Technology
and the turfgrass management industry

Technological advances have swept across the turf industry in recent years. Irrigation systems that were once operated by mechanical time clocks are now controlled by state-of-the-art computer systems with software tools that allow the user to know exactly how much water flowed through the system during the last irrigation cycle. Similarly, sensors connected to the same computer monitor pressure and can shut the entire system off in the event of a sudden loss of pressure possibly due to a broken irrigation line. These same irrigation systems can be remotely monitored and activated or deactivated with the use of most Smartphones. Other uses of technology include computerized parts inventory systems, digital time keeping systems, GPS/GIS, golf cart monitoring systems, TRIMS Grounds Management Software® – just to name a few.

These advances demonstrate that we live in a digital world, a fact that can no longer be denied. As inhabitants of a digital world, we come from differing perspectives. Marc Prensky, author of "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants," describes a Digital Native as a person who was born into the digital era; an era where digital technology such as computers, the Internet, mobile phones and MP3s have always existed. In other words, the digital world is as natural and indigenous to them as an American being born in the United States.

Conversely, a Digital Immigrant is an individual who grew up without digital technology and adopted it later. This is akin to native-born Russian immigrating to the United States where he/she is expected to adapt and assimilate to their newly adopted home. Palfrey and Gasser write of Digital Settlers, individuals who grew up in the analog world but immersed themselves into digital technologies and were part of digital evolution. Another group in the digital world is the Digital Dropouts. These are individuals who choose not to or weren't able to understand or use digital technology.

So which are you?

THE TOOLS

The past couple of years have brought several interesting "tools" to the digital world, namely social networking applications ("Apps" for short). A social network is a social structure made of individuals or organizations called "nodes," which are tied (connected) by one or more specific types of interdependency, such as friendship, kinship, financial exchange, dislike, or relationships of beliefs, knowledge or prestige." Social networks are mainstream; especially amongst the younger generation. The Pew Research Center cites that

35% of adults have profiles on social networking sites while 55% of online teens use social networking sites. The primary social networks are:

Facebook. "Giving people the power to share and make the world more open and connected." Facebook allows registered users to "interact" with one another on the "Wall," a space on every user's profile page that allows "friends" to post messages for the user to see. Facebook users can update their "Status" to inform their friends of their whereabouts and actions and you can "Chat" with friends who are online. Facebook also allows users to upload photos. All of these features are available from the computer or on most Smartphones. Some suggest that Facebook has greater privacy than MySpace but hackers have managed to infiltrate it. Profile settings regulate who sees what. Visit www.facebook.com to learn more about Facebook features. Feel free to check out the University of Florida's Golf and Sports Turf Management Facebook Fan page (www.facebook.com/ufturf) and be sure to "Become a Fan" if you would like to keep in touch.

MySpace. "A place for friends." MySpace is similar to Facebook but with one significant difference between the two websites: the level of customization. MySpace allows users to decorate their profiles using different backgrounds, pictures, etc. MySpace has been formed with entertainment and music in mind and so videos, music, and pictures are found on many of the MySpace pages. MySpace is deemed to be more "open" and your content can be seen by more people. As with Facebook, profile settings regulates who sees what. Check out www.myspace.com for more information.
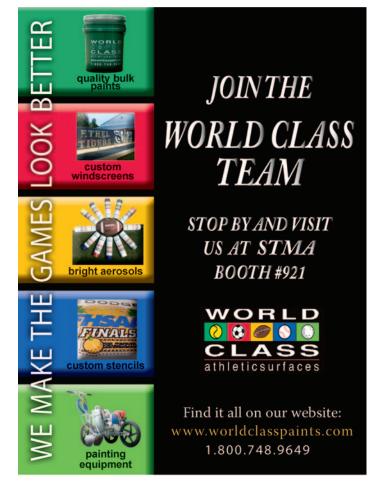
Twitter. "Share and discover what's happening right now, anywhere in the world." Twitter is a social networking and blogging service that allows users to send and read messages known as "tweets." Tweets are text-based posts of up to 140 characters that are displayed on your profile page and delivered to your subscribers who are known as "followers." Tweeters can restrict delivery of their updates to those in their circle of friends or allow open access for all to see. You can learn more about Twitter at www.twitter.com.

