



Shannon GC: online booking beats offline every time

While many golf clubs are relatively well equipped with computer software and hardware, the message now being promoted by the major IT suppliers is the need for fully integrated systems, ie. everything running off one single membership database.

However as Mike Corry, the General Manager of one of Ireland's top golf clubs, Shannon GC, will tell you, being fully integrated isn't necessarily the answer to a club manager's prayers. This is because when it's server-based the system's accessibility is still very restricted in terms of the speed at which online users can access the information they seek. Conversely, being online for your tee time bookings means all your members who are online at work or at home can access those tee time opportunities, 24/7, and at broadband speeds.

Why is this important? Well, a well known fact of internet usage is that we're all surprisingly impatient when something takes a while to come up on screen. If it doesn't appear within a split second, we get very, very miffed and frustrated – not a good thing for a golf club when several hundred online members are seeking tee times!

“The best time sheet system available...”

So it's just as well that the system that's widely regarded as the best there is, can be installed and made to work smoothly with pretty well whichever brand of club management system your club happens to operate. The system in question is the BRS Golf online booking system and Mike Corry, the General Manager of Shannon GC for the past 13 years, has been using it for the past twelve months.

But when an experienced technology user and widely respected manager says “It really is the best time sheet system available in this country.”, what makes him say that about the BRS system?

The disadvantages of working with server-based technology

As a golf club, Shannon's committee is very supportive and forward thinking about new technology, and this is why the club uses the server-driven Links fully integrated software system for membership management, the EPoS till systems in the bar and the Pro Shop, time sheets and so on. But good as the club's Links system is, it became clear to Mike that the speed of access to the tee time booking sheets was being inhibited by their being server-based and only available when the Pro Shop was open.

This also meant a huge number of telephone calls, all of which tied up the shop's team of assistant professionals answering the 'phone and dealing with hundreds of members' requests every week. To put this into perspective, of Shannon's 1,300+ members, 400 or so are the more active ones in regular and hot pursuit of a tee time, especially when there is a competition where as many as 300 of them will be competing. That's a lot of 'phone calls, engaged lines...and potentially, frustrated members.

“Making bookings web-based has made all the difference...”

Mike first saw the BRS system at IAGCS meetings and road shows, and felt it could be just the solution his club needed for members to go online and book the tee times they wanted. “Making the tee time bookings web-based instead of server-based has made all the difference to my members and my staff. Even if the web should happen to go down, which can happen very occasionally, BRS still do a file-based back-up of the tee sheet we're running and e-mail it to us, so it's completely fail-safe operationally.”

Web-based training

Training is one of BRS Golf's specialities. Ensuring the office or shop staff are thoroughly familiar with the booking system means that the sheer versatility of their software can be fully exploited by the club, whereas all too often the capabilities of the technology are under-utilised by a club and the benefits unexploited. Mike and his colleagues, Debbie Reddan and Jimmy Doyle, were trained over two days by Brian Smith over the phone and online, using the tee sheet screen live while being talked through how to operate it. So being web-based means even the training is much easier and more effective.

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Getting the members on board

The BRS system has proven sufficiently popular that Mike has increased access to it by installing a further PC in the bar as well as in the Pro Shop, so that members can look, check, and book even when they're relaxing with a drink. He's been particularly impressed with the degree to which the older members have taken to the new system as well: "It's great that they've really taken to the system, and are fully on board with it. Technology can be very divisive across the generations, but the BRS system really is very straightforward and easy to use. That's a big plus for any golf club, because its membership age profile will tend towards those who are put off by technology. But by the same token, the younger generation take to this sort of thing like ducks to water, so the club's keeping up with them as well."

What about the membership generally speaking, and have they taken to the online tee time booking system? Mike: "There's been a very positive mood change. We used to run paper-based tee sheets, and then we installed the offline server-based sheets; by going to web-based online tee times, we've made life that much easier for all our members. They in turn have found it's great to have complete control over their choice of tee times, secure in the knowledge that when they turn up on the first tee, they won't have to wait around for all the groups in front. When I first came here thirteen years ago, there would be up to 20 balls in the shoot, which meant hanging around for as long as one and a half hours to tee off. That was ridiculous, and with time being probably the most precious commodity our members have, that was always going to be a serious disadvantage to membership at Shannon. It had to go."

"Because members are and always will be my priority at the club, whatever makes it easier for them to see what's going on, and to book a time to play, will be the focus of the club's technology. Retaining members is increasingly my main objective as the club's manager, and you know, it costs five times more to get a new member than it does to keep an existing member. So it really does pay to make sure your members can get what they want from their golf club, and to play when they want to."

The value of keeping members informed

Mike's experience over the last thirteen years has resulted in some other sharp-eyed observations, and for some of the old guard across the water, pay attention! Mike Corry: "The more information you can give your members – within reason, obviously! – the more they will feel better informed, and more in control. In turn, there's much less hassle for those running the club." The BRS system is a perfect illustration of Mike's philosophy in action; the members can see what's happening on the first tee on any particular day, check for an available tee time and book it. That means there's a happy member, and an office staff who can be left to get on with their many other tasks, rather than dealing with either members chasing tee times, or worse, complaining about their lack of availability.

Reports, course management

The BRS system has a lot of reports it can deliver to a manager, so which ones does Mike like to use? "Mainly the course usage report on a daily, weekly or monthly basis. This is extremely valuable to me as the manager of the club's main income-generating asset. It also allows me to determine times for course maintenance so that green staff can be booked in without getting in the way of too many members, and of course to make the most of any gaps in the schedule with casual green fees."

"One of the most valuable ways in which we've exploited the system is to establish the times being taken to complete a round. We know when people start, and by getting some of the members to record the respective finishing times against a print-out of the starting times, we can then see how much time is actually being taken. This is proving very useful; for example, we now know that a typical three ball strokeplay competition under less than great weather conditions will take around 3 hours 40 minutes, which I'd say was pretty good. We'll take more recordings, and as soon as we detect any slowing up, we can present the proof and act accordingly. Slow play is potentially the one thing that will turn people away from golf, so we're just being vigilant and making sure it doesn't happen at Shannon."

Service and support

Mike's seen enough technology in his time at Shannon to have a very clear sense of the priorities you need as the manager when selecting a technology company: "BRS Golf's response to anything we've raised is fantastic. If it's humanly possible to develop it, or to re-write it, around our requirements, they'll do it."

So that just leaves the acid test question: could Mike do without the BRS Golf booking system?

“No! It's a must-have. If it was taken away, my life and that of our members would be much, much more difficult!”

