

Purchasing is an art

Whether the superintendent is buying materials, services or labor, he must be certain the club is receiving full value for every dollar it spends.

by Robert M. Williams

Superintendent, Bob O'Link G.C., Highland Park, Ill.

Businessmen are generally in agreement that integrity is the foremost ingredient behind the successful management executive. So it is for the modern golf course superintendent also. He has become a vital part of the club's management team and thus responsible for spending large sums of money. Whether he is buying greenkeeping materials, services or labor, he must ensure that the club is receiving full and efficient value for every dollar spent.

After approval of the grounds and greens department budget by the greens committee and the board of directors, the course superintendent is generally authorized to proceed to spend the money as indicated.

In the post war years since 1945, we have seen these budget figures climb from around \$40,000 or \$50,000 to the present figures of anywhere from \$100,000 to \$150,000 for the total annual expenditure for a high standard, private, 18-hole club. This would of course include both the operating and the capital expenditures.

So, it is quite obvious why it is considered so important by the club's officers to make doubly sure their superintendent is a wise and careful planner and spender of the club's money.

WAGES—BIGGEST OUTLAY

Golf course superintendents are spending about 75 per cent of the

course maintenance funds on salaries and wages. This percentage holds pretty true, regardless of the size of the budget. If you use the figures of \$50,000 to \$75,000 for salaries and wages, you are within the "ball park". That is of course to be qualified further as 18-hole, private clubs, in the areas where golf is enjoyed on about a seven-month season.

Getting a day's work for a day's pay is not a bad objective for both the club and the workmen. For too many years past, clubs and superintendents alike have been at fault by not paying rates to men from whom they expected much in return.

Fortunately for everyone, the picture is rapidly changing to where many clubs are now offering their greens staff realistic wages and many fringe benefits that are meeting the competition in allied fields. Paid insurance, uniforms, retirement plans and paid vacations are a few examples of items that can be used to aid the superintendent in procuring the kind of workmen that will give the club full value of their labor dollar.

Anything less than a satisfied workman contributes to inefficiency and a waste of money.

CAREFUL BUDGET

Whether the club's money is spent for commodities as seed, soil, fertilizer, chemicals, labor or a contract asphalt job, the same

basic concepts hold true in any case. Over the years, I have become a strong advocate for good budgeting and we find that it is just as important as a planned guide for the spending of funds as it is in getting the appropriations in the first place.

If the superintendent has made a thorough study of his annual plans for the year ahead, with due consideration to his long range planning as well, he can estimate to within 1 per cent to 2 per cent of his annual expense requirements (barring of course, some unforeseen, abnormal emergency situation).

Armed with a good, well thought out and planned budget in one hand and the authority to spend this fixed amount of money in the other, the thinking superintendent has the battle of stretching dollars half won.

OFF-SEASON BUYING

The winter season is the usual time for administrative planning and it can also be the most appropriate time to do some of your spending. The suppliers are anxious to move materials and to keep their warehousemen busy in the slow season. In addition, the superintendent can make sizeable savings on materials by buying his entire season's requirements as bulk purchases with quantity discounts.

The distributors are using a general practice these days of winter

Continued from page 46

Purchasing Continued from page 44

delivery with a delayed billing to April or May when the golfing season is again under way. Of course, this is only idle talk if one does not have adequate storage space that is both dry and safe from pilferage.

The winter quantity discounts are currently running anywhere from 5 per cent to as much as 15 per cent. And this is no small matter when you consider that expendable course maintenance materials will run around \$10,000 per year on the average. This means a reduction of cost of anywhere from \$500 to \$1,500, which is well worth consideration.

One chemical fungicide manufac-

turer for instance, currently offers one bonus case for every eight cases purchased during the winter months. This is a 12½ per cent reduction amounting to some \$75. Still another example is where the distributor offers a bonus item worth about \$150 for each \$1,000 order placed with him during a certain off-season period.



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Now, only if you anticipate and need one of these items can this arrangement be considered a worthwhile incentive. After all, there is no efficiency in getting a power saw, for instance, if you really don't need it.

UPDATE EQUIPMENT

When it comes to new equipment

purchases, a somewhat different approach should be taken. Today, many clubs have an equipment inventory that represents a replacement cost of roughly \$80,000. Amortizing this figure over an average life expectancy of some 12 years, we come up with a little over \$6,500 per year as an average annual expenditure.

Incidentally, these figures are not "guesstimates" but the approximate average at our club and of several others in our vicinity. As most superintendents are aware, the big question to resolve here is, when is the most efficient and proper time to trade in each piece of equipment? The answer

to this question will differ from one machine to another as well as from one course to another. A good rule of thumb is usually developed by the experienced superintendent at each club.

