

COMMUNICATION AND GOLF COURSE MAINTENANCE

Communication is ultimately more important than agronomics in the daily conditioning of a golf course!

by BOB BRAME

WE LIVE in a world of continual interaction with others. Contrary to the beliefs of some, it's not just winning or losing, but how you play the game. In other words, how we communicate is actually more important than the day-to-day, visual results of our work. This is as true in the golf course management industry as it is in other aspects of our lives. For example, how many times has a superintendent been fired even when the course was in good condition? Conversely, it's not uncommon for a course to experience significant turf loss/damage and the superintendent's employment remain secure. We've all seen or heard about both situations. The difference is communication. Good communications can bridge the gap when course conditioning falls off, but an immaculately maintained golf course does not protect a poor communicator. Most turf managers invest a significant amount of time on the agronomics of golf course maintenance. At the very least, equal time should be given to improving communication strategies and techniques.

Over the past few years the Green Section staff has been surveyed several times to draw on their expertise and field experience. In two previous surveys the top ten and ultimately the top 20 pitfalls of golf course maintenance were identified (Table 1). This listing, based upon Green Section staff consensus, unanimously identified *communications* as the number-one potential pitfall of golf course maintenance.

Unfortunately, communication is not given enough attention in most golf course maintenance operations. The focus of this article is a third staff survey, which identifies sub-headings (Table 2) under the number-one pitfall, communications. The purpose is to share some thoughts from the Green Section staff to help strengthen communications in golf course manage-



Hand-held communication radios enhance the speed and efficiency of golf course maintenance. Seeing the superintendent using the tools of the trade helps enhance the image golfers have of the superintendent and the entire operation.

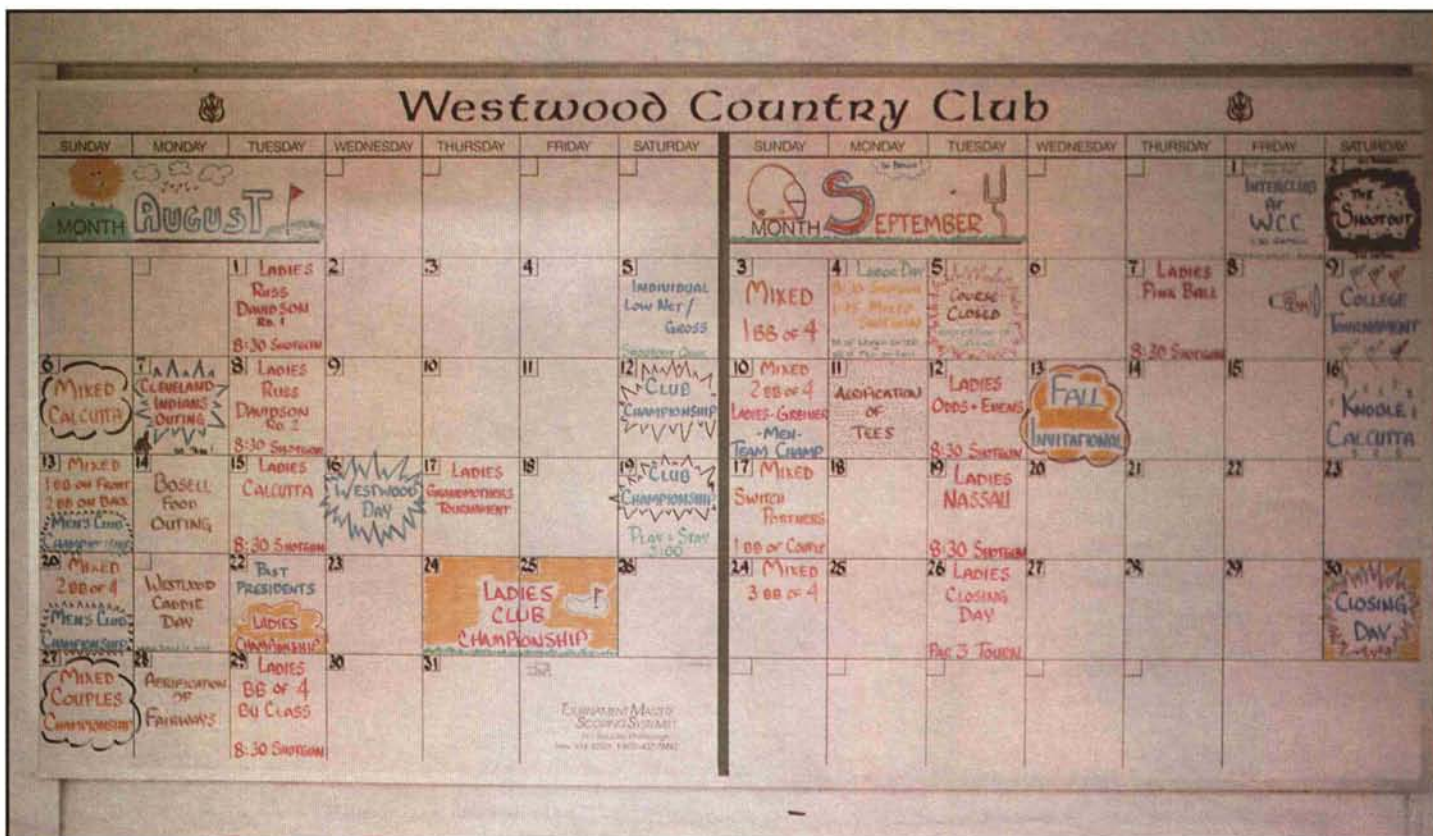
ment. Regardless of how successful or inadequate your past communications efforts have been, staying innovative and positive is very important. Seven categories have been identified and prioritized under the heading "*How can golf course maintenance communication and public relations be improved?*" Specific ideas/thoughts are covered under each of the main headings.

