Into The Lion's Den In Lawrence

BY PAT JONES

A few weeks back, I walked through the doors of GCSAA's Headquarters in Lawrence, Kan., with mixed feelings. On one hand, I'd spent nine years working for the association and was excited to see former co-workers and visit my old stomping grounds.

On the other hand, given that *Golfdom* hasn't exactly been a cheerleader for the GCSAA, I also felt a little like I was walking into the lion's den.

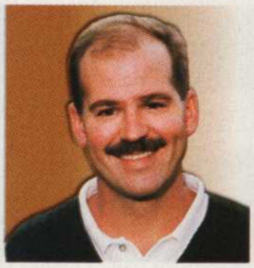
But, the lion — in the guise of CEO Steve Mona — was as charming and forthright as usual. I emerged from the GCSAA Media Roundtable unscathed, though a bit bemused by the whole affair. The roundtable consisted of a bunch of us golf industry media types listening to Mona and his staff present updates on programs and issues. Here are a few highlights:

■ The online "reverse auction" part of the association's e-commerce pilot program appears to be DOA. It will likely be terminated in light of the firestorm of criticism from manufacturers, distributors and members. "It was the right thing to try it," Mona said, citing the association's interest in being on the ground floor of an e-business boom. But, contrary to my suggestion in this column two months ago, he insisted, "We never viewed this as a financial panacea for the organization." That's good, because 3 percent of nothing (which is what e-commerce has become in many instances) is still nothing.

■ The numbers were a little fuzzy, but Career Development director Kim Heck projects that only about 7 percent of superintendents leave a position because of "involuntary termination" — on par with the national average.

In short, despite a pervasive feeling that superintendents are fired with great frequency, statistics suggest job security in the profession is about as good as most — and it's a hell of a lot better than for dot-commers or steelworkers.

■ Later this year, GCSAA will officially announce the formation of a political action committee to build access and awareness among key legislators. The PAC will funnel campaign contributions through local chapters into the coffers of golf-friendly congressional candidates. I think it's an OK idea in theory, but I wonder where they'll get the dollars. I quietly asked a few executives of leading industry suppliers whether they'd help fund a GCSAA PAC and they all basically said "no way" (once they'd stopped laughing).



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Which, of course, brings us to the central issue: GCSAA's reliance on industry to fund the lion's share of its operations. Between the recent departure of several executives, the disharmony caused by the PDI debate and the e-commerce debacle, many key companies are scratching their heads about the association.

If you add in lousy weather this spring and a weakened economy, it becomes even harder for industry to justify supporting the national at the same astonishing levels it has in the past five years.

"Every time they come here to see us, they have their hands out for something new," says one longtime industry executive who asked not to be identified. "It's gotten to be kind of comical. We actually take bets on how much dough they'll ask for."

The latest funding "opportunity" is the 75th anniversary celebration set for next month. From what leaders at major companies tell me, GCSAA staff have thus far found few takers for donations in the mid five-figure range to underwrite the cost of what the industry perceives to be a "big self-congratulatory party."

So, the lion of Lawrence, along with his pride — all 120 of them — are facing a new and largely self-inflicted challenge: How can the association continue to implement new programs when the people who pay the bills are beginning to balk? Short of holding a really big bake sale, maybe its time to slow down, take stock and listen carefully to what members — and industry — are saying.

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