

THE VOICE OF A STRANGER

The right consultant, when utilized properly, is a valuable resource to any golf course operation, big or small.

BY JIM SKORULSKI



Green Section agronomists consult on golf courses across the United States. With no specific products to sell, this extra set of eyes helps cut through marketing claims and identifies solutions based on research and proven experience (Kissing Camels G.C., Colorado Springs, Colorado).

Consultants probably have been utilized in the golf industry for centuries. The legendary Old Tom Morris himself designed and consulted on the construction and maintenance of golf courses while he was the greenkeeper at St. Andrews. Records show that the legendary Drs. C.V. Piper and R. A. Oakley, scientists with the USDA, were called upon by The National Golf Links in 1908 to help with

the establishment of that golf course. Commercial consultants aligned with seed and other companies were used on golf courses well before that. Mr. E. J. Marshall, Green Committee chairman at the Inverness Club in 1920, lobbied the USGA and USDA to provide an impartial and authoritative source of agronomic information for the game of golf. His efforts spurred the formation of the USGA Green Section in November of that year.



General consultants help identify and solve a wide range of agronomic and management issues in the field. When addressing more complicated issues, the consultant may call upon more specialized resources to help solve the problem.

One of the Green Section's early responsibilities included providing a non-commercial informational service for member clubs. The advisory service was limited during the early years, but the service was expanded considerably in 1953 when the Turf Advisory Service was introduced by the Green Section.

There are many types of consultants to choose from. Agronomic consultants are helpful in diagnosing and solving agronomic problems, to help educate course officials, prioritize maintenance needs, confirm the need for and plan programs and capital projects, introduce new research and ideas, or act as an objective third party to evaluate management programs and bring a fresh perspective to the golf course.

There are many types of specialized consultants who focus on specific areas, such as irrigation, drainage design, architecture, pond management, environmental planning, business and marketing, nutrient management, trees, facility design, and safety.

Agronomic consultants may be affiliated with the USGA, regional golf associations, private entities, or universities or extension agencies. There are commercial consultants who are employed by companies to help sell products and provide their customers with product support and/or agronomic advice. Consultations may be requested by the superintendent, general manager, course official, or owner. Many golf course superintendents already have worked or eventually will work with a consultant of some sort. Choosing the right consultants, understanding their role, and preparing thoroughly for the process are critical to maximizing the benefit of the meeting.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT CONSULTANT

The old adage "never bring a knife to a gunfight" is most appropriate when it comes to selecting a consultant. A golf course architect or pond specialist may not be qualified to develop a program to improve your greens, and likewise an agronomist is not the ideal candidate to provide a detailed design plan for new greens or ponds. In many instances it is wise to begin the consulting process using a general consultant. An agronomic consultant will complete a wide-ranging review of the golf course, tackling all agronomic and management issues. An experienced agronomist, not unlike a good general practitioner, will be able to deal with the vast majority of golf course issues and will defer to specialized consultants (designers/engineers) when more specific advice, planning, or design work are necessary. A general agronomic consultant should be able to help compile information and prioritize recommendations provided from specialized consultants and designers. Agronomic consultants are also used to review architectural plans for agronomic soundness and maintenance practicality. Each individual agronomist will likely have a special expertise but should be capable of addressing most management issues on a golf course.

Larger capital projects, including irrigation system redesign, major site drainage, golf course design, computer shade analysis, environmental permitting or site assessment, and renovating maintenance or clubhouse facilities, are better tackled by more specialized consultants or designers. Those may include irrigation consultants, golf course architects and design consultants, drainage engineers, arborists, and environmental specialists. Designers and engineers will consult with each other and develop new design plans and oversee the construction or installation of larger projects.