Maintain a Professional Image

Every golfer has an image of the superintendent who maintains the course he/she plays. That image will directly affect their interactions with the superintendent. Do the players at your course have confidence in what is being done in the maintenance program? Or do they continually question and argue? In the final analysis it is the

responsibility of each superintendent to make sure his/her image is positive and professional. When the superintendent presents a professional image, players are more willing to discuss turf loss or general course conditioning needs from a calm, rational perspective. If the superintendent's image is weak, players often become emotional in their desire for improved conditioning.

How often have you heard, "Gee, my yard looks great; why doesn't the golf course? Our superintendent must not know what he's doing." Why not have a *home lawn improvement night?* Open the door for golfers/members to ask about their lawns. It's a perfect opportunity to discuss the differences between a home lawn and the golf course. Demonstration areas and/or test plots can help convey the message and gain support for needed resources.



At Westwood Country Club in Cleveland, Ohio, all golf course information is placed on large marker boards that are easily altered as needed. Golfing events are combined with course maintenance activities (i.e., aerification) to give golfers the complete picture.

Positive, effective communication will require an investment of time.

As the superintendent, make sure golfers see you on the course using tools of the trade (soil probe, hand lens, camera, disease detection kit, communication radios, outside consultants, etc.). Dress in a manner that reflects the position you hold. Provide the grounds staff with uniforms (or at least a shirt), to present a neat and united team appearance. Make sure employees understand their assignments and, as a result, stay busy. Keep the equipment, maintenance building, and surrounding area clean. Maintaining a project book or portfolio, containing pictures, can be an excellent tool for meetings or contract review time. Do not rely on golfers' memories of how it *was*. Be innovative and proactive in establishing and maintaining a professional image. What worked yesterday may not work tomorrow.

Post Information

We're past the days of providing only minimal information and trying to blend into the woodwork. Golfers want to know what's going on and be given the freedom of making their own decision about how it affects them. While it is true that some golfers will

not read information that is posted or sent to them, we have a responsibility to those who do want to know. Even those who don't appear to be interested often will respond if the right approach is used. Posting information can be done in a number of ways, but it boils down to getting information where it will be seen or heard.

Course maintenance information can be posted on bulletin boards, at the first and/or tenth tees, at the halfway house out on the course, in locker rooms, in the pro shop, in the clubhouse, and even on carts. Also, getting the information out can be done through mailings to players', neighbors', and/or employees' homes. A detailed annual calendar of maintenance activities may have greater impact if mailed. On the other hand, the condition of the course or products being used on a particular day would be best communicated on a prominent on-site bulletin board.

Maintenance work, such as aerification, should be posted in advance and on the actual day work is to be done. How about posting weekly or monthly maintenance summaries? As an exception, *do not* post Stimpmeter readings. The condition of a course cannot be distilled down to a number.

Concerns and/or problems should be spelled out clearly so rumors don't become the primary flow of information. Chemical applications, as well as pertinent integrated pest management (IPM) strategies should be posted. A picture and a short biography of the grounds employee of the month could be displayed. Occasionally, it may be helpful to post pictures and names of the entire grounds staff. On the other hand, pictures and names of green committee members could be posted in the employee lunch room.

Posting also can be done with a dedicated phone line and answering system. A course information hotline with frequently (several times a day) updated messages would allow players to call and hear the latest. Creative, fresh, and current posting of information can enhance golf course maintenance communication.

