



## GAG US WITH A STEREOTYPE

By Monroe S. Miller

Those of us who live in Wisconsin and love this state sometimes tire of its image among out-of-staters. You know, the frozen north with snow on the ground for over 200 days of the year. We are *only*, to them, "America's Dairyland" and no matter where your glance takes you, a barn is in view. We hear a lot of griping about being on the receiving end of some very generous dairy subsidies from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. I think they sort of make up for the Defense Department contracts we don't get!

Gag us on a Holstein.

Milwaukee, instead of inspiring thoughts of the arts and of clean streets and of corruption-free municipal government, conjures up images of beer. "The beer that made Milwaukee famous", "Milwaukee's finest", etc. ad nauseum.

Gag us on a no-deposit no-return bottle.

And if we tire of having out-of-staters stereotype us as the land of cow manure and beer flatulates, then how about many of the professions we read about each day? The lawyers are the butt of a flood of jokes. Ask your neighbors and friends (assuming they aren't attorneys!) about their perceptions of lawyers and you'll likely get phrases such as "money grubbers" and "ambulance chasers". They are thought to be incredibly selfish as they pursue frivolous suit after petty and marginal suit through our already crowded criminal justice system, for the sole reason of padding their own wallets.

I'm sure the vast majority of the honest and competent attorneys in the State Bar could gag on a summons.

They have company, too. Doctors, politicians, stock brokers, businessmen and journalists are also in that group of professionals who have become more narrowly stereotyped of late, most often in very unflattering light.

And for those members of the golf course management fraternity who haven't checked lately, let me assure

you that all of us are still viewed in stereotypical terms, despite the efforts of a lot of individuals and some organizations. I kept a loose list of references to our profession (and ourselves) and it includes the usual greenskeepers, groundsmen, groundman, grass cutter, et. al., etc. I gag on these stupid stereotypes. I did not spend six years at this state's land grant university to become any of the above. Did Jim Beard earn a Ph.D. in "greenskeeping"? Most people cannot even spell the damn word right—there is no "s" between the "n" and the "k". Is Wayne Kussow a professor of grass cutting? To see educated and capable men and women viewed in these lowly terms is sad to me.

I will admit that occasionally the use of these words is innocent and inadvertent. The thing that saddens and frustrates me so much is the thought that these are terms in common use among the golfing public and reflect what they are used to hearing. I can only hope most think more of us than the words they use imply.

It isn't that I've lost (or never had) a sense of humor. Frankly, few are more ready to laugh at themselves than I am. I am simply deeply troubled that after so much effort, experience, education and contribution to the game of golf that we could still be suffering from that kind of "good ol' John Turnipseed" stereotype.

Gag us with a push mower.

Only a few months ago I was in a social situation with a friend of mine who is a faculty member at the University of Wisconsin. Despite nearly twenty years of knowing one another, when he introduced me to a couple he was with, he didn't know what to tell his friend my job was! He knows where I work and what I do, but he didn't know what to call my position. He was embarrassed. The point of this incident is that not only do we suffer stereotyping, but we don't even have a focused position in the eyes of some.

Living in Madison offers the opportunity to see a lot of state professional organizations in action. Many call the capital city of Wisconsin their "home". The State Bar of Wisconsin, for example, is quartered here and I've read of how they are developing a program they hope will overcome much of their public stereotype. From what I've read, this program will recommend changes from the law school level and up. Reports have it that their program includes a lot of self criticism.

Our own Golf Course Superintendents Association of America is working very hard to improve our image, and it obviously needs improvement. Bob Still is the staff person who was given that formidable task and he has shown how capable he is with this assignment. Rob Schultz spoke with Bob and wrote a column in "The Sports Page" about Still's work with focus groups of golfers. Anyone who attended the opening session at the GCSAA Conference in Houston had an opportunity to see and hear a video developed by Still that gave viewers a look at our profession. It is a good piece of work — my hat is off to this capable young man.

But despite my sincere support for such PR programs because of an obvious need, I am troubled by them. It is one thing to change "perception". But what do you do if, realistically, you have to change "fact"? I am not so foolish that I don't recognize that there may be a little bit of truth to the stereotype I believe we suffer. The image is what the public sees and hears about us; the presumption is that the reality is different. Presumption is the key word, for me. If people like Bob Still labor heavily and we spend generously in support, the public may actually eventually believe what we want them to believe. The trouble comes if the image is what too many of us are not. Then there is little incentive to change the reality, in my mind at least.

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It seems you could illustrate my point by using another example — the difference between “character” and “reputation”. One’s reputation is what others have come to think about him; his character is what he really is. If this person devotes considerable effort to improve his reputation, for selfish reasons, then his character will undoubtedly suffer.

An image must be a true reflection of reality, or it is a fraud. The only permanent and meaningful way to change our stereotypic image is to change more of the substance behind it. Bob Still, the GCSAA and all of their programs cannot do this; each and every Golf Course Superintendent has to assume the task. Everyone in the profession must make the commitment; one idiot can spoil the good work of a hundred.

We need to re-examine our goals, our values and our standards. Every time I go to a meeting — Houston was the most recent and gross example — and see colleagues dressed like they just came in from the shop, I realize

how far we have to go. Dirty tennis shoes, blue jeans and rumpled shirts should be verboten at any of our meetings — GCSAA, WGCSA, WTA or whatever. If you look like a hick, well, maybe the stereotype fits.

What kind of an image can you expect golf players to have when they see a shop yard that looks more like a junk yard? Frequently, a trip *into* the shop reveals a mess worse than outside. Disorganized chaos does little to improve images.

Work habits, proper grammar, neat attire and a hundred other things may well deserve more attention than PR programs do. This is hard work and might be unpleasant to follow. But it ultimately is the only really honest way to merge reality with image. A barrage of publicity complete with key phrases like “dedication”, “professionalism”, “service” and similar will ring hollow until we remedy the practices, procedure and conduct that lead to stereotypes like those we detest.

I’m extremely sensitive to what others think about us as a professional

group. And I don’t want them to have a wrong conception. I hate the stereotype we suffer too frequently. But also, I am smart enough to realize that dressing up an image for the golfing public without some improvement in the way a few of our colleagues act will make them imposters and the true professionals will be prostitutes. Without change on the part of those that really need it, each of Bob Still’s successive campaigns will have to be more intense and more expensive and more hysterical. It will never end.

Obviously, I am not suggesting that we start having sushi and a glass of Chardonnay for lunch, or that we start driving Volvos; a phony image is of absolutely no value. Let’s continue to applaud the work of groups like the WGCSA and the GCSAA to improve our image and try to make their job, on our behalf, much easier by being the kind of professional people we want the public to think we are and that we should be.

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