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“Mobilizing” Your Club’s Member Communications

FEBRUARY 2000 - THE CMAA WORLD CONFERENCE IN ATLANTA. THREE UPSTART COMPANIES LAUNCH THEIR WEB SITE PRODUCTS DESIGNED ESPECIALLY FOR PRIVATE CLUBS. AND THE FACE OF CLUB TECHNOLOGY IS CHANGED FOREVER.

Several points stick in my mind about that event. First, most club managers reacted negatively to the concept of a club website (less than five percent of clubs had websites in 2000). They grumbled... “The members will never use a website... it’s too expensive... it’s just a fad.” Secondly, a few managers came away saying... “This is the future of member communications.”

And of course, those visionary managers were right – to a degree. A short five years later more than 75 percent of private clubs had a website, and today the number is 98 percent. But have websites really delivered on the vision of becoming “the” member communications vehicle?

When speaking at industry conferences I sometimes refer to the “really big advances” in computer technology that have rocked the private club world. They are:

1970s - Moving away from external billing services to in-house computer systems.

1980s - Replacing cash registers and paper chits with computerized POS systems.

1990s - Migrating from centralized mini-computer systems to decentralized networks of PCs.

2000s - Adding websites and email to computerize member communications.

Now it’s 2011 – and my focus has been turning toward the next “really big advance” in computer technology for private clubs. And no, it isn’t social networking!

MOBILE COMMUNICATIONS DEVICES

Starting with simple pagers and “beepers”, progressing to car and briefcase phones, downsizing to cellular phones, and miniaturizing to palm-sized flip phones – mobile devices have been focused entirely on voice communications for more than two decades. Pagers provided a number to call, and each new wireless invention made calling faster and more convenient.

Great mainstream technology for placing and receiving voice calls – but minimal effect on private clubs. (One might argue that the biggest impact of this technology on clubs has been to spawn rules against cell phone usage in the clubhouse.)

In the late 90s PDAs appeared and made some headway with the techies, but their complexity, cost and limitations (no phone – just data) kept them from gaining a mainstream foothold. *Impact on private clubs – zilch.* (A few clubs bought PDAs for staff use, but the promise of these devices far outstripped any practical applications.) Then came SmartPhones – and life, as we knew it, began to change. Texting, which was an offbeat and difficult task with cell phones, came alive with SmartPhone keyboards that everyone could use.

Email became commonplace on these devices, and was enhanced to synch up with accounts at work and home. Most recently, apps have appeared on SmartPhones, dramatically changing the technology landscape. No longer are these devices mobile phones with email, *now they are mobile computers that double as phones.*

MOVING OUR LIVES ONTO OUR SMARTPHONES

It really is amazing how quickly – and completely – our society is embracing SmartPhone technology. Here are some startling statistics to consider:

- 31 percent of U.S. mobile phone owners had a SmartPhone on 12-31-2010. (Nielson)
- SmartPhones will be the majority *by the end of this year (2011).* (Nielson)
- 89 percent of SmartPhone owners *use their device throughout the day.* (Google/IPSOS)
 - 89 percent check email.
 - 82 percent read the news and conduct research.
 - 75 percent search for a place.
 - 65 percent keep themselves entertained.

Lest you get the idea that SmartPhones are just for kids, consider this data as of Q4 2010 (comScore):

- 22 percent of persons age 35-44 own a SmartPhone.
- 16 percent – 45-54.
- 18 percent – 55 plus.

By now those percentages are much higher and heading up at an accelerating rate. Your members are even more likely to own and use SmartPhones than the “general public.” SmartPhones aren’t cheap, but these devices and services are easily affordable by your members.

Although I have been unable to find any research showing SmartPhone usage by income or wealth levels, I would suggest that *the usage rates within your membership are probably twice the percentages listed above for the general public.*

This rapid adoption of SmartPhone technology – by your club’s members – will drive the next “really big advance” in computer technology for private clubs – *mobile member communications.*

WHAT SMARTPHONE USERS EXPECT

Simple. They expect to have the same Internet services on their mobile devices that they currently access with their home or work computers. For a private club, include everything currently provided on your website – and more.

Member roster. Club calendar. News and information. Billing account access and payments. Reservations (dining, club events, activities, tee times and courts). Photo galleries. Club documents. Social networking features. And everything else of interest to your members. All on a SmartPhone platform accessible by a variety of different devices – Android, iPhone, Blackberry and others.

Now don’t think your members will be as patient waiting for mobile access as they were in waiting for a club website. Every time a club member uses their SmartPhone to make a restaurant reservation, or send/receive email, or check the stock market, or shop on line – and then has to call the club to “transact business” – they are painfully reminded that their club is behind the times.

COMPUTER TECHNOLOGY A SIGNIFICANT AMENITY?

Until recently most private clubs viewed their investment in technology as a necessary chore and an unwanted expense.

A variety of member-focused technologies have been added by clubs: wireless networks for members and guests, websites with a broad array of features including online statements and bill pay, online reservations and more.

But these additions have mostly been piecemeal, with no “big picture” strategy. And they have tended to lag behind member expectations, always playing catch-up as member requests keep pouring in.

Few clubs have recognized technology as the powerful and valuable amenity it can be – an amenity that can significantly increase the value of the club’s membership.

Think about it. Compared to almost all other amenities a club offers its members, technology is a real bargain. It does-

n’t require much if any space. Labor requirements are minimal. And hard costs are nothing compared to sports, dining, clubhouse and pool.

Imagine a well-planned technology amenity with a broad and deep online presence - taking advantage of your members’ nearly compulsive use of their SmartPhones.

Imagine a channel accessing every aspect of club life. Imagine a medium touching every member of the family at all levels of their interests and curiosity. Imagine your club’s online presence being an integral part of your members’ lives. Imagine...

Turning imagination into reality.

Stay tuned. In my next article I’ll cover what SmartPhone features are currently available for private clubs, what’s in development, and what’s on the drawing boards. **BR**

Bill Boothe is a partner with Private Club Technology Solutions, an independent consulting firm providing a wide range of technology consulting services. During his 20 plus years in the club industry Bill has assisted more than 300 private clubs with the planning, evaluation, selection and implementation of computer technology in all facets of their operations. Bill can be reached at bboothe@PCTSGroup.com and at (561) 281-0459.

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