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McTurf: A Model for the Turfgrass Industry

It's not enough for those who work in turf maintenance to talk about being environmentally responsible; they must prove it, especially to those who believe otherwise. Changing the perceptions that some hold about the golf industry's effects on the environment might even help grow the game.

An environmental movement in golf needs two things to be successful: demand from customers and an industry leader to set the standards. The demand for environmental stewardship—from within and outside the industry—already exists. But what's missing is a leader willing to step forward to set standards and effect change. Once that happens, getting the market to embrace those standards should be relatively easy.

A Fast-Food Model

An example of how this approach can work has taken place in the fast-food industry. A report in the Feb. 20, 2005 edition of *The New York Times* outlined the ripple effects on the apple industry caused by McDonald's Apple Dippers snack.

In response to a demand for healthier fast food options, McDonald's launched a line of items, including fresh apple slices, aimed at health-conscious consumers. According to *The New York Times* report, McDonald's instantly became the nation's largest buyer of apples, purchasing more than 54 million pounds this year.

With this level of buying power, McDonald's has the ability to exercise its influence on the apple industry. When a representative from the company communicated to apple growers that McDonald's prefers such varieties as cameo and pink lady (neither of which are widely grown) because of their flavor and crispness, production of both types skyrocketed. For example, production of cameo apples in Washington—which produces more than half of all apples grown in the United States—shot up 58 percent so far this year.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, apples are one of the world's most

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This Times

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McTurf

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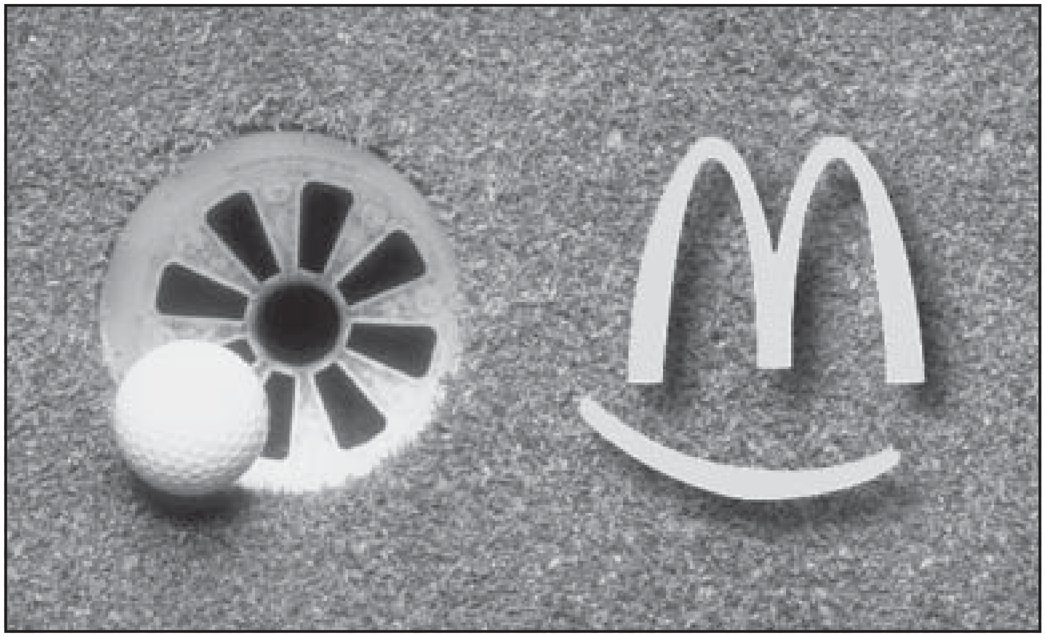

To capitalize on this market, the golf industry needs a "McDonald's" to demand a certain level of standards. If the PGA Tour, for example, demanded that courses on which its events are played establish and maintain standards of environmental compatibility that exceed those already set by Audubon International, I believe the rest of the industry would follow.

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widely sprayed produce products. McDonald's, if it so chooses, also has the power to effect change to a more sustainable production model that is less reliant on pesticides.

There is no questioning the demand for a lifestyle that includes healthier food options and less exposure to synthetic chemicals. A report from a group known as Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability, which tracks business and consumer trends for goods and services that focus on health and the environment, claims there are as many as 68 million Americans interested in living a healthier lifestyle. This group spends nearly $30 billion annually on natural food and personal care products. Although many golfers seem to be interested in little more than perfect playing conditions, some are drawn to the game because of the natural beauty that comes with being outdoors. The industry potentially could grow the game by trying to attract others interested in taking up another outdoor activity.

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Talking in Code

Obviously, such talk is code for using less pesticides. Chemical runoff and water use are two hot-button issues regarding the game and how it affects the environment.

There is much to be learned from the organic agriculture industry. For example, organic does not necessarily mean "no pesticides." There are some pest problems for which no alternative to pesticide use exists. Such products are categorized as a level of organic that is less than 100 percent.

The GCSAA Environmental Institute could help expedite the process of changing perceptions by convincing industry leaders, such as the PGA Tour, that superintendents are capable of delivering a product that is well maintained and environmentally responsible.

Of course, this won't happen overnight—consider that it took four years of market research and testing for McDonald's to launch Apple Dippers. But the same people who decide there is an audience willing to buy yet another $500 driver also can help define potential new golfers. While the industry seeks new players, it can work to change the perceptions of its core market as well. It might sound farfetched, but who ever thought you'd be able to buy apple slices at McDonald's?

Frank S. Rossi, Ph.D.