When either the inconvenience, time lost or cost of repairs due to breakdown becomes a factor of any consequence, it is time to consider replacement. Also, we have found that the rapid improvements in many new pieces of specialized equipment have brought about a demand for items we never heard of only a few years ago.

Additional factors to be considered in equipment purchasing involve trade-in values, identical

specifications to all bidders, demonstrations, a sensible preventive maintenance program and care in the general operation and handling of the equipment.

A philosophy I've often heard repeated by greens committee members regarding new equipment is that, during a relative period of economic prosperity, the grounds equipment should be built up to an efficient and desirable level. Then, during a recession cycle, the club can well stand to tighten its belt for a year or two.

This opinion seems to be shared by a number of clubs in the vicinity.

CONTRACT SERVICES

This is a rather new concept in buying materials and services combined that has been making its way into the golf maintenance picture of late. For example:

- Fairways can now be fertilized by a contractor who furnishes the materials and does the spreading as well, with his equipment.
- Specialized equipment is now being used by landscape contractors who will offer to furnish and plant trees up to 10 and 12 inches in diameter, on your course, at almost any time of the year when the ground is firm enough to hold the equipment.
- Helicopter spraying of trees and turfgrass areas is now a reality here in the Chicago area through contract services.
- Small asphalt contractors offer complete golf car path installation services.
- Specialized tree expert contractors can move in large crews to complete a pruning or removal project in a hurry.

Clubs are seldom attempting to do their own reconstruction or renovation work anymore. They are keeping their regular crew solely for maintenance and accomplishing the extra jobs with contract services. Even labor can be purchased by day-to-day contract suppliers.

Continued on page 98



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So, here is a new area that the superintendent has available to work in so that he may more effectively spend the club's money.

Within the scope of contractors' services we must be mindful of the many other ramifications of bidding, such as insurance certificates, specifications, "free" engineering, etc. All of these demand the attention of a capable superintendent trained in the art of spending.

SELECTING SUPPLIERS

The buying of materials, products and services for the club, brings us into contact with the sales representatives, the distributors, the contractors and the manufacturers. So, as night follows day, where we have people, we have people problems existing.

Salesmen and factory representatives can take up much of the superintendent's valuable time. Occasionally this time spent can be very rewarding, but, far too often, it

encroaches upon an already tight schedule. The super who announces the time limit to the salesman, or who requests seeing salesmen at certain hours, or even by appointment, has gone a long way towards eliminating this potential problem.

The experienced superintendent generally does his purchasing of materials through the old tried and true supply houses that offer him a "satisfaction guaranteed" policy on all of his requirements. After all, this type of a distributor carries large and expensive inventories of all course materials so that he may serve your every need. They also have prompt delivery service and have a good-will or liaison man calling on you periodically to make sure that their products are performing as they should.

Unfortunately, the superintendents are also being pressured by rather unscrupulous fly-by-night sales representatives who operate pretty much out of the trunks of their cars. They are little more than order-takers who operate between the manufacturers and the

Continued on page 106

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Purchasing Continued from page 98

customers. These fellows know every angle, and remind you of the old time pitch-men. Often times their products are untried and unproven and are usually priced two to three times more than they should be. The knowledgeable superintendent excuses them politely and quickly and they are normally quick to get the message that they are not needed or wanted.

In the final analysis, there is little difference in the art of spending the club's money or in the art of accomplishing all of the other many features of the golf course superintendent's profession.

He must start out with a high degree of personal integrity and self-discipline, coupled with a sound business-like approach. His objective should never waver from serving his club to the best of his ability to the end that for every dollar spent, the club can expect to receive more than a dollar's value. □

About the author—Robert M. Williams is the golf course superintendent at the "men-only" Bob O'Link Golf Club, in Highland Park, Ill. Bob has worked in all phases of club operation and went to the Turf Management School at the University of Mass. After serving in the European theater during WW II when he rose to the rank of captain in the combat engineers, he returned to Ohio State U. in 1945. From 1947 to 1958 Williams was superintendent at the Beverly CC in Chicago. In 1959 he was selected to head up the course maintenance program at Bob O'Link. Bob has served for six years on the GCSAA board, being the International president in 1958. For many years, he has been an active speaker at the many university turf-grass conferences and a regular author of articles on course management for the various publications serving the golf course complex. Bob is a native of Illinois, being born in Lake Forest, where he and his family now reside.

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