



**Consultants have a place in the industry, but it's elementary to know who you're dealing with before hiring one**

# The Search for Sound Advice

**BY LARRY AYLWARD**  
EDITOR

**T**he moral of this story is as unmistakable as a push-up green: A good consultant can help you as much as a bad consultant can hurt you.

Those who have worked with consultants will tell you that good ones can only make you more capable superintendents. Bad consultants, however, can take you down for the count.

"Consultants are there to make you better," says Jim Ferrin, CGCS at Whitney Oaks GC in Sacramento, Calif. "I use them to help make me a better business person. I've been able to save money because they come up with programs that can enhance the facility."

"There's a fear of consultants and rightfully so," contends Mark Clark, CGCS for Troon Golf & CC in Scottsdale, Ariz. "I've seen a lot of dead bodies follow some of these guys around."

Most superintendents agree that good

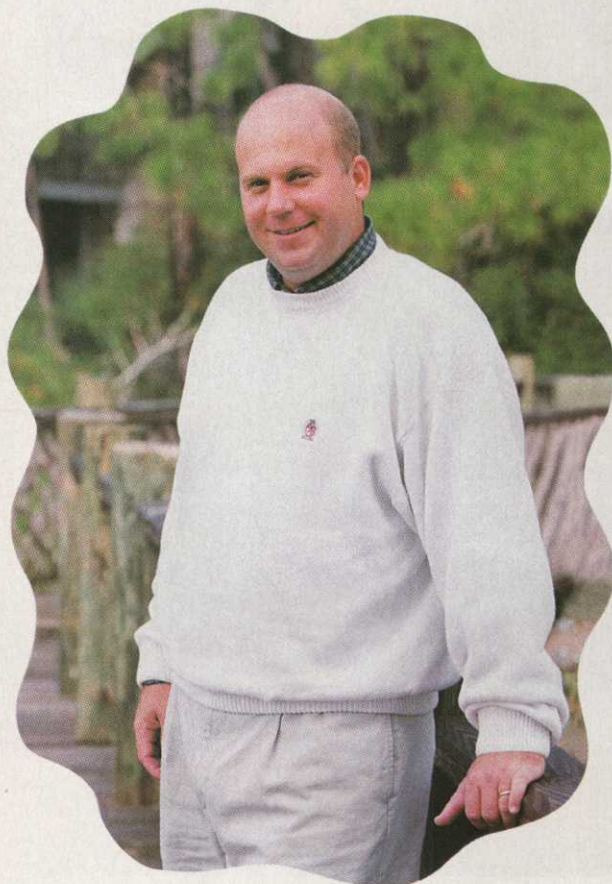
consultants have a place in the industry. What William Bengeyfield reported in the *USGA Green Section Record* in 1976 remains true today:

"Turfgrass consultants are a product of today's technology and golfer demands," wrote Bengeyfield, the former editor of the USGA publication. "There's a need to share and exchange information among all those interested in professional turfgrass management."

"The truism, 'No one has all the  
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ARTVILLE





**“Find someone who understands your objectives and is going to support you.”**

**—Allan Pulaski,  
The Landings Club**

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answers’ is more applicable today than ever before.”

But what makes a good consultant, and how can you identify the profile of a bad consultant? Let us count the ways.

Allan Pulaski, director of golf course and grounds maintenance at The Landings Club in Savannah, Ga., says a good consultant is foremost a team player.

“Find someone who understands your objectives and is going to support you,” says Pulaski, who was interviewing irrigation consultants in August. “My objective is to find the best team player. You need someone who’s going to walk in stride with you.”

Good consultants also won’t tell you just what you want to hear, Ferrin says.

“They will tell you if you’re not doing a good job,” he adds. “They’ll tell you what you don’t want to hear.”

But good consultants won’t tell others — most importantly, your supervisors and peers — what you don’t want them to hear about agronomic problems on your golf course.

When a superintendent and a good consultant meet with the general manager, the green committee chairman and the board of directors, a superintendent knows what that consultant is going to say because the two are united in their views. “[The consultant] won’t pull a 180 on you and say things you don’t agree with,” Pulaski says.

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### **USGA Wields Powerful Name**

For years, USGA’s Green Section has been a popular consulting service for superintendents. And from a political standpoint, USGA consultants wield plenty of power.

While superintendents are the agronomic voices for their respective courses, most realize that green committee members and owners deeply respect the USGA’s opinions. Throughout his career, Jim Ferrin, CGCS at Whitney Oaks GC in Sacramento, Calif., has lobbied members to do this and that to the golf course. But on many occasions, they only conceded when they heard the same things from a USGA consultant.

“In terms of a political element, the USGA has been wonderful,” Ferrin says. “USGA is a powerful entity and should be respected.”

