Touching base

The main software suppliers to golf clubs spent 2012 developing systems that are meeting an insatiable demand from golf clubs to improve the ways they communicate. **Tom James** finds out what managers, committees and members are now able to do

The speed and rate of technological change is now so rapid that it's easy to fall behind current trends. The leisure industry has historically been guilty of not keeping pace with progress – and golf is no exception.

With the arrival of 4G technology in certain UK cities, connections are faster than ever and information sharing has reached even greater heights. In stark contrast, a significant number of golf clubs are still vastly under-utilising vital technologies, even email.

This year is one that the UK's leading IT systems' management companies see as a time for real progression, for some

as the move towards a wholly web-based model begins. This advance will ultimately make clubs more streamlined and will shift the emphasis to members, allowing them to manage and tailor their own memberships.

"The biggest recent shift in the market is the move to online and hosted systems, and more flexibility of operation," explained Hilary Clamp, sales manager for Club Systems International.

"In many cases, it is still committee members who do the administration on a voluntary basis, so hosted systems make operations much simpler," she

argued. "It's an evolution for most clubs, like us moving from MS-DOS to Windows – it's a similar leap, and one that isn't going to happen overnight."

NEW PRODUCT: CLUBV1
Club Systems' new ClubV1 cloud handicapping and membership software is designed to allow remotely based committee members and office staff alike to manage club affairs more efficiently. "One benefit of Club V1 is that it allows administrators to set user access and limit it to specific users, which is an important feature, so there's no risk of just anyone viewing members' databases," Clamp explained. "Also, the software can be used on PCs, Macs, tablet computers and smart phones, so it means connectivity is heightened and users can manage their memberships and handicaps on the go."

NEW PRODUCT: COMMIT
In 2012, Jonas Computing UK, a subsidiary of Jonas Software, the world's largest provider of software to the club management industry, launched COMMiT, a system claimed to handle every aspect of IT for a club – from its website to bar accounts and memberships.

"COMMiT is like a jigsaw," explained Paul Mainstone, director of Jonas Computing UK. "The various modules are the individual pieces, which can be used separately or as a whole. Each module is supplied by different specialist groups but the system operates as one united entity when used by clubs and members."

The thinking behind COMMiT has been to improve customer service, reduce administration and allow members to take charge of their own membership, relieving clubs of much of the red tape associated with it.

The crucial point, stressed Mainstone, is to allow non-critical information to be viewed online, while keeping vital elements still "within the clubhouse".

"A member should be able to log on and see everything relevant to them and their interests, whether that be news, course updates, handicaps or bar tab, allowing the unique tailoring of the member's 'landing page'," he continued.

A single member login is perhaps the ▶▶

most powerful dimension of COMMiT. Although each module is produced by a different company, members are never aware of it when using the software. "The old system of multiple logins was confusing for members," said Mainstone, "but COMMiT makes it more streamlined, and now when members update their profiles, everything is automatically sent to the other areas in the club, thus reducing the need for in-house staff to do it." Importantly, the club can delegate adding web pages to officers at the club, he added, and the club manager can act as editor, "to decide exactly what should appear on a member's landing page, which means members feel more in control of their own destiny, are better connected and feel more a part of their club."

Mainstone insists golf needs to move more towards what he calls the 'Ryanair model', whereby as much of the legwork is pushed out to members,

"Members by and large want to use the latest technologies and use them as part of their memberships"

who can individually control what information appears on their page.

ONLINE TEE TIME BOOKINGS

Belfast-based tee time management specialist BRS Golf's 'Golf Tee Time Manager' is recognised as one of the UK and Ireland's leading tee time management and online booking systems, with more than 720 clubs, including 65 per cent of those in Ireland, using it to manage all aspects of their bookings.

"There's been a real sea change in the market," stated Dr Brian Smith, founder and managing director of BRS Golf. "Many more clubs are ditching the paper diary and going for electronic systems that allow members and visitors to book online. The benefits of online bookings are becoming more well known and 2013 promises to be a year when such elements as competition management, membership management and bar tab top-up and wider facets of club management will become more commonplace.

"Making the managing and running of member accounts as simple as possible will only be to the benefit of clubs in the long term."

While Jonas Computing UK works with BRS Golf, Club Systems goes much further, having formed an equity partnership with the company two years ago.

WEB-BASED VERSUS CLUBHOUSE-BASED

Despite what looks like an increasingly 'remote' future for the running of golf club member services, Jonas remains cautious about how much of a club's day-to-day operation should be handled online, due to what Mainstone believes is the unreliability and sluggish speed of current broadband.

