

Off The Fringe

Jake Pledges Six Sigma

**BUSINESS STRATEGY HELPS
COMPANY WITH QUALITY CONTROL**

By Larry Aylward, Editor in Chief

Jacobsen President Dan Wilkinson used a quote from Arnold Palmer to kick off a talk he gave to business magazine editors at the company's Charlotte, N.C., headquarters in October.

"The condition of the golf course is the battlefield upon which golf facilities will win or lose in today's ultra-competitive environment," Wilkinson quoted The King as saying.

Wilkinson is well aware that the golf course market is undergoing a stock market-like correction of sorts after overbuilding in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The net growth of 18-hole golf course openings in the United States in 2006 was minus 26.5.

"From our perspective, this isn't a good thing," Wilkinson said. "If we want to grow, we have to deliver a product that provides better performance to the customer."

That's why Wilkinson takes Palmer's

quote to heart ... and head. He knows he can't afford not to react to the market's situation. So Wilkinson decided to introduce Six Sigma, a modern management strategy, to the company's operations.

Six Sigma has gained popularity in the business world for its quality of control mechanisms. It may be gaining ground as a popular approach in the golf industry. Six Sigma is a set of practices originally developed by Motorola in 1986 to systematically improve processes by eliminating defects. Six Sigma stresses that manufacturing and business processes can be measured, analyzed, improved and controlled. Six Sigma at many organizations simply means a measure of quality that strives for near perfection.

When Wilkinson came to Jacobsen in 2005, he spent considerable time with other members of the senior leadership team discussing what the manufacturer of mowers, aerators and other golf course equipment needed to improve on to better serve its customers. They decided Six Sigma would play a role in that process.

At Jacobsen, Wilkinson says Six Sigma meets head on with customer

service. "It's a very defined process that gets us to what ultimately is a result that's customer driven," he says. "What we've done is [implement] our Six Sigma methodology into our product development process so we can really deliver the performance our customers are expecting."

Six Sigma plays a few different roles at Jacobsen, Wilkinson says. "One is the focus on lean — of taking cost and variation out of the manufacturing process," he says. "Another is what we call DMAIC, which is an acronym for Define, Measure, Analyze, Improve and Control. That's about taking a look at the existing process you have ... improving it and putting a control plan in place."

Six Sigma is also playing a role in Jacobsen's product development testing. In fact, Six Sigma has brought back an intensive approach to product development testing that has been missing from the company for several years, Wilkinson says, noting that company personnel realized that a mower produced in the southeast United States might not operate the same on turfgrass in southeast Europe.

"It used to be that we could design something and test it here in Charlotte or around the Southeast and then we'd send it out," Wilkinson says. "Now we're doing a lot more robust testing. ... We've begun testing our products around the globe. We're testing them on courses in Europe, Asia, Australia and North America."

It's no secret Jacobsen had some customer service issues before Wilkinson arrived, specifically with problems refilling part orders with its dealers. Basically, things were getting lost in the shuffle.

Six Sigma has also impacted this segment of Jacobsen's operations. John Whittington, Jacobsen's distribution center manager, provided a tour of the center and talked about the improvements ►



Jacobsen's John Whittington talks about the improvements the company has made with its parts refilling

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Business Tip of the Month

Quotable

"I can always tell when the Chase is about to start because of that awful feeling I get in the pit of my stomach. But playing golf definitely relaxed me. It really improved my state of mind."

— *NASCAR driver Jimmie Johnson to Sports Illustrated on how he's learned to chill away from the race-track. (The "Chase" is the several races that combine the Nextel Cup series or the Chase for the Cup. Johnson won the Cup in November for the fourth straight year.)*

"It would be unwise and illegitimate to say that we've achieved environmental success as an industry. A practical approach is to assess where you are and strive to get better every day."

— *Greg Lyman, Director of Environmental Programs for the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America.*

Jacobsen has made in its parts refilling operation, which focus on efficiency and safety, among other things. That said, Wilkinson admits Jacobsen is still fighting a negative perception from superintendents on the parts-refilling front.

"It's a battle I fight every day," he said. "I take it very personal." ■

Proactive About Pesticides

Superintendents can help themselves by educating the public

Golf course superintendents should expect public scrutiny to increase in coming years in regard to their use of pesticides on golf courses. Even though superintendents use pesticides responsibly, the current environment might require them to address questions concerning pesticide usage.

In fact, superintendents can help themselves and the industry they represent by being proactive and educating the public about how they use pesticides sensibly. The public needs to understand that many superintendents are formally educated, have many years of field experience with pesticide use, and understand the importance of using pesticides at the proper rates and not over using in order to maintain the reliability of the chemical.

Local superintendents could join together to make a formal presentation on golf course maintenance and how pesticides play a role in turf management at city council meetings. The Responsible Industry for a Sound Environment (RISE) reports that there has been "a significant increase in localities attempting to 're-regulate' pesticides already thoroughly regulated by federal and state agencies." These localities should understand that golf course superintendents are professionals who want to maintain the integrity of their profession by being responsible to their employer, the course and their community.

Superintendents could also invite the local press — including newspaper and television reporters — to their respective golf courses to discuss the what, why, when and where of the maintenance staff's pesticide application program. Superintendents should make clear to the public that there's nothing to hide.

The bottom line: By stepping up and using their expertise, superintendents can educate the public and the press about the value of pesticides when used responsibly.

The "Tip of the Month" is provided by Syngenta to support superintendents in their agronomic, business and professional development.



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