

The Idea Factory

Ever wonder where course accessory companies get their ideas?

They often get their most profitable ideas from *you*

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John Kelly, director of marketing for Standard Golf, recently flipped through his catalog when a product on page 60 caught his eye. He smiled when he looked at the Drag Brush (Part No. 52000) because it reminded him of the superintendent who brought the idea to Standard: Paul Panek, who worked at a course in Iowa at the time (Kelly believes he is now retired).

Kelly says the Drag Brush was revolutionary when it first entered the market in 1980. It replaced the metal drag mat used at the time and did a more effective job at working top-dressing into the greens while eliminating the damage the metal mat caused. It was also used to stand up runners prior to mowing, which helped control thatch. Its success is evident in the fact that the product is still going strong after 23 years.

"It's been one of the most successful products we've ever marketed that came from a superintendent," Kelly says. "It was the perfect example of how superintendents will tell you what accessories they need — if only you're willing to listen to them."

From beginning to end, superintendents provide valuable insights for accessory manufacturers that help them make crucial business decisions. Some, like Panek, provide actual product ideas. Others serve as unofficial advisors to companies trying to fill a niche or improve existing products. Finally, before the products hit the shelves, superintendents are asked to use their courses as test sites to make sure the accessories work as planned before they're sold.

Through each stage of the process, it's the ideas of superintendents that push the ideas forward.

Where the ideas come from

Shirley Anderson, sales manager at Bayco Golf Products, says superintendents provide many of the new ideas for her company.

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"I would say at least 50 percent of our new product ideas come from people who are out in the field taking care of courses on a daily basis," Anderson says. "Sometimes they call us directly. Others contact our distributors. We love to hear from them."

When Bayco receives an idea, it makes a prototype and sends it to the superintendent to test, Anderson says. As hard as it is to believe, Anderson says Bayco has never turned down an idea.

"You can never tell how many people need a product until you go into production," Anderson says. "Once you make it once — the hard way — you figure out what you have to do to make it affordable. If one superintendent needs it, chances are there are others who will buy it."

That's why Great Lakes Golf Products periodically surveys superintendents to find out what's missing from the company's portfolio, says Matt Morse, president and owner of the company.

"We'd be foolish not to get our end-users involved," Morse says. "They have a huge impact on what we do."

Morse says Great Lakes doesn't have anything as formal as an advisory board because it costs too much. But he does have a closely held group of superintendents in his hometown of Milwaukee whom he visits when he has a product idea.

Superintendents call Great Lakes with product ideas three or four times a year, Morse says. Some of the products are too cost-prohibitive to bring to market, but he remembers one call that led to one of the company's most successful products.

"We got a call from a superintendent who was making his own tee markers from tree limbs on his course," Morse says. "The problem was that the natural markers didn't hold up well, and he was constantly having to do extra maintenance to keep them looking nice.

"So he asked if we could mold something for him that would look natural but be more durable," he adds. "We did, and now our log tee marker is one of our most popular items."

How long does it take?

Steve Garske, president of Par Aide, says it can take anywhere from two months to more

than a year from the time the company gets an idea until the company brings it to market.

"If we have to do some tooling to make a product, that takes time," Garske says. "If there's no retooling, we can generally get something done more quickly."

Garske says Par Aide has three criteria to decide whether to bring a product to market:

- it has to be functional;
- it has to either improve the ease with which superintendents do their jobs or improve the quality of work they do; and
- it helps superintendents provide an even better playing experience for their customers.

"We don't do things just to make money," Garske says. "We do things because it's going to make a difference in superintendents' lives."

Garske says it can cost up to \$100,000 to create a product over a year and bring it to market, but he says he doesn't always worry about financial payback in the short term.

"[On] some products, you don't get a payback, and we understand that," Garske says. "Our attitude is that if you can do something that makes [superintendents' lives] easier, it helps the rest of your line, and you do it because you need to do it."

Testing, testing ...

Once the prototypes of products are ready to go, each company relies on a group of superintendents to test the products for any flaws. Kelly says Standard Golf has nearly eight sites around the country at the moment.

"Every product needs to be tested, and we have a group of superintendents we like to work with," Kelly says. "You have to have them in different parts of the country."

Morse agrees that testing is critical. "You want to make sure everything works for as broad a spectrum of superintendents as possible."

Given how important superintendents are to the process across the board, Garske says it's important to build trust with customers.

"That's one of the best reasons to go to trade shows, field days and local association gatherings," he says. "We need to be in touch with our customers and find out what they need. If we get new product ideas from them, that's a great bonus. We hope the relationship is an exchange of ideas between accessory manufacturers and superintendents and is beneficial to everyone." ■



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