Selecting effective consultants is not unlike choosing a building contractor, golf course architect, or a financial planner. The people you select must have the appropriate knowledge and experience to get the job done correctly. Local or at least regional knowledge is helpful. They must also be credible, able to communicate effectively, and get along with a wide range of personalities. More importantly, they must possess a high level of integrity if their recommendations are to be credible and in the best interest of the golf course. There are some consultants who lack

credibility but may be attractive to the unwary, offering miracle cures that are often too good to be true. They usually are not in business for long, but they can leave an expensive path of destruction and disappointment. Good reputations follow good consultants in this industry, and the opposite is true for those with questionable pasts, so do your homework when selecting the right person for the task.

In the best of worlds, the consultants you choose to work with should be independent and must be objective if their recommendations are to serve the best economic interest of the golf course. Commercial consultants will also strive to provide effective information, but there may be a bias to their recommendations. For example, the financial planner who is affiliated with a brokerage firm may promote mutual funds and other investments sold by that brokerage company. The financial planner's recommendations may be effective, but there may be equally or more effective and less expensive opportunities with other investment companies that you will not hear about. Be aware of any affiliations a consultant may have and consider what implications any company or product associations may have on the recommendations you receive.

It is not imperative to choose a consultant who has a pleasant personality, but it is helpful. An effective relationship requires trust, and it is often more effective to work with someone who has a positive and constructive attitude. Developing a team concept based on mutual trust and respect will provide the greatest benefits.

It is imperative that the consultant possess strong communication skills! The consultant should be convincing and have the ability to effectively present even the most technical information to the layman. Any visit should be followed with a timely and concise written report that details the observations and recommendations made during the visit. In some instances, it may be useful to ask the consultant to speak to golf course officials or address the membership. The consultant should be comfortable with public speaking for that purpose.

PREPARING FOR THE CONSULTANT: MAXIMIZING THE BENEFITS

"Be prepared" is the Boy Scout motto that many of us learned long ago. Those words are critical in our jobs, especially when dealing with a consultant who has a finite quantity of time to spend

on the golf course. It is always a good idea to contact any consultant prior to an initial meeting to ask what information and records will be helpful for the visit. Past maintenance records, including diagnostic information, fertilizer and pesticide records, soil and water test reports, budget and labor information, the number of rounds played, photographs, and the reports from other consultants (if pertinent), can be useful for agronomic consultants. Be prepared to answer questions about cultural practices, current heights of cut and mowing frequencies, irrigation practices, labor issues, and golfers' desires or expectations. There must be no secrets if the consultant is to be effective and helpful, so be willing to bare your soul.

