

The Golf Club Secretary

BRIEFING AND PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR GOLF CLUB ADMINISTRATORS

Communication Matters

Texting has been around almost since mobile phones came into being and yet a recent survey shows it isn't being used, even though the costs are plummeting. Paul Mainstone explores whether this may be the next big thing to improve customer service.

We all know how important it is to communicate. This applies not only to communication between colleagues and between the Club and suppliers, but also to communication between the Club and its members and visitors.

New technologies and their associated user facilities have made the process of communicating increasingly easy. Websites are now universal and the move to responsive websites, which may be used equally well on smart phones as desktops, is gathering momentum. Email is a standard method of communication and computer systems can now generate emails automatically as a result of an administrator at a Club performing some function such as agreeing a booking. Clubs are starting to exploit social media tools such as Facebook and Twitter. Even the venerable **R&A** uses these modern methods.

So, the days when you put your best kept secrets on a noticeboard in the foyer of the Club are long gone! Nevertheless, there are many available tools which still remain underexploited, for example, using mobile app 'push notifications' or good old fashioned text messaging, perhaps because mobile apps are still not used by many Clubs and text messaging is perceived as costly.

Telling people about your Club is clearly possible through your website. The website is also an excellent place to keep members informed about handicaps, competitions, bar accounts and subscription payments. Email is great for newsletters, subscription notices and general office communications. Different people use different forms of social media, so it is important that the Club standardises on one or two social media vehicles and keeps them up to date.

For communications with members, 'push notifications' offered through mobile apps are an excellent means to broadcast to all those of your members who have downloaded your mobile app. Such communications could include quick messages informing all people on a start sheet that the course is closed, or re-opened.

Another useful tool for this is text messaging, already frequently used by doctors, dentist, opticians, hairdressers and other practitioners reminding patients and clients of their forthcoming appointments. Golf clubs could use them as reminders of a tee time for either casual golf or a competition, reminders to people who have booked into a social event, or even to wish a member a happy birthday!

Each of these methods has its own set of challenges. Websites are reactive, so people have to visit and then search to find the information they want. Emails get junked or are just deleted as the subject line doesn't strike a chord.

People have to 'Friend' you on Facebook, 'Follow' you on Twitter, load mobile applications to receive 'Push notifications', or join 'WhatsApp' for free group discussions. However, most people can receive a text message regardless of the type of phone they are using, and the good news is that the costs are tumbling.

I recently ran a quick survey looking at how Clubs communicated last minute golf related information, such as tee times, to members and visitors. The survey first looked at the methods Clubs used to manage bookings for members and visitors, and then went on to see how this and other information was made available to golfers. I also thought it instructive to add questions related to the communication of non-green fee related information such as a notice of an AGM or EGM, or information on the Captain's Drive In, or just an upcoming Club social event.

The survey went out to 761 secretary managers. 92 Clubs, or just over 12%, responded. As usual, I ran a draw for all entrants where the prize was a case of respectable wine, sponsored by the text messaging company *www.sawted.com* and delivered in time for Christmas. I am pleased to announce that the winner was **Jim Cunning**, from now on known as Lucky Jim, from *Clevedon Golf Club* in the South West.

Whilst the survey size is small it nevertheless provides some interesting insights. There were only a few questions.

I made an assumption that tee-times probably represented the most interesting area to investigate with regard to last minute communications and so started the survey by looking predominantly at how Clubs use online booking systems.

Just over 60% of responding Clubs now offer some form of online tee bookings for visitors. The figure drops to just over 50% for members. Just over half the Clubs offering online tee-bookings are managed using BRS Golf and a further third use **Teofftimes** independently of any other software at the Club. All respondents using ESP systems ran online tee-booking for visitors and members. This may be down to the more proprietary nature of Clubs using ESP.

So the mood seems to be changing. Had we asked these questions just a few years ago, the concept of publishing online tee-times would have been met by howls of derision from the large majority of Clubs. Now it is clear that the idea is catching on, and is sure to spread as more and more Clubs attempt to minimise course idle time.

Online facilities to book into Open Competitions are now offered by nearly half the respondents. Again, BRS Golf leads the way supplying the software to nearly one in four Clubs.

But Clubs are also allowing visitors and members different ways to arrange and play their casual golf. Two thirds of the Clubs still allow members to just roll up to play golf without worrying about booking a tee-time, although less than a third allow visitors the same privilege, even though online facilities may be available. People also call the Pro-shop (30%), call the office (15%) and email the Club (12%) to book tee-times.

Booking into competitions varies depending on the type of competition. Open competitions are generally entered by submitting a form to the Club, presumably with the appropriate payment (45%) though online systems are used in 23% of cases. Club Championships relied heavily on entering the player's name onto an entry sheet (60%) as is the case with Monthly Medals (43%). Many Clubs use a variety of methods to collect entrants for these competitions. But a steady quarter of all Clubs are moving towards online bookings for all competition types.

The answers to these initial questions regarding competitions and how entrants' details are collected are instructive. They show that the on-line bookings are certainly happening, and whilst it would need a similar survey at the same time

in the coming year to measure trends, my prediction is that it will continue to grow as a general method of operation. This is because it reduces administration within the Club, improves general visibility with members and visitors as they become more attuned to smart phone usage and, most importantly, it helps a Club's finances!

Clearly, as the trend for using smart phones to do just about everything continues, it becomes more important for Clubs to make the use of them as a tool. However, it seems that there is still some way to go.

Going back to the start of this article, what tools are Clubs using to communicate casual information to golfers? The final question in the survey looked at which tools were being used to communicate certain types of message. Only 35% of Clubs send a 'happy birthday' email to their members. 80% use their website, and email system, to communicate virtually all other pieces of information such as whether the course is open or closed, or when the next social event is taking place.

Next on the list is the use of Twitter (with about 30% of Clubs using it), Facebook (again about 30%), with Mobile 'Push Notifications' and Mobile Text Messages hovering around the virtually unused 2%–5% mark. Twitter and Facebook are great for talking to groups of people, but if you just want to talk to an individual you have to use either an email or a text message. With emails becoming the modern day junk mail, maybe the next step to improve customer service is a text messaging service for golfers? It is certainly worth thinking about.

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