

Image /s Everything

As one superintendent found out, keeping a low profile can banish you to utter obscurity

BY RON FURLONG, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

Someone once told me we always think things are better than they really are. This goes against the more common saying that things are always better than they appear.

The person who told me this, ironically, was the first superintendent for whom I ever worked. I always thought he was simply a pessimist, but now I think perhaps he knew more than I ever gave him credit for.

The golf club I work for sends out an annual survey
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PHOTO BY: MIKE KLEMM



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to the members. The survey asks questions in four different areas:

- the pro shop;
- the starters and marshals;
- the restaurant; and
- the condition of the golf course.

It is a golf club in the most literal sense. There are no tennis courts or pools, and no game rooms or spas. Members come here to golf. And, we hope, golf on a darn-nice golf course. Thus, the questions, though spread through the four different sections, tend to focus primarily on the golf course's condition.

I knew something was wrong when members kept congratulating Brian and Eric — the golf pro and his assistant — on the condition of the golf course.

More than one-third of our membership responded to the survey. I would say about 98 percent of them were extremely happy with the condition of the golf course. The few complaints we received centered around not enough sand in the bunkers and the greens being a little too quick in mid-summer.

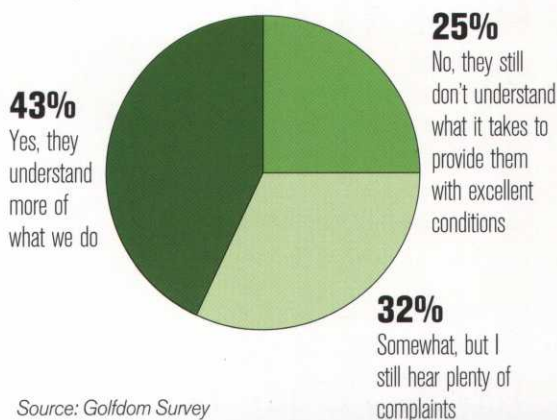
The thing that struck me about the survey wasn't the answers themselves, but to whom the members were directing their compliments. More than one respondent to the survey wrote in the comments section that the golf course was in fantastic shape, and that Brian and Eric should be congratulated. Brian and Eric, it should be noted, are the golf pro and the assistant pro. Another member suggested we hold an instructional sand and seed divot seminar for the members, and Brian or Eric could lead it. Another asked if Brian or Eric could give a talk some evening on course maintenance, and how we achieve the things we do.

Nothing against Brian or Eric, but something was wrong here. I had no idea how low my profile had become in the clubhouse.

Granted, I do like to fly under the radar a bit, but this seemed a little too low, even for me. I suddenly realized that something had to be done

Do you think golfers have a better appreciation for what you do compared to five years ago?

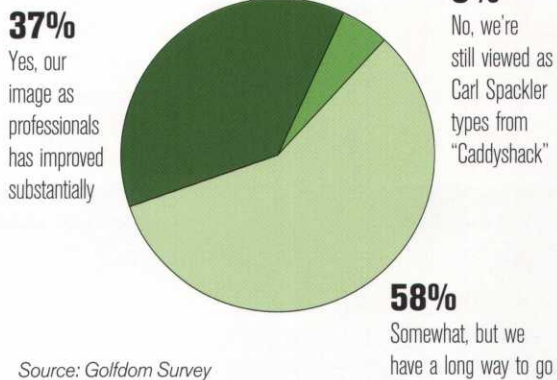
(639 responses)



Source: Golfdom Survey

Do you think superintendents are viewed more professionally for what they do compared to five years ago?

(640 responses)



Source: Golfdom Survey

about the image I was projecting to the membership — and not just for myself, but the image of my staff as well.

Three things immediately came to mind when I put my brain into action. And all three were things I used to do, but no longer did.

The first was golfing with members. In general I simply don't golf as much as I used to. And when I do golf, it tends to be with friends or co-workers, or even by myself. I previously made a habit of golfing with members from time to time, either casually or in a scheduled management/membership golf outing. With a quick scan past the cobwebs in my brain, I realized it had been at least three years since either of these events had happened.

