



## Vendors as educators: a true win-win situation

**B**EING SOLD TO probably isn't high on anyone's list of favorite activities. But for professional turf managers, it's part of the job; you need to get the equipment and services that work for your particular situation, and often the best information comes from the folks trying to sell you that piece of equipment, product or service. And the vendors know that the best customers, the repeat customers, are the best-educated ones.

Here we present perspectives on vendors as educators:

**Dan Douglas,**  
stadium grounds superintendent, Reading Phillies

"[Our chapter] usually relies on educators and practitioners for presenters at our events. However, there are certain topics such as irrigation and equipment that we like to tap into the expertise of our commercial presen-

ters are not compensated but their company does benefit from the exposure. We ask that the presentations be educational and not an 'infomercial.'

"Our commercial members realize what a privilege it is to have a captive audience and typically only use subtle references to their company/products. If they don't, they won't be invited to speak again. We are always grateful for their support."

**Paul Zwaska, Beacon Athletics**

During my years working for the Baltimore Orioles as head groundskeeper, I worked with many vendors. But four or five in particular were of special value to me. These were vendors who were there to help me decipher problems, whether they had a product to deal with it or not. These vendors were more

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interested in finding answers for me then selling product to me. In doing so, these vendors gained my trust and loyalty because I knew whenever they appeared at my door at the stadium, it wasn't always to sell me their products.

Often times it was a social visit more so than a sales call. They might spot something I missed or they would help me find a solution to a problem that didn't always involve a product they sold. In fact, many times it was something someone else sold, supplied or knew the answer to. In doing so they helped to educate me on situations that I might not be familiar with. In a way, they helped to mentor me and further educate me in different areas of my field management.

In return, I followed those sales people to whatever company they worked for and always purchased product from them when they had what I needed. In short, vendors who educate, especially when removing themselves from the sales side of their business while they are educating, go a long ways in earning the trust of their customers. And once trust is established, the relationship will grow as will the sales from that customer.

After working both sides of the fence, it is the one rule I would teach to all new sales people in our industry. Listen first, relate next, then answer and educate as best you can and eventually a relationship will form and before you know it, you have a dedicated customer.

At Beacon Athletics, the seminars we do on our own and the seminars we perform in partnership with Toro and Diamond Pro are conducted in the same tone. These seminars are strictly educational with very little sales pitch involved. No one wants to spend money to come to a seminar only to have product shoved down their throat and presentations that are purely sales driven. People come to seminars to further educate themselves on their craft of groundskeeping. When performed properly, these seminars go a long way in establishing trust between the vendor and customers.

### **Jay Warnick, CSFM, World Class Athletic Surfaces**

Yes indeed, the commercial segment of this industry does have a role and responsibility in educating and providing support to each and every person engaged in the daily challenges found within the profession.

It is obvious to state that the vendor of a product should be the expert and authority on the product(s) that they are selling. Next, the vendor should also be a valuable resource, working in counsel with the

Sports Turf Manager as to how their products and services might impact the overall operations regarding budget, efficiency, environmental responsibility and so forth. Another primary responsibility of a vendor is to remain diligent in seeking out advances in technology and to communicate how such improvements may improve the management program of a given facility.

With all of that said, I have not felt the term "educator" as applicable. A unique opportunity of a vendor is that of traveling to many different facilities, and as such I have felt the term "student" more aptly applies to me. The education and teaching comes from the experiences of those who work each and every day on their field, solving problems and pouring in effort. With that in mind, the role of a vendor becomes that of an information gatherer and disseminator, reaping the benefits of an industry that is free and forthcoming with its information.

### **Chad Price, CSFM, Carolina Green Corp.**

Education is a big part of what we do for a client. Many times the client has limited knowledge of the construction process, or the various types of athletic field construction, or

both. We have to walk them through design, construction, and maintenance of the field, and then tie that into a workable project budget.

Explaining the types of field construction and the expectations and performance of the field is the easy part for us. The more difficult part is working through the design and construction process. Requirements for erosion control, stormwater, and permitting varies at the state and local level, and the time needed to work through the process is often 2-3 months, or more. The time and costs before breaking ground often comes as a surprise for a client that “just wants to build a field.”

