

Be a Skeptic

By **Bob Vavrek**, Senior Agronomist, United States Golf Association

Cold snowy days provide a bit of time to catch up on office reading of the trade journals that have piled up on my desk this past summer. You cannot help but get caught up in the hype of glitzy advertising. The outrageous claims of some products never cease to amaze me. The current presidential hopefuls could certainly take some lessons from "spin" placed on product performance, or lack thereof.


My spin of the day is the claim that one product "measurably outperformed" another in a university trial. Ok, grab your Stimpmeter and check the speed of the carpet in your office and measure, say 13' 6". Now check it again from the exact same spot and gee whiz, it is 13' 8". That is a measurable difference that means absolutely nothing, except perhaps that your carpet has now "measurably outperformed" itself.

There are measurable differences, statistically significant differences and, more importantly, meaningful differences between various turf management products. Be sure to ask for university based research data before making a significant investment for a new, unproven product. If all you get for your inquiry are testimonials then beware.

Do not hesitate to call the principal investigators of the research study. Most will be more than willing to discuss their opinion regarding the effectiveness of a particular product, which may be quite different from claims found in advertisements. Be wary of graphs and charts that illustrate effects without reference to statistical differences.

Furthermore, statistics can be misleading. Books have been written on this subject. For example, you have an inch of dense thatch on your fairways. A research study clearly indicates that, over time, product A or treatment B reduced thatch accumulation by 10% and the difference was statistically significant. Yes, we have a measurable difference. Yes, we have university-based research that demonstrates a statistically significant reduction in thatch. However, is there a "meaningful" difference

worth the cost of the product? Probably not, since after all is said and done, you still have 9/10 of an inch of thatch on your fairway.

The bottom line is that you must justify the cost vs. benefits for any product or maintenance operation. Does it "work" just isn't good enough in today's economic climate of stagnant or decreasing operating budgets and ever increasing golfer expectations. A product must be effective and cost effective. 

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