

They have multiplied like rabbits, only “they” aren’t furry, funny or lovable. They seem to enjoy faxing silly introductory letters to pros, superintendents and general man-

agers, and they have never met a voice mail they didn’t love telling their life stories to. They carry little identification cards (which you should always ask to see). “They” are ranking panelists.

They have topped the 1,000 mark with directives to evaluate the resistance-to-scoring greatness, conditioning precision and “walk-in-the-park” charm of your course. And supposedly they know greatness when they see it — especially when they are comped rounds.

Many facilities have grown weary of panelists’ requests for access, going so far as to establish elaborate policies to deal with the herd. Others engage in creative phone-tag charades, sending panelists yo-yoing between the pro, general manager and an accounting office answering machine in between. Still others in need of publicity welcome the pack, offering perks every an International Olympic Committee member would envy.

Unsure just how to deal with all of these panelists? Here are a few guidelines that will help you separate the real students from the posers.

The wannabe-ranked course

So you want to be considered for one of those Best New awards or the Top 100? Be prepared to roll out the red carpet. Besides deep-tissue (ego) massaging and a yardage book, free food and wine will earn big points with certain rankers.

Legend has it that a 2003 magazine-organized gathering of panelists couldn’t get enough of the free Pro-V1’s and pricey fermented grape during a lavish post-round panelist celebration. You’ll be shocked to learn that this little glutton-fest took place in the quaint town of Las Vegas.

And remember, even if you have just opened the second coming of St. Andrews, a paid green fee is the quickest way to a lower-than-deserved panelist score.

The little-hope-of-being-ranked course

You are a quiet place, providing a nice service for your customers. The panelists only call when

What to Do With All These Panelists?

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD



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they can’t get on the purported-to-be-more desirable courses in town. Your policy is simple. You’d be happy to host the panelist and his pals, but you must take a credit card in advance because you’ve had a few cancellations lately.

Sit back and savor that dial tone.

The doesn’t-care-about-awards course

There’s some sadistic, pain-loving gene in all golfers. So nothing warms a panelist’s heart like hearing that he can only play at certain times. If you whip the panelist into believing he is blessed to receive some undesirable time (Monday at 3 p.m.), he might just think he’s lucky to play your fine course and vote accordingly.

If you work for a private club and don’t want the hassle, tell a panelist it’s the club’s policy that a guest must play with a member. If the panelist persists, ask for his ranking supervisor’s number because it’s club policy to confirm all panelist rounds with editors. You won’t hear back.

The somewhere-in-between course

There is one way to tell if a panelist is actually interested in evaluating your course (as opposed to merely longing for free golf). If the panelist calls to ask if he could just walk your course to study the design, you actually have a student on your hand. Welcome that panelist. Tell him to bring his clubs, and maybe, just maybe, you’ll be able to slip him in.

Because that is a panelist trying to do his job — evaluating course architecture — as opposed to evaluating (free) course access.

Geoff Shackelford is teaching a one day Harvard Design School seminar on golf course restoration with architect Brian Silva on March 31. For more information, go to <http://www.gsd.harvard.edu> or email Shackelford at geoffshackelford@aol.com.