

Innovative Knowledge for Industry Growth

The Success of the Syngenta Business Institute

Golf course superintendents have increasing requirements to not only deliver outstanding turf conditions, but to also possess excellent business and managerial skills. The Syngenta Business Institute (SBI) is an innovative professional business development program for golf course superintendents. Since 2009, Syngenta has partnered with the Wake Forest Executive Education to host this three-day leadership institute. At SBI, superintendents receive hands-on, practical knowledge to enhance their business intelligence and expand leadership skills for their professional development.

Opportunity

As the #1 market share leader in golf course agronomics, Syngenta's executive leadership noticed that their customer's needs were changing. The golf course superintendent is not only expected to be an expert in agronomics, but business acumen is becoming as or more important. Areas such as negotiations, human resource competency, financial management, leadership, and diversity and cultural awareness are requiring expanded skill sets. Syngenta has long been known for its innovation in the industry. There is a strong desire to continue to differentiate itself in the market and fully support the industry through a unique customer experience, and subsequent commitment to executive education and talent development.

Syngenta's main priority in designing a learning program for the industry is to educate and improve golf course superintendents in their business —not to increase sales of Syngenta's products. "If we make [superintendents] better at their jobs, we have seen them reward us with their loyalty," says Mark LaFleur of Syngenta. "We want to provide them with a platform to improve their careers. This program needs to be about the industry as a whole and providing value."

"I could never do what these guys do on a day-to-day basis. They worry about finding good employees. They worry about maintaining a pristine golf course every day. They worry about financial issues, making money for their clubs, satisfying all of the daily requirements that need to be met, and handling problem employees. For superintendents, the agronomy is the easy part. It's the people management that is difficult," said Robert Meyer of Superintendent Magazine.

"The four days spent at the Syngenta Business Institute was the most rewarding, pertinent, and valuable education I have received in some time. SBI gets to the heart of managing a golf facility in today's world beyond just agronomics. Learning how to manage different cultures and generations was very important to me and SBI delivered. I have already been able to use the techniques from SBI to better communicate with some of my staff and that has resulted in improved morale and enthusiasm." Fred Gehrisch, CGCS, Highlands Falls Country Club, Highlands, NC



"SBI has just strengthened that brand promise Syngenta has and helps us deliver even more," says Dave Ravel of Syngenta. "SBI gives the company clout in the industry and distinguishes the company as a leading voice." Looking forward, topics at SBI will focus on servant leadership and managing generational differences along with opportunities to embrace social media and the benefits it provides to both staff and club members.

"The program benefits the attendees as well as the company," said Ken Middaugh, Wake Forest faculty leader for the SBI program. "Syngenta might not be selling products outright, but they eventually see a return from the program in more ways than one." Middaugh said this program shows that Syngenta wants to keep the industry alive, which ultimately means it will continue selling its products. "To receive feedback from [the superintendents] a couple years later is the best part," he said. "It's really nice to hear we've made a difference in their lives."

Client Profile



Solution

To innovatively address this industry opportunity, Syngenta started by identifying the outcomes of the learning program and focusing on ways to improve their industry and customers with the right steps: first, define objectives; second, find the right partner; and last, evolve as time goes on.

In designing this three (3)-day immersive program, Wake Forest faculty focused first on areas such as financial metrics that are useful in evaluating the performance of golf and club operations. Key program delivery initiatives included industry best practices, experiential learning and case studies rather than lectures, and evening roundtable topic discussions facilitated by a faculty member. In terms of managing employees, two sessions were developed. The first was focused on the elements of cultural diversity on how people go about doing their jobs, and the second was about leveraging and respecting the value of differences in each employee. Whether it's different generations, race or cultural background, attendees need to learn various ways to reach employees and relate to the issues they might have. Cases are presented and discussed highlighting the power of negotiating and how it can be used to create the best possible outcomes in finance, personnel, and other aspects of course management. SBI fulfills a goal passionate to Syngenta's leadership team – elevate and strengthen the business acumen of key, valued customers while expanding the leadership capabilities of superintendents in the golf industry.

Result

Although Syngenta says the SBI program has anecdotally impacted product sales and revenues, the key accomplishment is the significant impact this innovative professional development program is having on the future careers of superintendents and the golf agronomics industry. Syngenta continues to define a successful SBI program in the following ways: did the SBI program offer substantive peer-to-peer engagement, were stronger relationships fostered between superintendents and the company, and did the program elevate and strengthen superintendents' connection to the industry. Essentially, Syngenta is embedding industry talent with critical leadership competencies and business savvy to ensure golf course superintendents stay in the business long term and have professional growth opportunities. Confirming the success of this program, recent SBI participants have enthusiastically agreed to serve in an advisory council capacity as Syngenta tests new "apps" in golf course turf agronomy.

In regard to SBI, Wake Forest faculty leader Ken Middaugh stated, "One of the things that amazed me the most about this program is that from day one, there has never been a commercial during the program. The Syngenta folks do not talk about new products. Instead, they're really focused on giving the participants a set of skills to improve the industry."

From attendees at SBI:

As Rancho Bernardo Inn course superintendent Chris Hayman noted, "The program touches on all the important things that are non-agronomic that we deal with as superintendents. As an example, I realized how much of my work week is put into negotiations. I really took away a lot from that course at SBI. It's the kind of education where you use what you've learned and really apply it."

"I find it very valuable when I'm around colleagues", said Scott Dey of Mission Viejo Country Club. "There are so many experiences out there, that when you get into a setting like SBI, it offers the sharing of knowledge and people are sharing ideas, talking about things. You get to see how other superintendents are going about problem-solving techniques."

"The Syngenta Business Institute is arguably the best continuing education program I have attended. It was a learning experience that will allow me to grow as a leader for my maintenance team and club. The educators and hosts were first-class and the opportunity to network with fellow superintendents is always an added bonus. Thank you again to the entire Wake Forest and Syngenta team for this opportunity." Eric Feldhusen, Mountain Gate Country Club, Los Angeles, CA

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