasing mowing frequency. As stated earlier, any and all adjustments will have an impact on the course condition and the perception of the quality of the product the golf course superintendent is producing.

A golf course can still be maintained in a very playable condition "down the middle" even with reductions in your budget. It will take a creative superintendent that has a plan in place. The plan needs to be shared with all of the stakeholders and a part of that plan should include the impact on the golfer.

Once the golfers understand what is happening, why it is happening and what the impact will be they should be much more sympathetic to the challenges the facility is facing.

There are some steps to follow when communicating this plan.

- Explain the state of the facility;
- Describe the short-term plan and adjustments to protect the facility;
- Lay out the long-term plan and overall impact on the golf course;
- Outline what golfers can expect as a result of the changes ; and
- Detail the cost considerations and fiscal responsibility that will keep the golf course profitable.

It's important this new plan is agreed upon by management and owners alike and everyone is supportive of the direction needed to operate effectively.



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## GETTING THE WORD OUT

It's vital to communicate the message in a variety of methods. A special letter from the club president, municipality or owner should be sent out addressing the facility issues including the golf course.

Additional notifications should be placed in newsletters, bulletin boards and signage in the facility's pro shop or first tee. Brief all staff on the situation and make sure they understand who represents the facility as spokespersons. It's also a good idea to convene a meeting of interested parties to allow for questions and answers.

Here's an example of how a typical communication effectively outlines the pertinent issues.

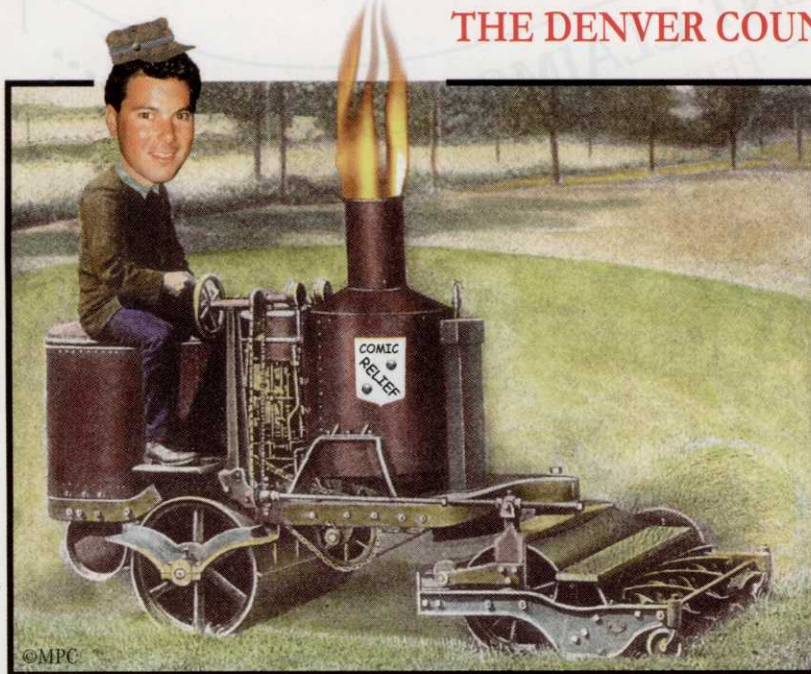
1. Golf rounds have been on an annual 5 percent decline for the last three years.
2. Revenues of the facility are down 18 percent annually and adjustments are necessary to balance our finances.
3. Services will be reduced in areas including our pro shop, dining areas and locker rooms.
4. Hours of service will be affected to best cover the time periods of greatest usage while minimizing or eliminating service in low-use periods.
5. Staffing levels will reflect the current economy and will affect course conditions.
6. Everything is being done to develop new marketing plans to attract business and/or members.
7. While we are addressing cutbacks that are cosmetic it is our intent to protect our greatest asset, the golf course, for the long-term.
8. Effective immediately, we will no longer oversee the entire golf course.
9. We will oversee the tees and fairways only to reduce costs on mowing, water and fertilizer.
10. Greens will be mowed with riding mowers on weekdays and walking mowers on weekends.
11. Fairways will be mowed twice per week rather than three times per week.
12. Rough will be mowed weekly rather than two times per week.
13. Hole locations will be changed five days per week rather than seven.
14. Bunkers will be fully raked on Friday through Sunday and touched up on weekdays.
15. Tree pruning will only be done as needed for safety.
16. Tolerance for disease, insects and weeds will be softened as we are now on a curative program rather than a preventive program.
17. By making the above adjustments we are able to trim our golf course maintenance budget by 18 percent.
18. We will continue to look at ways that will keep our costs in line with minimal impact on our golfers.

