What People Really Want to Know About Pesticides on the Golf Course

People who manage golf courses have found themselves in the unenviable position of defending their use of pesticides.

Let's face it, we live in a world in which more people are raising concerns about almost everything. The pesticides that you rely upon to maintain the integrity of your course are coming under attack from those who, most likely, do not have an understanding about these products. In fact, they probably have a negative view of pesticides. You, like most of your colleagues, have attempted to convince your members that there is nothing wrong with those products. You use complicated science, facts and figures to demonstrate that pesticides are okay. Well, what I am about to tell you may shed some light on just what are the most effective messages to use when discussing the use of pesticides.

First, let me provide a little background on this subject. In 1990, the crop protection products industry conducted extensive research into the general public's attitude regarding pesticides. This research was in response to a California ballot proposition known as "The Big Green Initiative." "Big Green" would have seriously curtailed pesticide usage in California. Public opinion polls indicated that at least 73% of the voting public was in favor of this ballot proposition. We learned several very interesting insights regarding the public's perceptions of pesticides.

One of the key messages brought out by this research pointed out that the general public simply does not understand the amount of testing and regulation that pesticides must undergo, prior to being allowed on the market. People believe products are discovered in the chemist's lab, produced in the factory and applied on a crop or golf course, with very little testing or oversight from EPA. In addition, your members most likely do not realize that you must be trained and licensed in order to apply pesticides. They believe anybody can purchase and apply a product with no training or supervision. They do not view you as the professional that you really are. So the message here is, let everyone know that you and your staff are trained and certified. You might consider hanging your annual pesticide training certificate on the wall in your office as a sign of professionalism. Place a story in your club's newsletter explaining the recent training your staff has completed. Let them know at every turn "I AM A PROFESSIONAL."

Also let them know about how thoroughly the products you are using have been tested. Here are a few key facts about pesticides that help get that point across.

- On average, only one in 20,000 chemicals makes it from the chemist's laboratory to a farmer's field or golf course. Once registered for use, the pesticide continues to be monitored by the EPA and state regulatory agencies.
- Each pesticide must undergo a rigorous testing process which includes more than 120 separate tests, takes eight to ten years and costs between 35-50 million dollars before a product is registered for use by the EPA.

The greatest concern expressed by the public was the "C" word, namely cancer. Since the causes and origins of this disease are not completely understood, we search for answers. Many cite pesticides as the cause. One useful tool is to explain how much of a pesticide it would take in order to cause an adverse health effect. Let me give you an example: "A 150-pound adult could eat 875 pounds of broccoli every day for the rest of his life and still not consume the amount of pesticide residues found to cause health problems in laboratory mice. By the same token, a 20-pound child could eat 873 apples and still not consume that amount."

There are a few messages and techniques that do not work well when explaining pesticides to the public. These are arguments which may sound convincing to us, but, to the general public, they simply do not make sense. Here are a few examples of messages that do not work.

1. Explaining risk in terms of one in a million. We have all heard of the claims that the risk of eating, drinking or breathing a particular substance will only increase our chances of cancer by one in a million. Although those may sound like great odds, people do not relate favorably to those statistics. Automatically an individual may feel as though he will be that one in a million.

2. The natural carcinogen argument. How many times have you heard that we consume more natural carcinogens in our food, than we are exposed to via man-made compounds? Although this is true, the general public believes that Mother Nature is benign. They simply do not feel as though anything in nature can hurt them.

In general, you should adopt the attitude that pesticide can be used safely. You are a professional trained in the proper application and storage of these products. And you are also a steward of the environment. You would not put something on your golf course that would cause injury to the ecosystem, because you know that the long term viability of that course depends on a healthy environment.

The next time one of your members asks you about the products you're using, try to work one of the key messages into the conversation. I am certain you will see a different reaction when people know a few key facts.

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