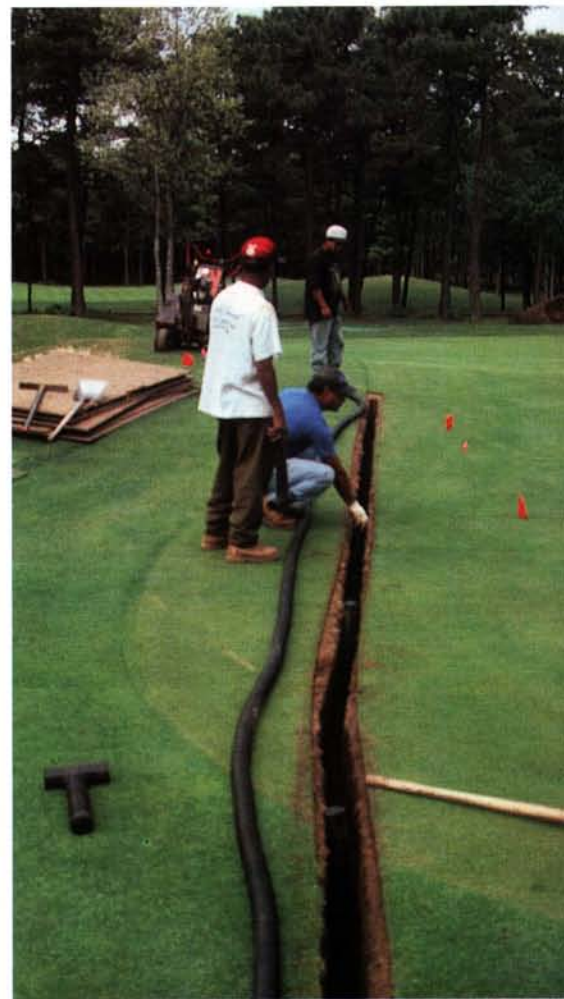
DEVELOPING AN AGENDA

Develop a written agenda prior to the meeting to maximize your time with the consultant. The agenda does not have to be a complex document, but it should contain the primary objectives or issues that you wish to be addressed during the meeting. The agenda will keep the consultant and meeting attendees focused on the important issues and areas of concern on the golf course. Try to include the names of key people who attend the visit or who are the decision makers at the golf course. Those people may be critical during the visit and should be copied for any follow-up reports. Speaking from personal experience, a prepared agenda is one of the most helpful tools you can provide to a consultant working under tight time constraints and a heavy workload.

ATTENDANCE IS MANDATORY

It is important to encourage interested parties to participate in the meeting or site visit. But it is also important to keep the group manageable in size to remain efficient and adhere to the critical agenda items. A group of three to five (including the superintendent) is ideal, but larger attendance

Consultants often provide multiple and creative options to correct an agronomic problem that best fits the golf course financial situation.



is never discouraged and may be necessary in some instances. It is important that the right people attend the visit. Those include the superintendent, the chairman or members of the Green Committee, influential board members, directors, the general manager, golf professional, or those who ultimately influence the decisions made on the golf course. Those who do not attend the field visit can submit agenda items or perhaps be invited to meet briefly with the consultant prior to or immediately after the visit to voice their concerns. A "wrap-up" meeting at the end of a course visit can be very helpful and a good way to avoid potential misunderstandings that may have arisen while in the field.

WORKING EFFECTIVELY WITH A CONSULTANT

Agronomic consulting is somewhat unique from other forms of consulting in the golf industry. It deals not only with the science behind green-keeping, but also involves dealing with various personalities and club politics. Agronomic consultants often have to play detective when trying to provide explanations and develop sound recommendations. The following will help ensure your experience with a consultant is both beneficial and positive.

- Consultants often are called in to calm the waters after a problem has occurred, but the consultant will be more effective in the long run if visits are scheduled on a routine basis. An annual checkup can prevent a small problem or potential issue from developing into a costly and unpleasant situation. Regular site visits allow the consultant to become familiar with the operation and nuances of the golf course at different times of the season. A routine site evaluation also provides a historical written record of the progress that has been made and where additional resources and improvements are required. That can be invaluable for maintaining continuity in future planning and golf course operations.
- Experienced consultants can usually sense a personal or political agenda or recognize a loaded question. But it is a good idea to forewarn a consultant as to any possible hidden agendas or personal vendettas that might surface during a site visit. Most consultants strive to stay above political and personal disputes and instead opt to provide positive and constructive recommendations that will move the golf course forward.