Google Buzz. "Go beyond status messages." Google Buzz is a relative newcomer to the social networking stage. Backed by the resources and people responsible for the most popular webpage in the world, Google Buzz has positioned itself as a simple means of communicating whatever it is that you find interesting. They have integrated sharing of photos and video in a manner that is seamless and in-line with status updates. Using their existing GMAIL accountholders as the early adopters they have created what could turn out to be the third largest social networking tool overnight. One standout difference with Google Buzz is the built-in feature that allows users to share their location when posting updates. Individuals can post public updates complete with location information that show up on a map on Google. If you are new to an area you may choose to browse those comments to learn

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Flickr. Flickr is an image and video hosting website (www.flickr.com) web services suite, and online community.

Twitpic. Similar to Flickr, Twitpic is a website (www.twitpic.com) that allows users to post pictures to the Twitter service.

Blog. Short for Web Log, blogs are places for you to write about anything you so desire.

YouTube. A video hosting website where one can place videos of just about anything.

Google docs. "Create and share your work online." Google docs is a free tool that offers a number of great features.

what people think of the public golf course or to check on reviews of a restaurant. You can learn more about Google Buzz at www.buzz.google.com.

Linkedin. "Relationships matter." Linkedin is a business-oriented social networking site mainly used for professional networking. Registered users can maintain a list of contact details of people they know and trust in business. The people in the list are called "Connections." The list of connections is then cross-referenced allowing users to network with a "connection of a connection" or "friend of a friend." There is also a Q&A section where you can ask business related questions or share business related answers. You can learn more about Linkedin at www.linkedin.com.

Regardless of where you feel that you fit, there is a good chance that you will interact with one of the many digital tools that you can find on the internet. The purpose of each social network varies slightly, and in some cases, may not be all that evident. MySpace is still the dominant social network, especially among the younger generation (Digital Natives). However, a quick internet search reveals that Facebook is rapidly becoming the most used social network and has likely surpassed MySpace. Research shows that different social networks appeal to those of differing ages. Teenagers are drawn to MySpace whereas LinkedIn is used commonly by working-aged individuals.

In addition to these primary social networking sites, many applications have been developed to assist those who partici-

pate in social networks. Examples of tools to compliment social networking sites include:

Flickr. Flickr is an image and video hosting website (www.flickr.com) web services suite, and online community. In addition to being a popular website for users to share and embed personal photographs, the service is widely used by bloggers to host images that they embed in blogs and social media. Flickr offers two levels of service: a "Free" membership that allows you to upload a reasonable number of pictures and video and a "Pro" membership that provides unlimited uploads. There are many photo hosting sites similar to Flickr, each with their own unique traits and features. Regularly uploading all of your pictures to a site like Flickr offers the added bonus of a free backup of your files in the event that you suffer from an unexpected hard drive failure.

Twitpic. Similar to Flickr, Twitpic is a website (www.twitpic.com) that allows users to post pictures to the Twitter service. If you have a Twitter account then you already have a Twitpic account and you can login to Twitpic with your Twitter username and password.

Blog. Short for Web Log, blogs are places for you to write about anything you so desire. Some use blogs to "rant and rave" about political activities while others use blogs as a personal journal or chronicle of their life activities. An example of a turf related blog is: http://www.turfdiseases.blogspot.com/

YouTube. A video hosting website where one can place videos of just about

anything. YouTube use is diverse and includes videos ranging from product promotion videos and student recruitment videos. An example of our Golf and Sports Turf Management degree program recruiting video can be seen here: (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2REnxRiJ6qk).

Google docs. "Create and share your work online." Google docs is a free tool that offers a number of great features. In a nutshell, Google docs is a cloud-based software suite that you can use to format and edit documents, spreadsheets, presentations, and forms from any computer that has access to the internet. It also allows you to share your content with other users giving you the ability to work on a document simultaneously with another user located in another physical location. A relatively new tool that Google has added to Docs is the form feature. Maybe you would like to create a short feedback form for customers to leave comments. You can create a form, complete with many different formatting options that you can then post on a company website or distribute through email. All responses are compiled in a spreadsheet in Google Docs where you can review and summarize the information at your convenience. To access Google docs you need to have a Google account, which is, of course, free. Just go to www.docs.google.com to sign-up. Once you have signed up you will have access to Google docs and an added bonus of over 7 gigabytes of online storage that can be used to store any and all files that you would like to backup or store for easy access.

