

Going Viral

Opinions and gossip regarding course conditions have a long history of quickly spreading through a golf facility and beyond. Good or bad, social media, smartphones and personal computers provide the opportunity for information and misinformation to spread faster than ever.

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A time sequence of images that clearly demonstrate the benefits of unpopular maintenance practices, such as tree removal, can consolidate and increase support for similar projects in the future. For example, even the most fervent tree enthusiast cannot deny that this average hole was transformed into something special after aggressive tree removal.

The good ol' days . . . when a golfer had a bad day, the high score was blamed on the slow, bumpy greens or soft, wet fairways or inconsistent bunkers. Complaints were then tendered first to the golf shop staff and then to anyone in the grill or locker room who would listen. Spreading personal discontent throughout the

facility was a slow process, but with persistence it was possible to influence the more impressionable golfers, while constantly annoying the more reasonable players.

Fast forward to the present . . . the golfer with the first tee time can send a text message about soft, inconsistent bunkers or slow, bumpy greens while

his partner drives a cart from the first green to the second tee. Assume at least 10 other golfers on the same day's tee sheet receive the message and anticipate a bad experience before ever setting foot on the practice putting green.

A few holes later, the same smart-phone might be used to take pictures



Some pictures speak for themselves. Want to make a point about motorized carts damaging soft, wet fairways? The image of muddy tire tracks says it all. In contrast, you may want to highlight more technical images with arrows or circles to make sure you and the audience are on the same page. Want to brag about how well the new brushes on walking greens mowers are standing up the turf for a cleaner cut? Be sure to highlight the brushes in the image to focus the reader's attention.

of mud on the golf ball or a plugged lie in a fairway. These images can be immediately posted on Facebook, where countless other golfers can provide soothing salve of consolation for having to endure such indignities. With any luck, support and encouragement from Facebook friends will arrive before the back nine.

Remember the good advice about counting to 10 before reacting to a child or adult who made you angry or upset? Counting provided a little time for you to calm down and think about an appropriate reply instead of blurting out an immediate, emotional response. Keep in mind that social media outlets provide instant gratification to those who want to express their opinion, so an upset golfer who is "connected" will often make a hasty and overly harsh response. Reputations and careers have been ruined by rash and reckless comments made over the Internet that have gone viral. They say you can never take back what you say. It is far more difficult to take back what you have posted to the Internet.

Everyone is well connected these days, and turf managers need to be smarter than the smartphones to influence perception and opinions regarding golf course maintenance practices and policies. The way to survive and thrive in the digital age is to be proactive versus reactive with respect to how you communicate with all golfers, but especially those who influence others.

Why be proactive? Right or wrong, a response or rebuttal made to a false or exaggerated post about course conditions may be perceived by many as an excuse. Does the one dissenting opinion ever change the minds of the countless supporters? Granted, others may rally to your cause with support, but these online debates tend to further polarize the participants. You always want to be the person making the initial, accurate statement about course issues, not the person relegated to damage control after the fact.

Why fear the ability of golfers to instantly convey information, when the same technology can be used to your advantage? Many superintendents regularly update an area on the golf

facility's website dedicated to course maintenance operations. Blogs can serve the same purpose with respect to posting course conditions or maintenance operations, such as aeration or topdressing, that temporarily affect the playability of the course. Others send short email messages to golfers about turf issues, such as frost delays or wet soil conditions, that could impact the availability of the course to walkers or motorized carts.



You could write a small book explaining why brown, dead spots appear on the fairways after a spell of dry weather or you could employ one image to clearly demonstrate the deficiencies of an antiquated irrigation system.

Never discount the positive effect a timely message to golfers will have regarding their personal connection with the course or the fact that they will feel important and almost part of the maintenance team when they are on the list to receive information. Everyone wants to feel special. Consequently, sending messages directly to a golfer can be an effective way to transform some of the chronic complainers into allies.

Emails are an excellent vehicle to convey important messages and images to key golfers. However, many people feel they receive far too many emails, so use this method of communication sparingly. Keep the messages short and to the point. Far more people will complain that your messages are too long and wordy than will complain that they are too short. Never send an important message until someone else proofreads it first. Depend solely on a spell checker to correct your grammar or spelling mistakes and you will ultimately embarrass yourself and lose credibility. Embarrass yourself repeatedly and all your messages will be directed to the spam folder instead of the inbox.

They say a good picture is worth 1,000 words, but a bad picture often requires many more words of

explanation. In fact, no picture at all is better than a poor picture if it only serves to confuse the reader. Frost will always look like frost and an image of a frustrated golfer's divot gouged out of the putting surface is unfortunate, but obvious. However, don't expect a golfer to know which one of the five tall trees near the green is causing the shade problem or that the brown turf on the tee is localized dry spot. Images require a short, well-written caption. Your image has a message, so learn a few basic photo editing techniques and use arrows or circles to identify and highlight exactly what you want the golfer to see. Bottom line . . . what is obvious to you may not be obvious to everyone else.

More is less when it comes to wordy explanations and multiple image attachments to email messages. Save the lengthy explanations and extra photos for a blog or website. Be sure to adjust and reduce the size of your images before attaching them to emails. Granted, your fancy digital camera can take poster-sized, 10-megapixel images, but the recipient of your message will likely be viewing the image on the tiny screen of a smartphone. Furthermore, no one wants to spend several minutes waiting for a

huge image file to download when a smaller file conveys the message equally well. Develop a reputation for sending nothing but important, short, well-written messages with the occasional high-quality image and your email messages will always be taken seriously.

On a final note, a blog or dedicated area on the golf facility's website for turf maintenance is the ideal place to communicate using multiple images or short videos. A

sequence of photographs or simple before and after images can provide plenty of support and justification when there is controversy, such as for tree removal. Before and after images of how tree removal improves turf quality or the playability of a hole can provide the encouragement to remove more trees in the future. Similarly, before and after pictures of successful drainage projects or bunker renovations are great to have when presenting the next year's budget and are excellent additions to any résumé.

Some golfers crave information about all aspects of maintenance operations. Ignore them and they will find answers, right or wrong, from the golf shop, other golfers, or from the maintenance blogs of your neighbors. The Internet isn't going to disappear anytime soon, so take full advantage of the various communication options at your disposal.

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