

Taking Service into Account!

BY BRYAN CAMPBELL

THE TIME WILL COME WHEN THE IRRIGATION SYSTEM THAT HAS SERVED THE CLUB FOR NEARLY TWO DECADES HAS ONLY TWO OR THREE SEASONS OF USEFUL LIFE LEFT.

The costs to maintain the system will continue to grow as fittings and pipes begin to wear and break. Labor hours will be expended to repair system failures, which will take up valuable time that could have been used for course improvements. The electronics in the computer controlled system that were state of the art in the late '80s will have parts now harder to find or which are not repairable.

The inefficiencies inherent in an aging irrigation system will be reflected in declining turf quality and higher electricity and water costs. The decision will need to be made to invest for the future with the purchase of a new, modern irrigation system.

To varying degrees, today's golf course irrigation system technologies incorporate wireless communication, personal digital assistants, and on-site weather stations. For example, the on-site weather station automatically feeds information to the central control computer, which automatically calculates just the right amount of water to apply that night to replace the water lost during the day.

Additionally, there are many types of sensors integrated into the control system that can be used for a variety of reasons such as pausing irrigation during rainfall, measuring the amount of rain that falls, and then subtracting that amount from the total water requirements before

resuming irrigation.

Many of the irrigation systems designed today incorporate more irrigation heads at closer spacing to maximize distribution and control. However, after the installation of these modern irrigation system designs, clubs routinely report savings of electricity and water of 25 percent or more along with reductions in maintenance costs, despite the increase in the numbers of heads. This is due in large part to the advances in sprinkler design that allow water to be applied even more efficiently than rainfall.

This technology is certainly wonderful but as with any major purchase, especially technologically sophisticated ones, the purchase decision needs to consider the quality of service being offered as part of the package.

The demand for high quality golf course irrigation service has increased over the last 15 years as technology has advanced. The partnerships the superintendent develops with his equipment suppliers are very important factors to the success of his management goals. In fact, a recent Golf Course Superintendent's Association of America (GCSAA) survey on why a product is chosen showed that after word of mouth, the single most important determining item is the service quality the superintendent expects to receive from his local distributor. (*Profiling the Golf Course Superintendent 2006*, GCSAA/NGF)

"Service" has always been difficult to define but some early definitions include "all offerings of value to the customer beyond the product itself" or "an activity which has value to the recipient" (Service

Management, Bleul and Patton). The value or quality the service has to the customer is the difference between their expectations and what is delivered. This difference will define the level of service quality in the mind of the customer.

Why is service quality important from a manufacturer's or distributor's viewpoint? Customers are five times more likely to switch vendors for perceived service issues than for product quality or prices (Forum Corporation). That's why service quality and how it is perceived is critical. A manufacturer wants to deliver a valuable product, and service is a significant part of that offering.

The value of a product increases when the golf club receives excellent service from a vendor and/or distributor. A three-ring model developed by Jim Clemmer elegantly explains what customers want when it comes to quality service. Jim Clemmer, co-founder of the Achieve Group, now runs the Clemmer Group, a business consulting organization in Kitchener, Ontario, Canada.

The *first ring* is the product, as it stands on its own. However, just providing the product, no matter how good it is, is not good enough.



The *second ring* represents identifying customers' needs and supplying it to them to support that product. This is also not nearly enough when reaching for total customer satisfaction.



The *third ring*, enhanced service, is a combination of the little things that make doing business with a company a fantastic experience. They are the small gestures, the personal touch and examples of knowledge and expertise that have a big impact on increasing the value of the basic product. It's in the arena of the third ring that a company's reputation is forged.



What are some of the services that should be available to a club's superintendent and his staff? First of all, there are the baseline or minimum service expectations. These include such items as wire tracing and finding broken wires, sprinkler operation and troubleshooting, controller and decoder service and earth ground testing for lightning protection.

In addition, the distributor should be able to set up and optimize the central control software including the hydraulic management and sprinkler precipitation rate functions, if necessary. They should have a deep enough understanding of the system along with the skills necessary to educate and train the system operators.

Other important distributor service functions include their being involved during the system installation phases such as material check-in, pre-construction meetings, and a manufacturer-certified start-up that assures the system is operating correctly.

Documentation should be provided such as site visit reports that keep all interested parties informed of the progress of an installation. At the commissioning of the system, there should be a complete set of manuals provided either in hard copy or digital formats or both. There should be appropriate service tool kits provided and regular software service pack updates installed as they become available.

These are some of the enhanced services that will set one distributor apart from another and are good indicators of their passion for the business of golf course irrigation. While these services may or may not be incorporated into the overall price of an irrigation system, course owners and superintendents should expect them to be part of a well-qualified distributor's offering and should expect to pay for them in one fashion or another.

One of the best ways to assess the distributor's qualifications in these and other areas is to contact those on their reference list – the names and phone numbers of the superintendents who operate the irrigation systems and deal with the distributor on a regular basis. Other positive indicators include the distributor's involvement in industry associations like the Irrigation Association, and their employment of staff members who are certified golf irrigation auditors.

The irrigation system is a club's largest investment and most important

tool in the management of its most visible asset - the golf course. Manufacturers and distributors need to be able to provide the superior service that will give the club the extra value in using that asset to its full capabilities. **BR**

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