## MAKING ADJUSTMENTS

Normally, the communication plan would not include a set of the written standards for the golf course. The standards will be different with the changes mentioned. It is very important to collectively adjust the written standards that the facility has for the golf course. The standards are the measuring tool by which the golf course superintendent is judged. If the standards are not changed then it would be unfair for management or ownership to judge the superintendent based on standards that were produced with a greater set of resources. Be sure the standards are approved by management and ownership.

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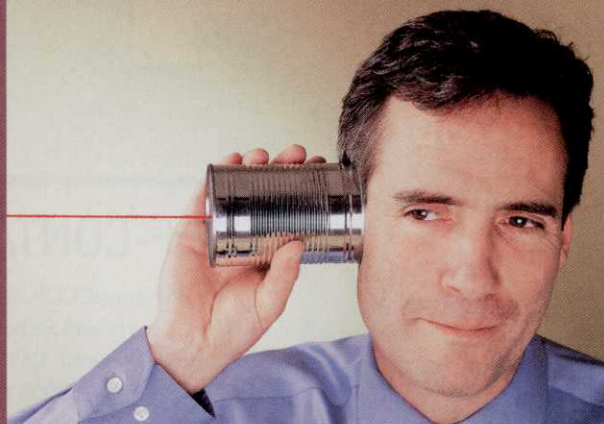
There are any number of strategic mistakes a golf course facility can make in this economy. Some of the more "major" snafus include failing to recognize that adjustments have to be made, not communicating the adjustments, not assessing the long-term impact on cutbacks, not adjusting the course's Golf Course Standards and failing to create a unified message.

I have spoken to a numerous superintendents who say their budgets have been cut dramatically resulting in changes in golf course conditioning.

Some of those individuals have stated that their facilities did not share those cutbacks with golfers/memberships. In addition, player expectations for course conditions were not reduced and adjustments were not made to Golf Course Standards. This is a recipe for disaster for the golf course superintendent.

Even if your golf course is holding its own in this economy, it is prudent to develop a plan to deal with our economic downturn. I

**"Even if your golf course is holding its own in this economy, it is prudent to develop a plan to deal with our economic downturn."**



have worked with facilities to develop cost reductions from 5 percent to 20 percent. Plans do not always need to be implemented, but solid, effective managers need to prepare for worse case scenarios. Like with most plans, there are three phases that include development, implementation and communication.

Tough times call for tough decisions and golfers will understand you are looking out for their facility. Superintendents must play

an active role in developing solutions for the problems our industry is facing, and that includes developing and communicating a clear and effective message of what is being done.

Tell your story well because it may mean your perceived success or failure. **GCI**

*Bruce Williams, CGCS, is the head of Williams Golf Consulting and a frequent contributor to GCI.*

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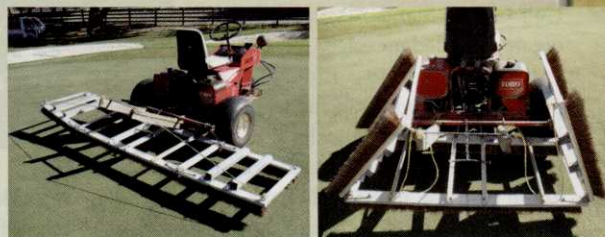
**Terry Buchen**, CGCS, MG, is president of Golf Agronomy International. He's a 41-year, life member of the GCSAA. He can be reached at 757-561-7777 or [terrybuchen@earthlink.net](mailto:terrybuchen@earthlink.net).

## Travels With Terry

Globetrotting consulting agronomist Terry Buchen visits many golf courses annually with his digital camera in hand. He shares helpful ideas relating to maintenance equipment from the golf course superintendents he visits – as well as a few ideas of his own – with timely photos and captions that explore the changing world of golf course management.

