

Refining

Reputation

Consumer information aims to bolster perceptions of green spaces

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The green industry has been working on its own miracle makeover in the public eye. After decades of spiteful jabs from disgruntled environmentalists, Project EverGreen is fighting back.

Now in its second year of marketing materials and information to consumers, it launched its golf initiative earlier this year with 25 radio interviews with superintendents that aired in major cities around the Masters and the U.S. Open tournaments. And there's a lot more in the planning stages, including strengthening ties with the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America Environmental Institute for Golf, says Den Gardner, executive director of Project EverGreen.

Gardner plans to continue with the radio interviews again this year.

The GCSAA has been integral with funding the project, as well as charting its mission, vision and goals, says GCSAA spokesperson Jeff Bollig. And though much of the behind-the-scenes work has been productive, the message is just starting to reach the masses.

"Like any new initiative, it's like a duck on the water. It looks pretty calm on the surface, but below, we're paddling like hell," says Bollig, also a Project EverGreen director. "We're starting to see more of the programs taking effect."

The organization's first consumer sentiment study was published earlier this year. It shows that consumers are in tune with the economic impact of green spaces: 90 percent agree that landscaping improves home value; 70 percent agree that parks and green spaces improve

property values, and 75 percent agree professionally maintained public parks and sports fields are good for the economy.

A whopping 95 percent of respondents agree that a well-maintained landscape is essential for a clean environment, but just 55 percent agree that green space within a city helps regulate air quality.

"We've learned that consumers are begging for balanced information about green spaces and how to take care of them," Gardner says. "That's everything from application of pest protection products, nutrients to add to grass, minor maintenance and water efficiency."

The nonprofit organization will continue to explore public perception each year via surveys about economic, lifestyle and environmental benefits of green spaces. Gardner says he expects to conduct golf-specific surveys late this year or early 2008.

In the meantime, the organization is in the process of creating materials for superintendents for use during tours, media interviews, newsletters and other public communications.

But many superintendents aren't waiting for the group's lead. Community outreach has been an important tool for golf courses as some vocal environmentalists target them as examples of environmental polluters.

"The main reason why I put myself out there is to help golf courses be seen in a different light than the environmental arena would normally portray them," says David Phipps, superintendent of Stone Creek Golf Club in Oregon City, Ore.

Phipps thrust himself into the public eye, ironically, by being proactive with his local soil and conservation district office. Being a

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SUPERINTENDENT, STONE CREEK GC

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new course, the administrators were eager to learn about his operation, he presumes, so they could offer suggestions on how to tread lightly on the environment.

At that time, the course wasn't Audubon certified, but Phipps didn't hesitate to show them the GCSAA Environmental Stewardship Guidelines and illustrate how the facility was nurturing wildlife corridors.

"They walked away from that meeting thinking I was an all-star," he says. So much so, they asked him to help homeowners understand the finer points of lawn care.

He now teaches "Golf Course-Quality Lawns" for homeowners every spring and fall. He's since recruited a couple other superintendents to help teach classes, and he's lobbed a call into the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) to offer his help in developing it into a nationwide plan.

It prompted some discussion with the NACD Urban Community and Coastal Resource Committee as it works to devise a national strategy to help its district offices become more engaged in urban areas, says Debra Bogar, regional representative for NACD's Northern Plains.

"I think there is great interest, and there is a great potential for a partnership at a local level," she says.

It could prove to be the profession's crown jewel in its public-awareness campaign, and it began when Phipps simply attended a public meeting for the local watershed to which Stone Creek belongs.

While it's a public relations coup, it's proving to be a benefit for the local environment, too, because superintendents are able to advise weekend warriors about how to care for their lawn properly by avoiding nitrogen run-off and cleaning up after herbicide and pesticide applications, for example.

"What I'm trying to do is target that audience who always sees that golf courses are always green, so they think we are going to give them the best techniques ... What ends up happening is we teach them how to be environmentally responsible and how to do it right," Phipps says.

Phipps also has starred in local cable pro-

gramming modeled after "This Old House," where a passerby (coincidentally with a broadcast-quality video camera) sees him on his lawn and stops to ask about lawn-care techniques.

"You almost have to have a passion for it ... I just enjoy teaching people my trade," Phipps says. "I enjoy what I do; I'm proud of what I do, and I belong to one of the greatest associations. So I want to represent them to the highest capacity and be an example."

But the mass media might not be the best venue for every superintendent, many of whom prefer to convert one soul at a time.

The Old Collier Golf Club welcomes upwards of 500 fifth-grade students each year on about 25 to 30 tours. Golf Course Manager Tim Hiers says field trips are a great way to illustrate the environmental value of golf courses while still making the tour interesting, entertaining and impactful.

"When we first started out, I felt like I had to defend golf. After almost 14 years of doing this, we never tell a kid how good a golf course is, we just show them," Hiers says. "You need to be creatively redundant and spontaneous. That's what makes it meaningful for the kids, teachers and escorts. It does wonders for the memory. We have a contest in the end, and there isn't anyone who doesn't know this stuff."

Part of Old Collier's curriculum includes snags, habitat, corridors, camouflage and interspersions, to name a few. And there's plenty of opportunity to impress pre-teens at the facility's 267 acres of Audubon International Certified Gold Signature Sanctuary. But you don't need to have a jaw-dropping course to make a tour interesting, Hiers stresses.

"Remember you have an advantage right off the bat: No. 1 is that they are out of school, so they are already happy to begin with. No. 2, they are outdoors, and No. 3, they are either riding in a golf car or walking," Hiers says. "So if you just find the most interesting parts of your golf course and accentuate that, [then you'll be successful]."

But Hiers does offer one warning: school tours are not for the feint of heart or the weak.

"When you finish, you're ready to go lay down for about 30 to 40 minutes," he jokes. "But it's very gratifying." ■