Participate in the Course Newsletter

Contributing to a course/club newsletter is similar to posting in that it is a valuable method of distributing information. However, information presented in a newsletter can be more comprehensive. A newsletter is a good format for dealing in detail with past and present issues and how they may

affect the future. It is also a good place to combine specific information pertinent to the course with general industry news/trends.

A course newsletter is a great format for discussing specific maintenance strategies like *no-mow* or natural areas. Environmental concerns and how they are being addressed should be included in the newsletter. Available resources like the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program for Golf Courses can be discussed, both in concept and specific involvement. Pesticides being used on the course could be listed with explanations about their safety and purpose.

A newsletter is an excellent format to inform golfers about course setup details, like hole rotation and tee marker placement. Articles about different members of the staff can improve golfers' familiarity with the crew, while strengthening employee morale. Special interest articles, like the current movement away from metal spikes on shoes, will generate interest and can open discussion applicable to your course. The green committee chairperson also should contribute to a course maintenance newsletter. In many cases the superintendent's boss can discuss issues more candidly and from a different perspective.

Recognizing the value of a newsletter, the superintendent should contribute to each and every issue. If your course does not have a newsletter, start one. Maybe two or three times a year at first, expanding as time and money allow. Depending upon the actual structure and needs of your course, there may be value in having a dedicated golf course maintenance newsletter, especially if the existing one is for social and/or clubhouse information.

Schedule, Attend, and Speak at Meetings

This category of communication deals with the value of well-time meetings, the importance of being at meetings that concern course maintenance, and getting involved in the presentation of information at such meetings. We have all sat through meetings that were a complete waste of time. Conversely, a well-organized gathering can be a valuable communication opportunity.

The golf course superintendent should attend any and every meeting that addresses course maintenance issues. The concerns of course maintenance should not be passed to a green committee chairperson, a general manager, or any other individual not in-

timately familiar with the day-to-day supervision of course conditioning. Unquestionably, the superintendent's boss should also attend key meetings related to course maintenance, but not as a substitute for the superintendent. This would include meetings with the green committee, board of directors, community/neighborhood associations, and various course golf groups/associations, like the ladies', men's, juniors', etc.

Green committee meetings provide the setting for detailed discussion on desired course conditioning and relevant budget, weather, and/or agronomic concerns. Oral and pictorial presentations can be combined with an occasional field trip to strengthen the decision-making process. These meetings should be scheduled frequently enough to keep members informed and to determine direction well in advance. Committee requests/desires should then be passed on to the board of directors by the superintendent *and* chairperson. The protocol can vary for privately owned courses and municipalities, but regular meetings with appropriate individuals are important.

The superintendent occasionally should volunteer to speak at general membership and golf group (ladies', men's, etc.) meetings. Opening day ladies' luncheons and/or stag days can be golden opportunities. Such gatherings provide a good opportunity to articulate concerns, accomplishments, and/or answer questions. Neighborhood association meetings offer another great opportunity to establish goodwill and a positive exchange of information. The organizers of these meetings will not always search out the course superintendent. Take the initiative with these and other groups; let them know you are available and willing to participate.

Have a Friendly Attitude

While this may seem a little simplistic, a friendly attitude is not always easy to remember when the grass is wilting or just after the hydraulic hose breaks. However, if we remember that positive communication will carry us further than healthy (or dead) grass, it may help bring our attitude back into perspective. Think about it — the only thing we have absolute control over is

Test plots make it possible to more accurately discuss maintenance strategies with committee members. An untreated area provides good information to help decide whether a product should or should not be used in the maintenance program.



our attitude. We cannot control much of what randomly happens in life, certainly not what Mother Nature and others may do. However, we can control our response. A friendly and sincere attitude is something people remember.

The superintendent should try to be visible and accessible on the course. When Mr. Jones starts driving toward you to ask another potentially dumb question, click on a friendly attitude. Sure it will take a little time, and you may need to answer a question that has already been answered many times. Nevertheless, a friendly attitude will pay dividends. Plan time when you can be available to players to answer questions. How about spending a little time at the first tee or practice green on Saturday morning, after the course work is done? Be available just before the ladies' shotgun. Following the golf professional's announcement of the play format over the public address system, jump in and give a quick overview of course conditions/concerns. Tell them why carts need to stay on paths. Remind them how important it is to fix ball marks immediately. Thank them, in advance, for replacing divots and raking bunkers. Explain why roughs are being treated with herbicide. Be proactive, using potentially negative issues, to establish positive communication.

Get to know the names of players. Nothing diffuses an explosive confrontation like calling a person by name. Think about the outbursts that occasionally occur, for many of us, when driving a car. If we knew the name of the guy who cut us off, wouldn't it temper some of the emotions?

