



## MIND THE APP

Alistair Dunsmuir and Tom James at Golf Club Management clarify the jargon around ‘apps’ – the biggest trend in golfing industry in the last year.

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Golf clubs acquiring their own app has been the biggest trend in the industry in the last year. But what are they getting out of this technology? And if they already have a desktop website, do they need a mobile website, a web app or a native app – and what’s the difference between them anyway? Alistair Dunsmuir and Tom James clarify the jargon and find out



More than 50 percent of the UK’s population now have a **smartphone** and that figure is set to jump to more than three in four people in the next three years.

When you factor in that tablets, which have only been around for three years, are now used to view even more global web traffic than smartphones, you can see why obtaining an app has been the number one trend for golf clubs in the past year.

Clubs know they need to adapt to the ways in which these technologies are changing our lifestyle habits, but they also need to be clear about what the technologies are and can do before making a buying decision. After all, if you’re confused about the differences between desktop websites, mobile websites, web apps and native apps, then you might not know what the best product for your needs is.

### Desktop websites

Historically speaking, websites (now often referred to as desktop websites, which are used on PCs, Macs, laptops and notebooks) were the first online technology to be taken up by golf clubs and almost every club now has one. The progressive clubs focused their websites to become marketing tools deliberately aimed at attracting membership enquiries, casual visitors, society organisers, function business and sponsorships.

What has also become clear is that websites are used less and less by club members other than if they have:

- ✎ A dedicated members’ section or pages. These will typically contain short reports and images of recent events, competition results and so on.
- ✎ An online tee time booking system.

Some developers have enabled club websites to carry member-oriented information such as their latest handicap, competition draws and results, and bar balances. But these depend on the

sophistication of the club's management software and the degree of their collaboration with the website provider to provide this data.

However, while members may use the club website less, it remains the number one marketing tool to attract visitors. For the vast majority of golf clubs it is the first listing that appears on a search engine if the club's name is being looked for, and the sites are often used by visitors to find out course information, club rules and events, and prices.

## Mobile websites

A mobile website is simply a desktop website that has been specifically adapted to suit smartphone and tablet screens – that is ones that are smaller than PC screens and ones that utilise touchscreen technology rather than the use of a mouse. Currently one in three website visits are made via smart phones, over 60 percent of UK golfers own a Smartphone (slightly higher than the national average) and because smart phones are carried with the users all the time, golf clubs need to make sure their websites can be seen on them.

The easiest way to develop a mobile website for a club is to take the club's most popular website pages (check Google Analytics) and edit them down so that they work within a Smartphone environment or screen in ways that are thumb- or touch-friendly.

“When a golfer uses his phone to access information from the golf club, what they most want is contact information, the club's latest news and tee time booking,” said Richard Peabody, managing director of Club Systems International. “And that can easily be done from a mobile version of a website.”

However, these sites can still be un-user friendly if the desktop site has a lot of information that needs to be condensed onto a smaller screen.

## Web apps

So why does a club need to have an app? And what is a web app as opposed to a native app?

Web apps are online applications that have specific functions to suit smart phones or tablets. The roles that they are intended to carry out will have been designed to specifically suit a handheld device, rather than be adapted from a desktop version to suit it. Web apps can do things mobile websites can't, for example, a golf club's web app may have the ability to accurately tell you how far you have walked during a round of golf, or how far you have hit a ball, neither of which would be available on a mobile website, as that information is not relevant to a desktop website. Like mobile websites though, web apps can be accessed on all the major operating systems.

“If your goals are primarily related to marketing or member-oriented communications, a web app makes more sense as a practical step in your mobile outreach strategy – it'll reach all types of smart phones because it works via the web,” said one web app developer. “With no approval needed from third parties, web apps are easier and quicker to develop and upgrade. The upgrades are instant and the user does not need to download the upgrade each time. This is important, as a native app will require all the Smartphone-using members to be told to re-download a club's native app.”

