

Over the years, I've seen plenty of knee-jerk, shoot-from-the-hip journalism which labels golf courses as toxic cesspools. Even if reporters don't explicitly say we're polluting the environment, they pretend that we're automatically the world's worst polluters because we use pesticides and fertilizers.

In many stories, reporters discuss issues like run-off and pollution as if they're given facts rather than suppositions that need to be proven. After all, the antigolf charges have been repeated so often (and challenged so infrequently by competent members of our profession) that reporters assume the charges are true without any proof.

Those assumptions won't disappear on their own. Therefore, it's time we remodel the way the popular (as opposed to the trade) press portrays what we do for a living.

We often focus too much on just doing our jobs and letting the press coverage take care of itself. As a result, the only time we react to faulty reporting is after some really onerous story has generated concern. By then, we're on the defensive and looking awful.

What if local superintendent chapters developed working relationships with their local media to educate them about the real world of golf course maintenance? You may find some local reporters are zealots, but most of them try to do the professional thing without letting personal prejudices get in the way.

I had two recent experiences here in Florida, one with a radio station and one with a newspaper, which convinced me it's worth our effort to respond vigorously to negative stories in the media. It's also worth it to work with (and become reliable sources for) reporters.

In the first case, a superintendent heard a canned show on National Public Radio called the "90-Second Naturalist." The commentator basically inferred that the Indian River Lagoon was being degraded by the practices of area golf courses. The superintendent, who has a course on the river, called the station, set up an interview and took the reporter on a tour of his operation. Less than 30 minutes into the visit, this lady said — and I quote — "I've seen more wildlife on your course than on any nature tour I've ever taken."

Make Local Media Friends, Not Foes

BY JOEL JACKSON



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He showed her the buffer zones, the native plantings, how run-off is retained and on and on. We are waiting for her follow-up program to air, and we're glad she saw the other side of the story.

The second case involved a call from a local newspaper reporter. She was working on a series on Florida's water "crisis," and she wanted to know how many Florida golf courses used reclaimed water. I didn't have the data handy, but I suggested several possible sources.

We talked about golf course water use and maintenance in general. She wasn't antagonistic, but she did start the conversation by repeating all the standard big water user, runoff and pollution myths we hear so often.

I was able to quote water management statistics that revealed golf courses only used 2.6 percent of the water consumed daily in Florida. I gave her the Web site addresses where she could find the data herself to verify it.

Within a week, I found the reclaimed water information on the Web and forwarded it to her. I also helped her set up a photo opportunity to show golf course irrigation in action. All of this took maybe one hour and three phone calls.

The result was that golf's write-up in the next article was positive, balanced and showed our real position concerning water consumption. The article also talked about superintendents being educated professionals and efficient water managers.

There are real opportunities to develop working relationships with your local media. The time is ripe to go on the offensive with verifiable factual information to become a valuable source instead of an erroneous target.

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