

**BILL BOOTHE**

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Software or Service Which Is More Important?

For more than 30 years, I've focused my consulting work on helping private clubs and communities evaluate and select the "best fit" software to handle all aspects of their operations.

During those years, the number of software vendors serving our industry has dwindled from more than 20 to just three major players. The remaining vendors have broadened their offerings to incorporate virtually all of the functionality most clubs could want.

In fact, the software offered by any one of the three major players will satisfy the needs of a majority of clubs. Only a small fraction of clubs have specialized needs that warrant choosing one vendor over the other, and tough competition between vendors makes the pricing of their solutions quite similar. So, similar software functionality, similar pricing – is that the end of the story? Do we just randomly choose systems? Draw straws? Flip a coin?

Of course not. Because there is one other critical factor to consider when choosing a software vendor: customer support. And that factor could be a significant differentiator between the key providers. Yet most clubs focus their evaluation efforts almost entirely on software features. It's as if they are shopping for a new car by focusing entirely on features and styling while ignoring the car's maintenance and service record.

Bottom line: You may think this is a lot of effort for not much return. Think again. There can be significant differences between vendors when it comes to customer support. It's fun to have a new car with lots of features and great styling. But it's not much fun to constantly have that car in the shop with maintenance and service issues. The right features with good customer support – that's the winning combination for your club. **BR**

Obtaining a fair sample of vendor references can be challenging. Vendors are happy to provide two or three references from clubs that are pleased with their service. But how can you know if those references are a representative sample of their overall customer base? Here are some suggestions on how to gather meaningful data on customer satisfaction.

1. Ask for 20 club references.

That way the vendor is less likely to "cherry-pick" references.

2. Bypass the vendor altogether and solicit references from clubs that you can contact yourself.

Send an email request to your CMAA or HFTP chapter members, or your list of club contacts, asking them which system they are using.

3. Contact clubs that are similar in size and operations to your own.

No need to contact a huge city athletic club if yours is a medium-sized golf and country club. And vice versa.

4. When discussing customer service, speak with the key users of the software.

In accounting, speak with the CFO or controller. In F&B, speak with the person who manages the POS system. In banquets and catering, speak with the person who creates BEOs and does the billing. In golf, speak with the merchandiser. In any department, speak with the folks who use the system and train others – not the GM/CEO, not board members, not department heads who rarely touch the software.