While Ferrin has found the USGA helpful, he prefers the more specific information offered by private consultants that he has hired. Mark Clark, CGCS for Troon Golf & CC in

Scottsdale, Ariz., says his peers have criticized the USGA for its lack of in-depth information, but he still believes the organization is superior.

“A lot of people don’t like the USGA because they don’t think the USGA tells them anything,” Clark says. “But I disagree.”

Clark prefers USGA consultants because they have visited so many courses and have excellent experience.

“When they get to our course, they have all kinds of tid-bits about things that are working and not working,” Clark says. “That’s the kind of stuff I like to hear.”

Clark also notes that USGA’s name carries clout. He says his members don’t know the names of independent consultants, but they know the USGA.

“I’d just as soon pay money and have the USGA’s name stamped on Troon CC,” Clark says. “I’ll get more bang for the buck.”

**— Larry Aylward**





**“[A good consultant] will tell you what you don’t want to hear.”**

– Jim Ferrin  
Whitney Oaks GC

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Good consultants possess solid agronomic backgrounds, and they aren’t afraid to get down and dirty — literally, Ferrin says. More than that, they aren’t afraid to tell you that you need to do this and that, and they will follow up with you to make sure you do.

“They will call you and get on your case,” Ferrin notes. “Those are the kind of consultants I want.”

A good consultant also understands the ins and outs of your course and the demographics of its location, Ferrin says. Just because a consultant has an impeccable reputation doesn’t mean he can slack off in preparation. A good consultant knows how much a course can afford to spend to upgrade. “A good consultant knows how to find the right equation for you,” Ferrin says.

“[The person] can enhance the programs you’re having success with, and direct you into other programs to offset failures,” Clark adds.

Good consultants can also help you save money. For instance, a salesman might try to sell a superintendent a new supercoated slow-release fertilizer that will work wonders on the golf course. But a good consultant might advise the superintendent that the course doesn’t need a fancy fertilizer and can be spruced up by simply adjusting mower heights, Ferrin says.

“So then I’m paying roughly \$1,800 every other month for fertilizer rather than \$7,000,” Ferrin says. “The aesthetics are just as good, and the grass is as hardy as ever.”

So what makes a bad consultant? The last thing a superintendent wants is a fly-by-night consultant who provides him with a canned spiel and is never heard from again. Likewise, a good consultant is genuinely concerned about a superintendent’s efforts to improve the course and will tweak his program to fit the superintendent’s agronomic and fiscal needs.

Clark is cynical about some consultants. He says he has seen at least six superintendents lose their jobs in the last five years over the backlash caused by consultants’ accounts of what superintendents weren’t doing to maintain their courses. “What happens is upper management hears what a consultant has to

### The Consummate Consultant

Jim Ferrin, CGCS at Whitney Oaks GC in Sacramento, Calif., lists his qualifications for a top agronomic advisor:

- ▶ Has a background in golf and possesses the agronomic sense to make decisions to benefit the business of the club and the conditions of the course.
- ▶ Someone with whom to compare notes.

- ▶ Doesn’t just tell you what you want to hear.
- ▶ Makes proper determinations.
- ▶ Understands your financial limits.
- ▶ Follows up with you to see how things are going.
- ▶ Makes you more organized.
- ▶ Someone you can trust.



say and thinks the superintendent is an idiot," Clark insists.

Clark isn't down on all consultants and agrees that many want to help superintendents improve their courses, which would improve their standing with members, green committees and owners. "Some consultants are good at doing that, and kudos to them," he says.

There are other circumstances that can get superintendents in trouble with consultants, Clark says. For instance, some superintendents may be under pressure from their general managers to hire consultants. But the superintendents don't realize the general managers might

## **Superintendents shouldn't let their egos get in the way of taking advice.**

be using the consultants to get the superintendents fired. A good consultant would figure out such a scenario and walk away from it, Clark says.

There are things superintendents can do to make working with consultants more constructive. First, superintendents shouldn't let their egos get in the way of taking advice.

"You have to be willing to admit that you don't have a patent on all of the brains in the world," Pulaski says. "You're insecure if you're not willing to ask for help and find a better way to do something."

Superintendents can benefit more from consultants by letting them figure out a course's imperfections on their own, Ferrin says. That way, superintendents will discover if consultants have anything worthwhile to say.

"One thing I've learned is that you need to let consultants do the work," says Ferrin, acknowledging that he once did the consultant's work for him. "Let them make the proper determinations."

The bottom line: Hiring a consultant is like buying a car. You had better do your homework and know how it works.

"Consultants have a place in our business, Clark says, "but you have to know who you're dealing with."

"You have to be careful," Pulaski adds. "I'm sure there are some consultants who can be influenced by green committee

chairmen a lot quicker than they can be influenced by superintendents."

Consultants and other advisers should take a cue from Samuel Taylor Coleridge, a 19th century English poet and theologian, who said of offering advice: "Like snow; the softer it falls, the longer it dwells upon, and the deeper it sinks into the mind." ■

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