

We get a lot of interesting “pitches” from public relations people. A pitch is typically a call or an e-mail suggesting a story idea. Usually, they’d like us to do a piece on their client’s new turf gadget or potion or — if they’re a wee bit misinformed about *Golfdom’s* readership — a revolutionary new plutonium-covered ball that’s guaranteed to fly 400 yards, never slice, cure the common cold and bring lasting peace to the Middle East.

Despite my cynicism about clever or even wildly exaggerated story pitches, I have to admit that I was intrigued when a PR person working for Bayer Environmental Sciences recently called and said, “You need to talk to Dan about the purple cow.”

What? OK ... Sure. Huh?

I eventually figured out that she meant Dan Carrothers, Bayer’s vice president of sales and a major player in the turf chemical biz. Baffled but curious, I dialed his number and, deciding that it must be some sort of coded password, whispered “Purple Cows” over the phone. Predictably, being a responsible adult, he hung up on me.

I called back and said, “Hey Dan, don’t hang up. It’s Pat and I want to know about the ‘purple cow.’”

Relieved that he wasn’t being harassed by some deranged cattle freak, Carrothers put it in simple terms for me. “Say you’re driving down a long country road and see hundreds of plain old cows in the fields along the way. After a while, a cow is pretty much a cow and you tune them out ... until you glance over and see a *purple* cow. That will get your attention. In other words, in a crowded marketplace where companies and products may seem the same, you have to stand out from the herd ... just like a purple cow.”

Interesting, I said, but what the heck does this have to do with golf? “We’re in a maturing market where there are lots of products competing for a share of the superintendent’s budget,” Carrothers said. “We’re also seeing generic companies offering no-frills alternatives supposedly at a lower price. So we have to do something more than just offer good stuff. We

The Power of the Purple Cow

BY PAT JONES



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have to be like that purple cow in the mind of customers by doing something special to give them value beyond just product performance.”

At Bayer, according to Carrothers, that means a renewed emphasis on field salespeople who consult with and support customers rather than just taking orders. The effort he describes goes beyond turf quality to encompass research and development, training, education and career enhancement. In short, Carrothers is proposing something more like an ongoing partnership with superintendents to build and keep their loyalty to Bayer.

I think this is an emerging trend, and I’m hearing similar things from a number of forward-thinking companies, including some notable Bayer competitors (although no one else has described it as colorfully). Today, as traditional sources of information and support (extension services, attendance at chapter meetings) are eroding because of budget and time constraints, progressive companies are stepping in to fill the void. Why? Because they want to become more “intimate” with you.

The idea is to build a close customer relationship that goes beyond just price and product performance. It’s certainly not a new concept but, frankly, in an era when many young superintendents find themselves facing challenges for which limited experience hasn’t prepared them, this seems like a welcome approach.

It’ll be interesting to see how many more suppliers adopt this strategy over the next few years. In the long run, it may be that superintendents who seek out and take advantage of the value these companies bring to the table will come to enjoy the taste of the milk from the purple cow.

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