



*Communicating with golfers helps them understand why various maintenance practices are performed and why the course is playing a certain way.*

## COMMUNICATING WITH TODAY'S GOLFER

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Golf course superintendents must develop a diverse skill set to provide high-quality, consistent playing conditions for golfers to enjoy. While it is not surprising, course conditions are consistently cited as the No. 1 factor influencing golfer satisfaction. Ensuring golfer expectations are met depends heavily on the golf course superintendent's ability to thoroughly understand agronomic principles and how they can be applied to balance turf health and playability.

While superintendents have a good understanding of the reasoning behind all the various maintenance practices that must be completed, a typical golfer does not have an advanced understanding of agronomy. This can lead to a disconnect between golfers and superintendents as to why maintenance practices need to be performed or why the golf course is playing a certain way.

Along with an intricate understanding of agronomics, the ability to communicate effectively is a fundamental component of the skill set necessary to find success as a golf course superintendent. The importance of communication cannot be overstated when it comes to educating golfers and decision-makers who may not completely understand the short- and long-term impacts of various maintenance practices on turf health and playability.



***Topdressing greens can be viewed negatively by golfers. Helping them understand how cultural practices improve putting quality can change their perception.***

Many superintendents utilize online tools, such as social media or blogs, to communicate with golfers at their course. While these tools can be effective, especially when it comes to reaching a large audience quickly, they do have their limitations. Most notable is the loss of personal interaction. Talking with golfers when they are present at the course is a strategy often not utilized to its fullest potential. Technology can certainly be used as an aid for connecting with golfers, but becoming comfortable with some more personal communication strategies can go a long way in educating golfers and receiving feedback that can be used to make maintenance decisions.

### *Listen and Ask Questions*

Superintendents have a long list of responsibilities and are usually being pulled in multiple directions every day. This is an expected part of the job, but it is important to remember that explaining an issue is often just as important as solving the issue. Communicating with golfers should be included as a top priority among a superintendent’s responsibilities. For some, the ability to communicate with golfers may come naturally, while others may need to work at perfecting this skill. Regardless of whether someone is a natural, communicating with golfers should not be bumped too far down the to-do list, even when things get hectic.

When communication is mentioned, speaking likely comes to mind. While what we say is a major component of communication, there are other important elements that should not be overlooked, with listening being at the top of the list. The saying “If you are talking, you are not listening; if you are not listening, you are

not learning,” puts into perspective why listening is an important part of communication. Every conversation has its ebbs and flows where each participant has an opportunity to talk and to listen. If you have never thought about how important listening is to communication, take notice of how you listen and whether this is something that needs improvement.

There is a balance when it comes to listening and speaking. When a conversation becomes lopsided because one person is doing all the speaking, those doing the listening are not able to offer their input. Considering how important golfer feedback is for superintendents to maintain a golf course that meets golfer expectations, it is critical to have a balanced conversation when communicating with golfers. A superintendent must have the ability to process the information provided by golfers to determine if it can be used to help guide maintenance decisions, or if it is an opportunity to educate golfers on maintenance practices.

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Daily communication with golfers provides opportunities to listen to their opinions and get a glimpse of how they view the course. If trends in golfer

feedback don’t align with your current maintenance priorities, it is possible blind spots have developed in the agronomic program. Identifying these blind spots makes it possible to adjust maintenance practices and improve the overall golf experience. Without regular communication, potential issues could go unnoticed or a simple misunderstanding could become a larger issue than it needed to be. Also, regular communication with golfers shows that their opinion is given consideration when maintaining the golf course. Letting the golfer’s voice be heard is an important aspect of customer service.

Feedback from golfers can vary greatly. Some, as mentioned, is constructive and can be used as a guide to adjust maintenance programs. It is also possible to find golfers that have developed misguided opinions about golf course maintenance practices. The internet offers an abundance of information about golf course maintenance. While much of this information is accurate, like anything on the internet, there are multiple unreliable sources.

It can also be easy for misinformation to spread when golfers at a course talk amongst themselves, compare playing conditions with friends who play at other courses or travel to play a new course. Golfers may receive limited or inaccurate information about course maintenance practices from sources that are not necessarily experts on the matter or familiar with the unique circumstances of a particular course. Superintendents can explain how agronomic programs must be tailored to fit the

specific needs of a golf course, but it is unlikely that a golfer will receive a thorough explanation from another golfer about all the practices that were performed when discussing how fast the greens are



***Proactive communication is critical when issues arise. Direct communication with golfers and other departments keeps people informed about anything out of the ordinary.***

rolling at the course their friend plays frequently. A golfer may have heard the greens were double cut and rolled, but not about the number of employees working on the maintenance staff, how well the soils drain, how trees were removed to increase sunlight reaching the putting surface, or that aggressive cultural management practices were performed earlier in the season to prepare the turf for intensive management practices geared to produce firm and fast conditions.