Should I or shouldn't I?

The question often asked by turf managers is "Should I participate in a social network?" Our answer is sure, why not? Social networks are a great place to reconnect with friends of the past or to connect with current colleagues. Within the social networks, you control who your friends are—if you don't want to be their friend, you simply do not accept their request. Every year the New Oxford American Dictionary announces the new word of the year. The new word of 2009 was "unfriend," a verb which means "to remove someone as a 'friend' on a social networking site such as Facebook. So, if your "friend" does something you don't like, you can simply "unfriend" them and they cannot see your status updates.

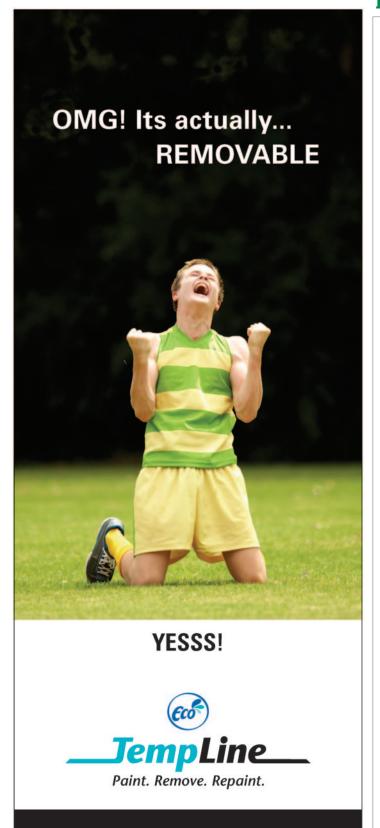The next logical question asked is, "Which social network?" In the Green Industry, it appears that Facebook is the most commonly used; however, the Facebook status updates may actually be originating from a Twitter account. Settings within the Twitter and Facebook accounts allow "tweets" to update Facebook automatically. One reason Facebook may be the most popular in the Green Industry is because Facebook allows

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for the creation of "fan" clubs and "groups." Many university turf programs have created Facebook groups for their current students and alumni to connect with each other

Additionally, many Green Industry businesses and allied associations have created Facebook profiles and the profile manager provides regular updates. From a marketing standpoint, Facebook, Twitter, and Buzz offer a relatively affordable means of reaching a targeted audience. For example, UF's Environmental Horticulture program has recently started targeting students in community colleges in Florida through Facebook ads. As a marketer you are able to specify age groups, keywords, location, interests, etc. to target your ads to those individuals who you feel will be most interested in your product. You can choose how much you want to spend with the minimum being around $1 per day. That might not seem like much, but for that $1 one is able to receive approximately 10,000 impressions (ad placements) each day on the pages of people who fit the criteria that we feel might be interested in attending UF upon finishing their community college education. Not bad when you consider how much it would cost in travel to reach just a fraction of the same group.

Though social networks offer some great benefits, users should exercise caution when using the networks. For starters:

• Social networks are really "private." People ranging from computer hackers to police investigators search social networks. Consequently, do not post too much personal information. For starters, leave the birthday and address lines vacant.

• Keep "business-related" sites business and "personal sites" personal. Espousing personal opinions or ideas on business-related social networks could come back to haunt you in the event that your opinion or ideas differ with those of your employer or customer.

• Do not post too many details related to your whereabouts. For example, if your job requires significant travel and you spend a great deal of time away from you home and family – don't advertise it. Doing so leaves your unattended family and home vulnerable to potential robbers. If you do post pictures from the trip, don't provide the details such as how long you will be away.

• Avoid posting "lack-of-judgment" statements, thoughts, or pictures. Most social networking sites "cache" their content meaning that there are backups and it is never deleted even if you think it has been. Phones with cameras can be dangerous tools if proper judgment is not exercised!

Whether you become a social network "junkie" who feels the need to update your status every three minutes or the occasional user who posts updates only when life's big events happen, social networks offer enjoyment and a level of interaction unlike that offered by another other communication tool. Start slowly and proceed cautiously. Enjoy. ■

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