

Communications — Public Relations

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As the Superintendent on the Rossmoor Golf Courses, I would estimate that 60 to 80 percent of my time is spent on some form of communication. This would be speaking, listening, writing and reading. There are also the various levels of communication, such as the informal face-to-face exchange, using the telephone, and the more formal types which would include (1) letters, (2) reports and recommendations to the Golf Advisory Committee, (3) budget preparation and justification, and (4) record keeping, such as weather data, pesticide usage reports, absentee records, and material inventories. What and how I communicate to my peers, the golfing community, and the golf course maintenance crew, plays an important role in the public images and opinions of how they view the organization.

Communications and public relations interact in most phases of golf

course operation. I will explain how it is up to me, as the Superintendent, to use the communications skills I have learned to actively promote good communication and good public relations at the same time.

One of the areas in which I have built a good image for the company is in the way I have conducted myself with the crew. It is very important for the crew to have a good self-image of themselves and also of the Superintendent. When the crew is out working on the course and in the public eye, they are also in direct verbal contact with the golfers. If they speak favorably about me, they will also speak favorably about the company. The golfers, in turn, will pick up these feelings. At the same time, unfavorable comments about me will reflect badly on the company. The point of this is that, in the eyes of the crew, I am the company. So, good or bad, that image is portrayed throughout the community.

What has to be done is to build the employees' pride in the company and in what they do. This is where I have to convey to them that the work they are doing is important and also let them know why

they are doing it. For example, "We have to mow the Course twice each week because we are having the major golf tournament. There will be many participants who do not reside in Rossmoor." This gives them a reason why they are doing it and makes them more interested and prideful in how they accomplish it.

I keep the crew members up to date on company policies and directives. In order for me to convey these policies and directives, I have to know the whys and wherefores. I have to know and be able to explain to them because these communications may have a direct effect on how they perform their job. It is also a bad idea to

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ridicule a company policy in front of the crew. If I do it, they will also feel it's okay and the good relations that have been carefully built up are eroded.

Effective communication is needed at all levels of the chain of command. I could be talking to my assistant, the golf course crew, club officials, golfers, or the Golf Professional. It is also very important for me to carefully select the terminology I use when addressing them, since the comprehension of turf grass terms most probably varies considerably among these groups. The effectiveness and efficiency with which I communicate with these groups is essential to gaining their support and respect.

Handling golfer and resident complaints on the golf course is almost always a challenging experience. Most of the time this experience can be turned into a positive effort and further your public relations effort. They come up and complain that "the greens are too hard or too dry. . . . There are too many weeds. . . . What are you going to do about it?" This is where communication comes in. I will always give them a friendly, courteous greeting. I have instructed my

assistant and crew to do the same thing. I always listen to their complaints or comments and write them down in my notebook. I carry a notebook with me at all times on my daily rounds of the course. If it is at all possible, I answer their questions. If not, I write them in the notebook and respond at a later date. By writing it down when I talk to them on the course, it gives them a sense of validity. By following through and responding to their complaint at a later date, they know that I am concerned and that I care. I thank them for their concern and I have another convert on my side.

It took me a little while at Rossmoor to learn that many times when residents come to see me with complaints, they were not really there to complain. They mostly just wanted to talk to someone, and they knew I was there.

Rossmoor is a retirement community, and the average age of residents is 75.4 years. Many of them are widows and widowers, and I have seen from experience here that many of them are just lonely. Also, at Rossmoor, a great majority of the residents and golfers I encounter have been in positions of authority. This fact, also, makes for sticky situations, because when you combine the age factor and authority, you have a person who can be difficult to deal with. What I have to do is be patient, be a listener, be considerate, be firm, and know exactly what I am talking about when confronted with this type of situation.

Telephone calls and messages I receive cannot be overlooked. By answering telephone messages promptly, you again give the impression that you care. Your telephone manner when answering and talking on the telephone also gives people insight into how they feel about you and your organization.

Some other things I have done to further public relations on the course and for the company is to play golf with the residents when invited. I also encourage my assistant

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to play. By playing golf with them, you can get out on the course in a one-to-one relationship. The golfers have expressed the thought that it is a terrific idea for us to play the course and get their perspective of conditions on the course. I agree completely with them.