- Do not expect the consultant to be a henchman who will validate all of the superintendent's practices or support programs that promote individual playing preferences. A consultant, paid by a golf club or municipality, will have the best interest of the entire golf course and the golfers in mind. There will be times when disagreements over programs or policies occur, and that is healthy and one of the reasons to bring in a fresh set of eyes. But many times the consultant will support the programs and practices in place if they are sound and justifiable.
- Be honest and do not withhold information from a consultant when answering questions and touring the golf course. The information is invaluable when trying to solve a problem and formulate new recommendations. Similarly, do not purposely avoid problem areas on the golf course during a site visit. Those areas, like the truth, usually surface and come back to haunt you at a later date.
- There is nothing more frustrating to a consultant than to repeatedly hear, "Great idea, but that won't work here." One benefit of using a consultant is to bring in a fresh set of ideas. Do not automatically dismiss new ideas because they vary from the status quo or are not politically popular. The consultant should be hired as an expert, so be willing to present and implement those ideas that are provided to improve the golf course.
- The level of negativity seems to be increasing on many golf courses. Some golfers appear to take delight in tearing apart their own golf courses. It is easy to become consumed by what is wrong with a golf course, failing entirely to acknowledge all that is right. A consultant can be helpful in pointing out the positives and provide constructive criticism and advice when it is necessary. Keep it positive!
- A consultant should not be expected to be a hatchet man! Most consultants would choose to work with a golf course and its superintendent in a positive aspect, always looking at ways to improve management practices and make the golf course as good as it can be with the resources available. There are times when personnel changes are inevitable and justified, but don't hire the outside stranger solely to do the dirty work.
- A good consultant will work with a golf course and the resources available to it. They may not always save the golf course money. A good consultant will provide realistic recommendations and an idea of the resources that will be required

to improve the golf course to meet the golfers' expectations. It is then up to the golfers to decide whether or not to provide the additional resources that are required to implement the programs and practices.

- Utilize a consultant's strengths. Complex design questions and planning should be left to an architect, while turf quality and playing conditions should be left to the agronomist. All consultants will happily provide an opinion on just about anything. It's in their blood. Just treat it as an opinion and leave the conclusive answers to the experts in their field.

- Comparisons between golf courses, racehorses from different eras, or favorite whiskies are inevitable and can be amusing when taken in the proper context. However, it is easy to become consumed by comparison, as is often the case with golfers. Many Green Section agronomists are asked why the greens are always faster, the fairways greener, and the water colder at the course down the street. In reality, conditions are often very similar at both golf courses. Convincing golfers of that can be a challenge. Comparisons can be helpful if they are realistic and used constructively to obtain the resources needed to improve a golf course and meet the expectations of the golfers. But little *good* will come from unrealistic comparisons or expectations.

- Too often an agronomic consultant is utilized to solve problems *after* a major architectural project is complete. Utilize an agronomist to review the plan *before* it is implemented to assure it is sound from an agronomic standpoint (i.e., surface and internal drainage, growing environments, traffic flow, rootzone materials, orientation, etc.) and capable of supporting good quality turf. The consultant will also provide quality control guidance to further assure the project's success. It is money well spent.

- Unscrupulous consultants are few and far between, but inevitably a new name or face will show up and raise quite a stir. Often they prey on the unwary by offering the latest and greatest recommendations, which mostly are unproven remedies. Their fame is usually short lived, but not before they wreak havoc on golf courses, operating budgets, and superintendents. Do your homework before selecting a consultant and avoid those offering novel approaches that seem too good to be true. They probably are.



The premise of this article is not entirely to promote the role of consultants in golf or to promote the Green Section Turf Advisory Service. The value of good consultants will quickly become evident to anyone who employs their services. The goal of the article is to offer some ideas to aid you in selecting the right consultant for the job and to maximize the experience. If you still remain wary of the idea of utilizing an agronomic or specialized consultant, consider the following words of H. H. Hilton in the book *Golf Greens and Green-Keeping*: "The voice of a stranger who has had any experience of the game is always worth listening to. He appears on the links with an open mind; his mind is not warped with the prejudices of many years' association."

The words of the stranger may be critical, and not all the recommendations feasible, but an objective evaluation can point out failings and weaknesses that are not fully understood, prevent expensive mistakes before they occur, and help make the golf course the best it can be.

Quote from H. H. Hilton in *Golf Greens and Green-Keeping*, edited by Horace G. Hutchinson, Country Life Limited, London MCMVI, p. 168.

JIM SKORULSKI is a senior Green Section agronomist in the Northeast Region, where he consults with golf courses around the New England states and eastern Canada.

An impartial consultant can be most helpful with material selection and developing quality control programs and grow-in practices that help assure a project's success.