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The second thing I no longer did was post a newsletter. This was a monthly occurrence. Again, about three years had passed since my last newsletter.

The third thing I had stopped doing was probably the hardest to admit to myself, but, in all honesty, I had to fess up to the fact that I really didn't make myself very accessible to members for small talk, maintenance condition talks or even home-yard advice. I guess I like to think the golf course speaks for itself, and that I really don't have to indulge in this time-wasting practice of idle chitchat.

So many times I'll steer the golf car down one path to avoid a possible conversation that could set me back 30 or 45 precious seconds. Or, to be completely honest here, to avoid a conversation with someone I would just as soon not converse with. But what exactly has been the cost of avoiding these idle conversations?

Well, I now know. The cost is that I have almost disappeared in the clubhouse. The cost is that the members are now praising the golf pro and his assistant for the great course conditions. The cost is I have more than likely missed out on some friendships with some really terrific people.

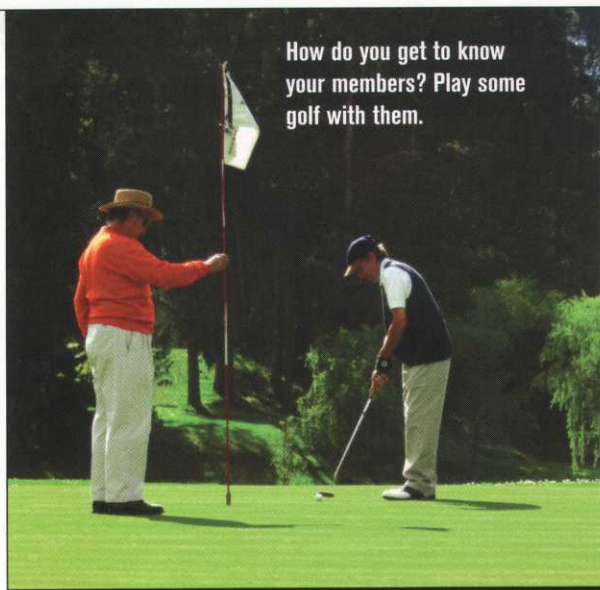
So, what to do? Well, first, I have to atone for the three sins I committed. Start golfing with members, start posting a newsletter again, and stop avoiding the conversations that have been so easy and so convenient to steer (literally) around.

If an effort is taken, there is no reason the superintendent and his staff should have to take a backseat for any credit due to them.

But even after addressing those three scenarios, I was able to come up with a fairly impressive list of other things I could do to keep myself and the crew more visible and more in the member consciousness.

- Have my morning latte (when possible) in the clubhouse instead of on the course by myself.

- Take a crew photo (updated annually) and post it in the clubhouse.



How do you get to know your members? Play some golf with them.

- Eat lunch more in the clubhouse restaurant.
- Enter more member tournaments.
- Post my office phone number and e-mail in the clubhouse.

- In the monthly newsletter (one of the three corrected sins), offer a monthly home lawn or garden tip.

- Have an annual tour of the maintenance shop for interested members.

- Have uniformed maintenance staff workers wear name tags.

- Post a maintenance employee of the month in the clubhouse and on the club's Web site.

- Taking the Web site idea further, have a page set up for "maintenance updates." (We have already done this, and it has been quite a success. I've even, for the most part, restrained myself from using it for my little political causes.)

I could actually go on with this list, but you get the idea. If an effort is taken, there is no reason the superintendent and his staff should have to take a backseat for any credit due to them. Step up, play the political game and bask in the accolades. Then, quit basking and get back to work already.

And to that first boss of mine who told me we always think things are better than they really are, I say, "You're right. And we should probably get out there and do something about it." ■

Furlong, superintendent of Avalon Golf Club in Burlington, Wash., can be reached at rfurlong5@gmail.com. If he's not there, he's probably playing golf with a member.