In the same vein, about three or four times a year, I will invite one or two of the golfers to attend a Golf Course Superintendents' meeting with me. These meetings are held once a month at a different golf course in the area. The program for the day usually consists of a general meeting, an educational seminar, and golf. The resident golfer has the opportunity to meet and talk to superintendents from other courses. He also participates in an educational seminar or some phase of golf course maintenance. The result of one of these outings is another golfer who sees and understands your problems and needs in a different light. As a consequence, he will also work for you in the community and offer you support.

Along with dealing with the golfers on the course in my daily routine, my wife and I are often invited to attend resident functions dinners on occasional weekends. These invitations are normally associated with a major golf tournament held on my course, and even though I am not required to attend these functions, I feel that in the best interest of the course and in my working relationships with them, I should attend. From their viewpoint, I do care about the course and about them, too.

Another communications tool that I use to further public relations is the Rossmoor News. This is a weekly newspaper that is distributed throughout the community. In the paper is a column called *Fore*. It deals with golf news, golf scores, and golf course information. I am able to use this column to my advantage. I will submit articles dealing with golf course maintenance items, such as spiking fairways, fertilizing and any other scheduled maintenance activity that could interfere and interrupt play. Scheduled events and tournaments are also a part of this column. By my using this column and

keeping the golfers and residents well informed, I can minimize rumors that may be false and counterproductive to the operation of the golf course. The *Fore* column in the Rossmoor News also gives me the means to provide recognition for the employees of the golf course. What I have done is write profiles of them for the paper. I put down length of employment, family, hobbies, off-the-job activities, and had them published over a series of weeks. I found that these articles provided a sense of solidarity and pride within the employees. Again, if an employee feels pride within himself, it is also directed at the organization and people who come in contact with that organization.

"Every time you come in contact with someone, you leave some type of impression. If I have communicated a sense of pride in my staff, they in turn will communicate that pride to the public, then you have generated public relations. When I communicate to a golfer or resident with respect and they respond with respect, that is public relations."

I also meet monthly with the Golf Advisory Committee. This advisory committee is composed of Rossmoor residents whose primary concern is the maintenance and upkeep of the golf course. This Committee does not make decisions on what I should be doing or give me direct orders. What it does is gather information from all sources concerning golf course activities and then make recommendations based on this information. As a member of the Rossmoor staff and Superintendent of the courses, I am one of the sources for this information. Each month I write a report for the Committee, and at the meeting I give an oral report regarding what maintenance activities have transpired in the past month. Also mentioned are problems regarding fungus activity on the greens and manpower needs. It is within the realm of the Committee to recommend equipment purchases, major budget requests, and staff requests. What I have to do is communicate my needs in a positive way and solicit the goodwill we have built up in our relations. At the present time, this relationship is functioning because all of my requests have been recommended.

The recommendations were passed because of the open line of communication that exists between myself and the Committee, and because of the mutual respect we hold for each other. We also have a common goal, and that is the maintenance of a quality golf course.

The posting of signs in the clubhouse is another means of keeping the golfers informed. There should always be something posted. I have learned that if people see the same sign every day, they will soon tend to ignore it altogether. What I do is post course conditions daily, such as, the course is wet, frost on greens, course is closed, or spraying in progress. Whatever it is, the golfers are being made aware of the problem

before they encounter it on the course. This is good public relations, and it is also extremely important to keep the golfers informed of hazards as part of my duties.

I have learned from experience that communication is a means of imparting

ideas and making myself understood by others. This exchange can only be successful when mutual understanding results. Understanding is also a personal matter between two people. If the other person hears what was intended for him to hear, then communication has taken place.

There is no question in my mind that communications and public relations go hand-in-hand. Every time you come in contact with someone, you leave some type of impression. Like when I talk to my staff. If I have communicated a sense of pride in my staff, they in turn will communicate that pride to the public, then you have generated public relations. When I have communicated to a golfer or resident with respect and they respond with respect, that is public relations. This interaction of communication and public relations is visible in all aspects of the golf course operation, and it can only be heightened by working on and improving these communication skills. ♦