

Help Us Out, USGA

One of my writing colleagues was chatting with a PGA Tour executive recently discussing some mindless matter when the suit announced, “It’s not just a *branding* issue, it’s how we *language* our *branding*.”

After you’ve digested that one and hopefully scribbled it down to wheel out when one of your golfers is throwing around too much business-speak, consider this sad reality: golf’s “green” movement has a branding problem. A how-we-language-our-branding problem.

There has been a slow move afoot to go to more organic practices or, more feasibly, leaner and less excessive maintenance with firm and fast as the goal. Yet the very word “green” has always created a conflict, one the USGA is discovering in its recent push toward promoting environmental stewardship and leaner, firmer, faster golf.

At the recent USGA annual meeting, a two-hour symposium run by the Green Section included excellent presentations from the organization’s Kim Erusha, Brian Whitlark, Jim Moore, Pat Gross and a guest appearance from Toro’s Dana Lonn. Each laid out where the industry stands with its efforts to use less water, battle myths about certain practices and move to more use of organics, all while helping the stagnant business of golf.

“Flat is the new up,” USGA President Jim Hyler noted during a press gathering. Since Hyler commenced his reign a year ago, the governing body of North American golf has been pushing firm, fast and lean as the way of the future. And they’ve already learned one

THERE SHOULD BE SOME REWARD FOR THOSE WHO ARE CUTTING BACK WATER USAGE AND WEAVING MORE SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES.

BY GEOFF SHACKELFORD



key lesson from the first year: you need green. Green grass that is.

Enter the new push: lean and green! And now you see the way we “language our branding” becomes even more problematic. Or, at least a problem to those outside of the golf maintenance industry.

Golfers will always prefer green grass, but the trick is how to give them the same color they’d never dream of wearing without breaking the bank, poisoning the stream or leaving the outside world with the impression that golf has no interest in sustainable practices. Credit the normally stodgy USGA for adapting its message and tailoring its presentations on the fly in the best interests of all parties involved.

But this still doesn’t help with the branding issue facing golf’s green movement. The game wants and needs to go the direction of the organic movement, where more and more people each day are selecting food or cleaning products based on the “certified organic” stamp of approval. And while we know it’s not feasible for most golf courses to go mostly organic in maintenance practices, there should be some reward and appreciation for those who are cutting back water usage and weaving more sustainable practices into their daily maintenance regimen.

This recognition will be vital to an ever-expanding generation that makes its buying decisions based on a desire to be associated with better practices. Yet golf has no one credible “branding” and “certifying” such practices.

At the symposium I asked if this was something the USGA would consider doing in the near future. After all, they’re equipped with a staff of green section specialists who could evaluate practices and for better or worse, stamp a big red, white and blue USGA logo onto a piece of paper certifying a course as having modified practices to achieve a certain level of respect for sustainability.

The answer was a pretty quick and disappointing, “no.” The USGA feels that an outside agency of some form needs to come along for any certification system to ever take hold and earn the respect of the environmental community.

I don’t agree. We first have to satisfy the golfing world and build a movement from within. And how we language the branding of green can only be verified, codified and solidified by the USGA Green Section.

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