

My old pal Bubba called the other day in a panic. He was very worried about his eyeballs. You may remember Bubba: He's a dirt-under-the-fingernails, grass-growin', cup-cuttin' superintendent.

He does not possess a single necktie, but he is the proud owner of a hot Pentium III computer with high-speed DSL Internet access and more bells and whistles than a Lionel train set.

"Jonesy," Bubba said breathlessly, "everybody seems to want my eyeballs. All these companies are calling and saying, 'We'll do whatever it takes to get your eyeballs.' I'm almost afraid to go to bed at night for fear they'll sneak in and steal 'em right outta my head."

I chuckled paternally and told Bubba not to fret. "It's just a 'Net-speak way of saying they want your eyeballs glued to their Web sites," I explained. "They want you to buy your supplies over the Internet through them. The more eyeballs they get, the more money they make. There are nearly 10 of these operations now and there will soon be a dozen more. It's going to be an all-out fight to see who can dominate the golf course e-business market."

"Oh," said Bubba thoughtfully. Then he quietly added, "Now I'm *really* afraid."

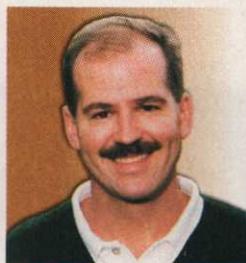
If you're a superintendent with a computer, they want your eyeballs, too. And it's not just hot new portal sites like Golfsat, Greentrac and e-Greenbiz. It's also your favorite industry suppliers, distributors and, in all likelihood, GCSAA. What's driving this sudden interest in selling online? Three things: greed, fear and guessing.

Greed (which is not necessarily a bad thing in my book) is bringing the new portal players to the market. These are largely start-ups or spin-offs with no previous experience in our segment. They have steep learning curves, but they also have deep pockets thanks to Silicon Valley's love for throwing venture capital at an untapped market. Most will fail, but the eventual victor will claim the spoils: market dominance and a lucrative public offering or buyout.

Fear is driving existing golf course suppliers to establish their own e-commerce capabilities with the utmost haste. Companies are terrified that if don't jump on this bandwagon

Invasion of the Eyeball Snatchers

BY PAT JONES



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now, they'll be history in two years. For similar reasons, GCSAA is likely to take the e-biz plunge. The association doesn't want to miss out on a potential gravy train since e-commerce has the potential to erode revenues from its trade show.

Finally, the players are **guessing** e-commerce will rapidly emerge as a major link in the supply chain. They're also guessing that higher margins from direct sales (bypassing distributors) will quickly recoup up their e-biz investment. Lastly, they're guessing that you will actually log on and buy stuff.

And that, friends, is the question: *If they build it, will you come?*

My thinking is that many of you eventually will, particularly when you need commodity supplies, replacement parts and other items that don't require any tire kicking. Cost-control pressures are high, and buying online generally offers a discount. More of you are computer savvy (and the kids flooding out of turf schools certainly are). Finally, the idea of one-stop shopping — and fewer sales calls — has appeal.

But what about service? What about local support? What about the value of dealing with someone face to face? How can you give all of that up just to save a few bucks and streamline the process a little? All good questions, but travel agents and bookshop owners were saying the same things a couple of years ago before e-commerce sent their industries ass over teakettle.

Will the same fate befall us? Anyone who says they know the answer to that question is a liar. All I know is that the era of e-business has arrived and you'd better grab your balls — er, I mean eyeballs — and hold on tight.

Pat Jones is the editor/publisher of Golfdom. He can be reached at 440-891-3126 or pjones@advanstar.com