Before the job starts, it is critical to coordinate various subcontractors so the field is not damaged along the way. Understanding the critical path of a schedule and knowing where the delays are most likely to occur is a huge part of timely completion. In every project, there comes a time when access over the field surface has to stop. So before that time, we make sure the concrete, steel, fencing, lights, etc. is either in place, or can be accessed from outside the field footprint.

So not only do we have to know our job, but the jobs of everyone else on the project, and anticipate their needs and actions. When I initially look at a job, I focus on everything that is under, over, or around the field first, and ask how that process will happen. Will they need to be on the field, or can they work from the outside? I try to determine the point at which all other construction traffic on the field can stop, and set that as the field construction start date. This date is usually part of the critical path in the construction schedule, if not a project milestone, so getting it established early helps everyone else adjust and keep on track.

In recent years we have been involved with field projects simply from a protection and event management angle. Facility managers or sports turf managers hosting a large concert or event on their stadium field need oversight and coordination assistance in order to prevent damage to the field. The same planning, scheduling, and coordination steps are used. We are at the planning meetings and on site during the build in and build out portion of the event to make sure the forklifts and cranes drive in the right places and proper flooring protection is used. After the event, we will do any repair work, but our protective work usually limits the amount of repairs.

### **Jeff Langner, Profile Products**

The Keep America Playing Tour arose out of recognition that ball fields, especially at the youth or park & recreation level, are often improperly maintained, resulting in unsafe conditions for players. We knew that coaches and groundskeepers wanted to keep fields in top condition, but they sometimes lacked the resources, or perhaps the education, on how to best make this happen.

With Keep America Playing (KAP), our goal is to develop safety and playability standards that help kids play on fields that will not lead to bad ball hops, injuries, rainouts, etc.

In 2007, we formally launched the Keep America Playing program by hosting on-site field days in communities giving attendees

opportunities for classroom learning and hands-on training. We bring professional groundskeepers on-site to demonstrate techniques they apply to their own fields. We've held several national educational events, along with smaller local events in conjunction with our Turface distributor network and industry partners such as PONY Baseball and Softball, the American Baseball Coaches Association (ABCA) and the Sports Turf Managers Association.

Knowing that we couldn't reach every area of the country, we also developed comprehensive online educational materials, which are quickly referenced, printed off and used for field maintenance. The educational content covers areas such as infield maintenance, turf management and field construction, which are the same kinds of topics we cover in our live education events. Our hope is that someone walks away from an event, or from our website, and has a clear idea of tactics they can implement, whether big or small, to improve their local field and to ensure that fields meet basic safety requirements.

With the goal of providing on-site assistance and web site materials to improve field playing conditions, the Keep America Playing Tour successfully lives up to its objective. For more information about KAP, call (800) 207-6457 or visit [www.keep-americanplaying.com](http://www.keep-americanplaying.com).

### **Paula Sliefert, The Toro Company**

The Toro Company is proud to make many investments in areas like product innovation, sustainable technology, and water management to name a few. Another investment Toro holds in high regard is our investment in Customer Education. Our educational offerings include classroom and “in the field” training available at distributors or customer sites. Toro is fortunate to have industry experts on staff to provide product training, equipment maintenance training and turf management education. The curriculum can be tailored to both current and future turf industry leaders. We have the capability to customize a training program to arm turf managers with the knowledge they need to succeed.

The Toro Company not only hosts service training schools at its headquarters in Bloomington, MN where attendees are surrounded by all the latest Toro equipment and technology, but also invests in training throughout the industry. This is accomplished several ways including the support of our distributor network to host field days and educational events, as well as partnering with other sports turf affiliated companies like Beacon and Diamond Pro to host a comprehensive session for turf managers which combines hands-on and classroom instruction. We also take pride in supporting education through the STMA and other industry associations and their chapters.

Vendors are in a good position to help with providing education for turf managers, keeping in mind that vendors gain as much from listening to turf managers and their challenges. The educational exchange between turf managers and vendors comes in helping the turf managers turn those challenges into opportunities. Toro invests in and believes wholeheartedly in helping turf managers learn how to become more efficient and productive in their positions. ■