It is easy to understand how a golfer can develop a

misguided opinion and after getting over the initial feeling of frustration when this situation occurs, the best approach is usually to use this as an opportunity to educate. However, a conversation of this type can be delicate and it is important to be informative without being insulting.

Asking questions can also be used as a strategy to steer conversations toward useful feedback. Maybe a change was recently made to the maintenance program and there is a need to determine if golfers have recognized its impact. Carefully worded and properly timed questions can yield the honest feedback a superintendent is looking for from golfers. Depending on which questions are asked, a superintendent may be exposing themselves to criticism. While criticism can be difficult to accept, actively seeking honest opinions of the golf course makes it possible to identify areas where improvement can be made.

Seeking out the golfers rather than waiting for them to find you can produce two very different interactions. Taking a proactive approach to communicating with golfers about course conditions or other agronomic issues will be better received than if a golfer is surprised to find something out of the ordinary during their round. It is important to speak with different types of golfers. Do not focus on who you know the best, the most vocal, or who holds the course record. Be sure to include both men and women as well as low-handicap and high-handicap golfers. This will provide a more accurate cross section of the golfers who play the course. When discussing issues with golfers, be prepared with a solution. Having the problem already solved will put their mind at ease. Some questions may



***Communicating with employees in other departments, such as the starter, can expand the superintendent's ability to provide golfers with timely information.***

follow but presenting the golfer with a solution will create a more positive conversation.

It is unrealistic to expect the superintendent to be the only one gathering feedback on course conditions and maintenance practices. Enlisting the help of key staff members, decision-makers and influential golfers can extend the superintendent's reach. When using proactive communication strategies an effort will have to be made to educate the individuals being entrusted to relay information on behalf of the superintendent.

## *A Communication Strategy That Works*

Developing a facility-wide communication strategy that includes employees, decision-makers and golfers makes it possible to keep everyone better informed about course conditions and what maintenance practices are scheduled to be completed. At the Country Club of Detroit, golf course superintendent Ross Miller and the other department managers use a strategy that focuses on "The Why" when communicating with golfers. Their goal is to develop a unified understanding among employees

and golfers holding leadership positions when it comes to scheduled maintenance practices and course conditions.

Miller and the agronomic team are not always able to be the first line of communication. Keeping employees from other departments – who often come in contact with golfers before and after their rounds – educated about what is taking place on the golf course from a maintenance standpoint makes it possible to expand the agronomic team's reach. Golfer questions can be accurately answered and any misperceptions about what is taking place on the course

can be addressed. The goal is building a synergy among all the departments so accurate information is being delivered to golfers.

Golfers holding leadership positions are included in this strategy because they often field questions from other golfers about maintenance practices and playing conditions. Rather than being asked a question and having to seek out an answer, they can respond immediately.

Miller sends a daily email to all departmental managers, mid-managers, board members, green committee members and golf committee members. This email makes decision-makers on both the employee and membership side of the operation fully aware of what maintenance practices are being completed and what conditions can be expected. Miller typically finds that this email takes about five minutes to compose every day.

There have been instances where golfers enjoying a meal after their round have made a comment regarding maintenance practices on the golf course and an individual working in the clubhouse was able to explain why those particular maintenance

practices were being performed. Had this employee not read the email that was prepared by Miller earlier that day, or if that email was not provided at all, those golfers would have continued to have a misguided perception of what was taking place on the golf course. This exchange was beneficial for educating the golfers and it also showed that communication is taking place between departments to ensure golfers have the best possible experience while they are visiting the facility.

Moving forward, Miller is exploring the possibility of adding a biweekly email that focuses on timely turf topics that golfers are likely to encounter. The goal is to offer an additional education outlet for golfers to further their understanding of maintenance practices taking place on the golf course. This could be as simple as sharing content from the USGA Green Section Record that applies to a relevant topic of discussion on course conditions or it could be content produced by the maintenance team.

### Summary

With the expectations for golf course conditioning seeming

to increase every golf season, the importance of being able to communicate effectively with golfers and decision-makers cannot be overstated. The information provided can be very useful for keeping people informed about the agronomic program. Effective communication also offers an opportunity to address any misperceptions before they become widespread or problematic. It is important for superintendents to tell the real story and educate golfers or misperceptions can become reality.

**“The education and feedback aspects of communicating with golfers is unquestionably important, but don’t overlook the relationship building component.”**

The education and feedback aspects of communicating with golfers is unquestionably important, but don’t overlook the relationship-building component. A superintendent can have the most advanced knowledge of agronomics, but without the ability to communicate success will be difficult to achieve.

It is not a coincidence that successful golf course maintenance operations make it a priority to communicate with golfers. How this communication takes place varies from course to course. While the superintendent cannot be the only one communicating about course conditions and maintenance programs, they should certainly be leading the charge to develop a communication strategy like the one implemented at the Country Club of Detroit so golfers are well-informed.

There is one important aspect of communication that has not been mentioned – the impact of saying “thank you.” Whether it is in response to negative feedback or a compliment, those two words can leave a lasting impression. With that being said, thank you for taking the time to read this article.