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Getting the Word Out-and In

How you use—or restrict—communications technology in your club can speak volumes about your ability to effectively manage staff and serve members.

by Erin Brereton (editor@clubandresortbusiness.com)
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At many clubs and resorts, giving guests a place to relax and interact is priority number one. Tradition and a personal touch, such as calling guests by name, are a vital part of the experience. But in today's increasingly fast-paced world, many members' free time is limited and often intermingled with real world responsibilities such as business calls, the need to check and send e-mail, and other forms of constant contact with the outside world.

Not surprisingly, the Palo Alto Hills Golf and Country Club in Palo Alto, Calif. (an area called the birthplace of Silicon Valley) has stepped up its technology and communication offerings in line with this trend. Its Web site,

www.pahgcc.com, debuted five years ago and is currently outsourced to a company that designs the member and non-member sections.

"The members can see events, read the newsletter and minutes, review an up-to-date bill or a roster of other members, and more," says the club's General Manager, Christian Thon. "The non-members can get basic information about the club's memberships and banquet events, such as weddings and corporate events."

The club also offers free wireless Internet access and locker room phones, computer access (with Internet) for posting scores, and more.

Yet Palo Alto Hills G&CC—arguably on the cutting edge of club communication technology—believes in retaining old-fashioned touches, too. "Phone messages are privately delivered to our members," Thon says. "It's much nicer that way. We know all 500 of our members by name."

Striking this delicate balance between highly personalized service and modern "techno" touches is a major issue for clubs today; while communicating with members has become more technology-based, concerns remain strong about not losing the value of a handshake and a smile that has always been a hallmark of good club service.

As a result, adding or upgrading technology isn't an easy decision for any club. In addition to cost and installation time, the overall effect any changes could have on staff service, customer experience and overall satisfaction must be considered. To decide what's right, you need to reflect on the positive changes technology can provide—and foresee and troubleshoot potential problems.



Keeping in Contact

Take, for example, the question of personalized communication tools such as e-mail addresses and phone extensions. Getting a staff used to e-mailing and checking voice mail frequently can be difficult at clubs and resorts, where many staff positions involve being out on the grounds for long periods of time.

"Given the nature of our business, and the fact that many people on staff do not spend intermittent time at a desk, we've found that a mix of communication techniques works best," says Brian Arthur, Clubhouse Manager at Ballymeade Golf and Country Club, Falmouth, Mass. Ballymeade's year-round staff members have had individual e-mail addresses and Internet access for the past few years, and the club underwent system upgrades last year to connect everyone electronically. Arthur feels it's all led to a boost in efficiency for the club. "It actually seems to be very beneficial in giving most staff members the flexibility they need to perform their jobs, while allowing them to return messages at a time that is more conducive to their schedule," he says.

However, just adding e-mail doesn't ensure your staff will communicate. At Panther Creek Country Club, in Springfield, Ill., where all staff members—including banquet and dining room managers as well as golf and grounds professionals and the club's executive chef—have been given their own club-domain-based e-mail addresses, Operations Manager Tim Straley reports that "there haven't been any issues—once everyone got into the habit of checking their e-mail."

While e-mail can be a great way to get policy changes, suggestions or news out to a widespread audience, many club managers stress it's important to know when face-to-face time is best, too. "Unimportant" information is most often done via e-mail," says Palo Alto Hills' Thon—but while the volume of electronic communications has increased at his club, so has the number of staff meetings. The same principle applies to clubs using portable communication devices to keep on-the-go staff members in contact. "We use cell phones quite extensively, but also try to have weekly meetings to discuss upcoming events and other club issues," says Panther Creek's Staley.

Now Hear This

Summing It Up

- Good communications systems can help a club boost operating efficiencies by reducing the number (and length) of staff meetings.
- Regular e-mails to membership can boost event attendance and keep the club front-of-mind for dining and other activities.
- Adding wireless fidelity (Wi-Fi) will help bring your club or resort up to date with the public spaces, such as cafes and bookstores, that offer this service. It also makes it easier for members who need to bring their business to the club, be it for a planned meeting or to check in with the office.
- It's important to stay current with technology, but always upgrade with actual staff and member needs in mind, to avoid frivolous add-ons.