### SELF-CONTAINED TOPDRESSING BRUSH

Ken Williams, CGCS, at the Stanford University Golf Course and Seibel Varsity Golf Training Complex in Stanford, Calif., enjoys using the Standard Golf Model #52000 topdressing brush, with two Model #52050 wing brushes, mounted on the back of a 1985 Toro Model #8880 Sand Pro. Tom Thatcher, the former superintendent who is enjoying retirement, developed the idea for the brackets that are two pieces of 2-inch angle iron welded to the lift bar, with two pieces of 1-inch-wide by 1/8-inch-thick flat steel that is screwed to the two 2x4x24-inch boards along with a flat-steel cross brace of the same dimensions. There are three 1 1/2-inch chains attached to the lift arm that lift the main topdressing brush. The boards have two pieces of 1/4-inch diameter yellow nylon rope tied to it and to both of the wing brushes,



with eye hooks, so when the lift arm raises the main brush it raises the wing brushes at the same time. The two wing brushes fold up efficiently and easily for transport. The Toro Sand Pro was outfitted with 21x12x8-inch slick tires available from [www.Tires-Easy.com](http://www.Tires-Easy.com). It took roughly two hours total to design, and about four hours to build and the materials were already in stock.

### THE WINDMEISTER

Brad Chutz, co-owner/superintendent of the Pine Grove Golf Course in Grove City, Pa., challenged his crew to find a better and faster method for removing leaves from the greens and tees. The method they always used was a backpack blower and a three-wheeled, push-type blower which would take hours. To speed up the process, they took an old Toro Sand-Pro with Carlisle 22/1100/8 four-ply turf tires, left the two lifting arms for the rakes in place and drilled two holes 1/2 inch in diameter in each lifting arm. They then took a piece of 1/4-inch-thick, 10x26-inch steel plate and drilled four 1/2-inch-diameter holes to match the holes in the lifting arms, then bolted the 1/4-inch plate to the lifting arms. Next, they took a three-wheeled 1997 Giant Vac walk-behind push blower (\$900 new) and removed the rear wheels leaving the axle in place and the handle bars were removed. The blower was set on the plate, two pieces of 1 1/2-inch angle iron 2 inches long were welded to the plate to set the axles onto and using the engine mounting bolt holes that were used to hold the handle bars in place, and four holes were drilled through the steel plate on that location. With the axles setting in the "V" formed by the angle



iron, the bottom of the engine for the blower was 4 inches above the plate. Using 1/2-inch-diameter pipe, four spacers 4 inches long were cut and the spacers were used to mount the blower to the plate with four 3/8x16x5 bolts. The throttle for the engine was mounted on a bracket under the seat so the operator could control the throttle of the blower without having to get off the unit. The third wheel was left in place on the blower to prevent lowering the blower too far and damaging the turf. With the assembly mounted to the Sand-Pro lift bars, the height of the blower can now be controlled with the hydraulics to be raised or lowered for transport and blowing. This modification has turned a two-person job that would take up to four hours into a one-person job that takes about an hour. The cost was about \$60 and it took about three hours to complete.



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## Studies say that when it comes to maintaining greens, an equal combination of mowing and rolling works best.

By Jason Stahl

**R**ollin', rollin', rollin'... If the song "Rawhide" doesn't play helplessly and mercilessly over and over in your head when you're rolling greens, you're lucky. But if it does, somewhere between the whip cracks and the guitar riffs should be the thought that you're doing your turfgrass good because you've decided to give the mower a rest that day.

Recent studies have shown that a combination of mowing and rolling greens during the summer months is the best strategy for keeping turfgrass healthy. Plus, there are large economic gains, too – depending on if you triplex mow or hand mow.

The studies, according to Dr. John Sorochan of the University of Tennessee, were done to provide hard data behind the USGA and GCSAA's annual recommendations to reduce mowing frequency and raise mower heights to minimize summer stress. "There had never been studies before; this information was always opinion," Sorochan says. "And the USGA says people just know to do this, but we wanted to quantify how, how much and how significant."

The study Sorochan participated in also involved Dr. Jason Henderson of the University of Connecticut, Dr. Doug Karcher of the University of Arkansas and Dr. Tom Nikolai of Michigan State University. Greens of *Poa annua*, Ultra Dwarf and bentgrass were subjected to various schedules of mowing and rolling from June through August to determine the ideal frequency.



# ON A ROLL