

BOOKING ONLINE

Several clubs in Ireland have made booking tee times as easy as purchasing a cheap flight online. Have they benefited from this? **Nicole McCracken** investigates

KICK-STARTED BY the Golfing Union of Ireland (GUI's) online national handicapping scheme, 500,000 Irish golfers and 420 golf clubs are at the forefront of developments in online technology. Practically all the clubs are on broadband, with many finding a new way to exploit online opportunities – tee time booking. It is easy for members to use; and tee time booking that's available 24/7 anywhere for visitors is proving a marketing success as well.

For example, any club secretary who runs competitions, especially an Open day or week, knows the drain on internal resources. But for his 2005 Open week, Jim Melody of Greystones GC, an 1895 club near Dublin, simply arranged for all the tee times to be posted on to a special Open week booking page on the club's website and the entrants took care of the rest.

Nearly 450 tee times were made available, of which 335 of those were booked out by members in the first day; visitors were able to book a week later.

Members booked 174 (52 per cent) tee times from their homes or offices, while others went to the club to book in, reducing considerably the administrative load. Visitors formed 30 per cent of the bookings, and were required to pre-pay online.

Jim said: "The online system worked extremely well for the Open week.

"It used to mean hundreds of phone calls which we could barely cope with, but now it almost takes care of itself. And what we did for the Open week, we can do for any competition.

"So we're now gently introducing the members to the idea of booking times and paying for their entries online."

What about the day-to-day operation? According to Jim: "I've just checked an e-mail and two people have booked to play tomorrow afternoon. They did it at 9.15 this morning, and their 100 euros payment has been confirmed. It's that easy!

"Our tee times are also marketed via a green fees portal, and that means that when a time is booked from one site, it's taken out from the other.

"That's really seamless integration, first

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class responsiveness and good development.”

Debbie Polly, club secretary at Ardglass, soon benefited by switching from paper to online: “We used to get 20-30 e-mails everyday asking if a particular date and tee time was available – which we had to respond to and check.

“Now we make certain tee times available at green fees we set - and people just book and if they're visitors, pay online. The system's really user-friendly, both for the administrative team, and more importantly for the members and visitors.”

Being online is also increasing bookings. “The website has boosted green fee income. It's an excellent system, and I'd strongly recommend it to any club,” Debbie added. She was speaking of Tee Time Manager from BRS Golf (www.brsgolf.com).

Wilma Erskine, club secretary at Royal Portrush, likes the system as a management tool. The old daily tee time sheets for both courses were laborious and “challenging” for generating revenue reports. Wilma said: “This has speeded things up significantly for the office, and the members can now book caddies and meals as well, which is a great advantage.” So online means less paperwork, more revenue.

“The great thing about the system is the reports I get from it. I can check revenues for the month ahead, and the deposits we've taken. This is an enormous help to our committee members. As we build up the usage records, we will compare year-on-year and month-on-month. Because the system captures visitors' e-mail addresses, we're also building a valuable database for future marketing.

“Now when I get asked: ‘What are the bookings looking like?’ I can easily give the answer at the click of a mouse. We're also getting a much clearer picture of course usage. Best of all, the committee members love it!”

Aside of saving time, reducing paperwork and better management information by working online, keeping the committee happy has got a be a huge plus for any club secretary! **GCM**