Communications isn't just an internal need, of course, especially when an organization exists to serve its members. And as club members' lives get busier, it can be harder to effectively remind them about exciting upcoming programming—which is why online communication needs to be a key part of club event planning.

"We have recently added several services in good part from technology advances, along with member requests," says Jeffrey J. Blais, General Manager at Green Island Country Club in Columbus, Ga. "We now send weekly e-mails to all of our members promoting the various upcoming food and beverage events and activities, along with separate e-mails to tennis members and golf members promoting events in these areas."

Panther Creek also sends weekly event notifications via e-mail. "I have received many compliments from members regarding the way that we keep them informed of everything that is going on at the club via e-mail," Straley says. "Not only do we have our monthly newsletter and event flyers on e-mails, we also send out a short 10-day calendar every Monday, to make sure the members haven't forgotten an upcoming event."

Weekly newsletters can serve as quick reminders, but many clubs say a Web presence is also important to inform current and potential members. Some Web sites are homespun—Panther Creek's Web site was developed and designed in March 2005 by an office administrator—while others are more elaborate, sometimes outsourced to Web companies or freelancers.

"Our site, www.ballymeade.com, was launched a few years ago," Arthur says. "Potential members can visit the site and take a tour of the course. Contacts are also available for outings, functions, and membership information. Currently we contract out for such services, but hope to take them on ourselves in the future."

And like many projects that clubs undertake, Ballymeade's Web site is a work in progress. "We are making upgrades to the site," Arthur says. "We currently do not have a special link for our members, but it's something we're working on, and believe will be a valuable tool."

Why Wi-Fi?

Your club's Web site isn't the only one you need to be thinking about. As more and more members bring work to the club with them, Internet access is a frequent request. With cafes and bookstores—both popular chains and small, independent ones—now offering wireless technology, some clubs have added it to their amenity lists.

"We presently offer computer access for members," says Blais. "We are investigating additional wireless capabilities, on top of the Internet access that we already provide via telephone lines. Both were born from member requests. We saw both as opportunities not only to please the members, but also have them spend more time at the club. The more time they spend [here], the more value they perceive from their membership."

Still, as tempting as adding exciting new technology can be, determining member needs and desires is an important factor when considering time-intensive and often expensive technology upgrades. For that reason, some clubs that already offer Internet capabilities are waiting to add Wi-Fi. "We have thought about putting a wireless connection somewhere," says Straley, "but as of yet, there has not been any call for it."

System-Ready

When a new software or hardware addition is called for, it's important to make sure the scope of installation reflects the level of demand. Member needs can dictate a number of technological changes—or just as importantly, the need for less, to create or preserve the "peaceful escape" many clubs strive for. Giving members an outlet to offer suggestions can help determine if any tech changes are needed, just as getting staff input can identify how to better use technology. In other words, it takes communication to implement appropriate communication system changes.

"With rapidly developing technologies always available, and our desire to better our services and offerings, we will always be looking to improve," Arthur says. Blais echoes that sentiment: "I feel we always need to keep a keen eye on tech changes and how they may affect our members and club. [That's led us to] increase communication through e-mail, statement stuffers, and attractive signage. And we've been investigating online reservations, personalized radios with earpieces for staff communication, offering monthly statements online, wireless access in several function rooms, and more.

"But we need to keep in mind that members are looking for a different setting at their club, versus work or stand-alone dining," he adds. "As new, younger executives become members, they need to keep in touch with the business world, even when enjoying leisure activities. But for the most part, at our club they seek balance, and enjoy being away from phones and computers."

Even at Palo Alto Hills G&CC, where technology is quite literally all around, leisure and atmosphere come first. The high-tech communication tools offered by the club were added by anticipating member needs, not through demand. "We are probably on the advanced side and have not seen any requests for added technology," Thon says. "Members come here to enjoy the club, not to use technology—so to speak." C&RB

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