The State of the Golf Industry Show

BY LARRY AYLWARD

Has the Golf Industry Show seen better days? In case you haven't noticed, the show is in decline on at least two fronts.

Two years ago in Orlando, the show attracted 26,000 attendees and exhibitors accounted for about 301,000 square feet. Last month in San Diego, the show attracted 16,000 people and exhibitors accounted for about 204,000 square feet.

This is not good, considering the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America gets about 40 percent of its annual revenue from the show. Declines in attendance and exhibitors mean less receipts. Alas, a few questions arise: Can the show make a New Orleans Saints-like come back? And if it can't, can the show survive as a lesser event? More importantly, can the GCSAA function solidly with less revenue coming from the show?

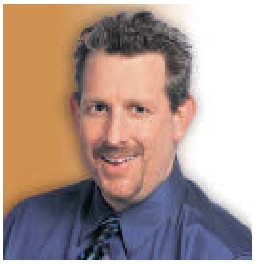
This is not to point fingers at the GCSAA for the show's decline. It's not the association's fault. Let's not forget the catalyst in this is the big pink elephant known as the Great Recession. The lousy economy hasn't spared the golf industry.

But some people think there's more to this equation than just blaming the GIS's decline on the sour economy. These people think trade shows, in general, are dinosaurs and are slowly becoming extinct. That's why they think the GIS is on a down-bound train. Only time will tell if they're correct.

I contacted GCSAA CEO Mark Woodward a few days after the show to talk about the state of the show and some of the rumors ("Hey, did you hear the show is gonna be every two years?") flying around San Diego last month.

Woodward realizes the GCSAA must find other sources to gain revenue it's losing from the show. It's a big concern, Woodward says, and the wheels are spinning inside the GCSAA headquarters in Lawrence, Kan. They're looking for ways to create new business, some of which could come from online programs and environmental initiatives.

"It's a daily conversation around here," Woodward says.



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Despite the show's declines, Woodward points out that it's still a big revenue producer and is vitally important to the GCSAA's success. Yeah, he believes some trade shows are dinosaurs, but not the Golf Industry Show. He says the GIS is "evolving" and is not going anywhere.

That said, realizing the expense outlay for exhibitors and attendees to travel to and stay in cities like San Diego, Woodward doesn't rule out less-expensive future show destinations to ease costs on exhibitors and attendees. In fact, Woodward told me a "deep-dive discussion" is set for this month with GCSAA representatives, its partners and the board of directors to "talk about everything and anything" related to the show.

One thing is certain for the time being: The GCSAA is committed to holding the show annually, Woodward says. There's no big push to have it every two years.

Woodward didn't dismiss another idea being floated — a merger of the GIS with the PGA Merchandise Show. If it's worth discussing, it will be discussed, he says.

Woodward is an optimist, but even he can't guarantee the show can come back to its 2008 level, especially now that the Club Managers Association of America has dropped out. But despite the show's diminution, Woodward believes it can function successfully as a smaller event.

But it's safe to say nobody wants to see it get smaller. And most everyone wants a strong show. Alas, next year's show in Orlando will be a telltale sign regarding the health of the event. Orlando is a favored site and most always draws well. It's also an easier place to get to because most courses are located on the east side of the Mississippi River.

We'll know a lot more about the state of the Golf Industry Show a year from now.

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