"The UK is currently ranked 28th in the world and 17th in Europe for broadband internet speeds," he said. "The government may hope to have countrywide internet speeds of 2Mb per second by 2015, but, with contention ratios taken into account, whereby 20 subscribers might be using a single connection, this is still poor in real terms.

"We believe player score entry, access control and tills are the three main modules that should be run from the club's premises at present," stated

An example of an online booking sheet from BRS Golf

Mainstone. "Fully web-based technology has been attempted, but with, we feel, little success, so we'd rather err on the side of caution until rural parts of the UK are as reliable as the heart of the UK network. After all, if the internet fails during a competition, members won't be able to enter their scores."

Smith, on the other hand, doesn't see this as an issue for other systems that the club uses if the proper back-up is put in place and the systems are well designed in the first place. "We always insist that our customers have a back-up plan, so if the internet goes down at the club they can still continue to operate," he said.

"One of the measures is to send a back-up of the next seven days' worth of timesheets to each club at the start of every day, with all relevant information on it, so even if broadband does go down, the club can still meet and greet golfers and take bookings."

Hilary Clamp is in agreement with Smith over the issue of internet speeds, insisting that it is not something clubs should be worrying about. "Scaremongering about the unreliability of the internet wont stop progress," she said. "We're not offering web-hosted systems because it's something that we want to do, we're doing it because it's what our customers have said they want. The market is telling us that people want that flexibility as, for example, the handicap secretary of a golf club might not want to go back to the club to update scores when he can do it from home.

"Golf clubs know how reliable their internet connection is, if it's not good enough, then they can wait and go for a web-hosted system when it is. ClubV1 is designed to keep critical data close by, so PSI and till systems have the ▶▶

information they need locally and connect to the hosted systems only when the connection is good. But there are cost-effective back-up systems available that make broadband faster and more reliable, and if there are problems with an internet connection at the golf club, the beauty of having a web-hosted system is that your handicapping and membership data can be accessed from home. You cant do that if the club's server sitting under a desk in the corner of the office goes down and everything is hosted on that."

MARKETING

Club Systems' free 'Marketing Module' is designed to help clubs shape and target their media through better communications, whether telling members about competitions or social events, emailing and texting special offers to past visitors or societies, or advertising open competitions.

By using existing membership data, website-managed or imported mailing lists, the module makes it easy to send out professional, smart emails to any targeted audience, Clamp stated.

Those concerned about technical know-how, need not be. The module is simple to use. Club Systems build and format the email for each user, taking news stories from the club website or custom articles.

"There's still a sizable amount of clubs that like to operate through traditional methods and are slow to move forward," Clamp added, "so it's our job to educate them on how to make their business more streamlined and ultimately more profitable.

"The members are the real drivers, though, and pressure from them on their club is what's moving things on. Members by and large want to use the latest technologies and use them as part of their memberships."

It may seem odd to talk about emailing in a technology feature, as it's part and parcel of daily life.

Yet, surprisingly, clubs are still missing valuable opportunities by not having a concerted email collection and correspondence system that is in place.

Despite the headaches of email, Smith is adamant that ensuring email databases are up to date is essential – and it shouldn't be restricted to members only. "The potential that clubs can derive from keeping a current visitor database is vast, and clubs need to get into the habit of doing it."

Galgorm Castle Golf Club is a good example. In 2011, 30 new members were introduced as a result of targeted emails to members of societies, corporate groups and golfers that have played the course. Also, at Oundle Golf Club, six new members recently came about directly from those who have enjoyed their visit to the club, representing several thousand pounds in additional revenue, and "wholly justifying Oundle's investment in the BRS Golf system," Smith believes.

And yet when it comes to income generation, other clubs have already moved beyond email. One of the features in BRS Golf's booking system's toolbox is its text marketing application.

Surveys have shown that 90 per cent of golfers own and carry mobile phones, however few club managers appear prepared to use this text capability as a way of reaching their members and visitors. Email is still their preference.

Soon, some IT companies here will announce the launch of 'email-free' zones, focusing solely on text and social media, so now's a great opportunity for golf to steal a march on the rest of the sports and leisure sectors. "With text, you're not only more likely to reach someone, but unlike most emails, recipients tend to respond almost immediately to a text, especially if it's of interest. All you need is their mobile phone number," said Smith.

"Email is a good tool but we all know that we're receiving more and more unwanted ones," he added. "The problem with email is that it's becoming excessive. Regular PC and laptop users know an email can slip below their radar when it goes below the screen, buried by others as the day slips by. And if you're not working on your laptop everyday, email can take days to be opened – and that's assuming the inbox is being checked regularly." **GCM**