A big part of a friendly attitude is the art of listening. When folks know you're really listening to them, it's a lot easier to disagree and still maintain mutual respect. This is true for players, the staff, and/or the boss. Listening means putting your agenda on hold, turning off all distractions, keeping your mouth shut, and concentrating on what's being said. It's easy to understand why most of us don't listen well. However, when we listen carefully it's amazing how much better our response becomes. Sometimes, good listening is the only response needed.

Involve Players and Officials

Take the green chairperson, president, golf professional, and/or manager to conferences. The more they know about course maintenance, the easier it will be to communicate with them. Regional conferences conducted by the Green Section are geared towards the different interests and needs of course department heads and officials. We need to know where others are coming from. Meet with key indi-

TABLE 1

The Top 20 Pitfalls of Golf Course Maintenance

1. Communication and Public Relations
2. Overwatering
3. Fast Green Speeds
4. Use of Pesticides
5. Continuity of Course Officials/ Green Chairperson
6. Pesticide Storage and/or Maintenance Buildings
7. Tree Management
8. Amount of Play
9. Labor: Not Enough and/or Under Qualified
10. Equipment: Not Enough and/or Poor Quality
11. Time on the Golf Course
12. Documentation
13. The Bandwagon Syndrome
14. The Rules of Golf and Marking the Course
15. Lack of Outside Interests
16. Test Plots
17. Staying Current with Technology
18. Long-Range Planning
19. Training and Delegation
20. Managing Carts and Cart Paths

"If they're not dangerous, why do you use so much protective equipment?" Take advantage of such questions to educate golfers about pesticides used on the golf course, their safety, and the impact on the environment.



viduals regularly; get to know their concerns and needs. Take them out on the course frequently so they can see the concerns of daily course conditioning. It takes time to get others involved, but it's time well invested.

The Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program for Golf Courses is an excellent tool for involving others. In fact, in order to become a certified site, community involvement is required. What a great opportunity to tell what is being done to enhance the environmental friendliness of the course and, as a result, the entire community. Whether neighbors or golfers, they will appreciate what is being done. This is a great opportunity to strengthen community relations.

The Green Section Turf Advisory Service (TAS) is another excellent tool for involving players and officials. Inviting course officials to attend TAS visits can open the door for constructive dialogue about past, present, and future maintenance strategies. It's even possible to schedule full committee or membership meetings for a time of questions and answers following a TAS tour of the course.

A *home lawn night*, maintenance facility open house, and/or special improvement project work day are just a few examples of ways to involve others in ongoing course maintenance.

Play Golf with Others at the Course

It is amazing to me that there are superintendents who do not play golf at all. It is easy to understand why a superintendent doesn't want to play golf after being on the course all day (I've been there). Playing golf on the course you are responsible for maintaining is work. However, it does not change the fact that a working knowledge of the game is vital to proper course conditioning. A superintendent must be able to understand course conditioning desires from a golfer's perspective. The only way this can occur is through regular playing.

It seems very reasonable to expect the course superintendent to play the course he/she maintains at least every other week. Weekly would be much better. Playing the course you're responsible for conditioning should be considered part of the workday responsibilities. In other words, a superintendent should play during regular weekday work hours and not be expected to work a full day and play in the evening.

It's possible to combine the importance of the superintendent playing golf regularly with involving others and general communication. Why not establish a weekly tee time with the golf professional, manager, and one course official — a great opportunity to see the course in detail and discuss playability. A superintendent may also find value in having a regular tee

time with three openings. This would allow others to occasionally play a round of golf with their course superintendent. Clearly, this needs to be custom-fitted to the personality and policies of your course. Nevertheless, a superintendent should play the game regularly, and involving others can strengthen communication efforts and credibility.

The Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program for Golf Courses (ACSP) is an invaluable tool for improving the golf course while involving others in the process. ACSP involvement is an excellent topic for an ongoing column in the course newsletter. Schuyler Meadows Club, Loudonville, New York.



<p>TABLE 2</p> <p>The Top Seven Ways Golf Course Maintenance Communication and Public Relations Can Be Improved</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Maintain a Professional Image 2. Post Information 3. Participate in the Course Newsletter 4. Schedule, Attend, and Speak at Meetings 5. Have a Friendly Attitude 6. Involve Players and Officials 7. Play Golf with Others at the Course

Conclusion

Be creative, positive, and proactive with golf course maintenance communication. At the very least, invest as much time towards improving communication as you're investing in staying current with agronomics. When agronomics falls short, and it occasionally will for us all, good communication is the vehicle that holds it all together. When all is going well agronomically, communication is what allows us to share the moment with others. How we communicate is the core of who we are. Think about it — it's not about grass!

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