## Native apps

A native app is a program that is downloaded or installed onto the device. With smart phones and tablets, this is usually done via one of four different operating platforms. Far and away the top two are iOS, which is used on Apple iPhones and iPads, and Android, which is used on most leading brands of smart phones, such as Samsung, HTC, Huawei and Google products. The other two systems are operated by Blackberry, which uses its own system, and Windows, which is used via phones such as some Nokia and HTC devices. Check Google Analytics for your club's website and you'll see it distinguishes between all four types.

Native apps are designed to work on one of these operating systems and therefore need to be written four times to work on all four systems. Like web apps, native apps feature software that has been specifically designed to work on a Smartphone or tablet, and most apps that people have on their phones are native apps.

## Web apps or native apps?

Web apps and native apps have both been huge growth areas in economics in the last few years, but which is better? The answer is that both have pros and cons.

Benefits that web apps have over native apps are: A web app is instantly accessible to users via a browser and doesn't require a download, they can reach users across many different types of mobile devices, whereas native apps require a separate version to be developed for each type of device, updates can be done easily by the operator rather than with native apps where they require the user to update them themselves, and a web app is much easier to integrate with a golf club's existing administration systems, due to the flexibility afforded on a web platform.

The biggest advantage of a web app over a native app is that with the latter the developer has four times the workload to develop upgrades, and four times the problems when it comes to testing and supporting them, if you want the app to appear on all four systems.

The benefits of native apps ahead of web apps are that some of their functions can be used when a user has no network connectivity, native apps can use 'push technology' available on many mobile devices to automatically beep users without having to train them to check the app for updates, they typically perform faster than mobile web apps, they can access more of the device's features – some of which are not available to apps developed for the web platform yet, and native apps are better for manipulating data into complex charts or reports. However, most of these benefits are not relevant for a golf club that simply wants an app to improve communications with its members.

## Apps: New opportunities

Now you know what the differences between mobile websites, web apps and native apps are, what can apps do for you that your website cannot?

Just as the rest of the consumer world has discovered, apps present all sorts of new opportunities to communicate online – not only existing information but other information we never knew we needed and which we're glad to see on an app on our smart phones.

From the sheer weight of evidence, apps are also proving much easier than websites for a club manager or even selected members of a golf club to update. This is vital when you think of, for example, the traditional club diary. In an app, its online form can be updated far more easily and more immediately by the club manager than on a website, let alone the printed version(!), so the members can go to their Smartphone, open the app and check out what's going on at their club in a matter of seconds, knowing that the dates and timings are fully up to date.

Members' contact details in an app enable one touch dialling, which exploits the fact the members carry their smart phones with them and can now call other members wherever and whenever they want. Apps can also carry club news, news which may be easily posted by a news' team of members about recent events. Members like to know what's been happening at their club.

Besides carrying a tee time booking function, perhaps a course guide, or local weather, what else can an app do? The latest developments among the app community will soon see booking lessons with the club professional, forums for members looking for a game or partner, local rules, course condition, competition entries and payments, the ability to order food and drinks while on the course, and all sorts of links to other golfing organisations' websites and so on.

Perhaps the most exciting developments are those that will give a member personal information: latest handicap, bar account balance, knock out draws and other competitions they're playing in, notices from the club and so on. Again, much of this depends on the degree to which the club's management software provider is prepared to either develop their own app, or collaborate with an app developer to share this kind of information.

Unsurprisingly, many clubs are now using a mobile version of their website to focus on their visitors and are using a dedicated app to effectively improve and replace the members' sections of their websites.

## Web apps in action

Several golf clubs now have apps and competition between providers is very strong.

**Reigate Heath Golf Club**, a traditional private members' club, is reaping the rewards of investing in a web app that has improved communication and brought in additional revenue through targeted advertising.

“A Smartphone tsunami is changing the way we work, live and communicate, and in the UK more of us are now going online via our smart phones than laptops or desktops,” revealed Charles de Haan, the member in charge of the club's marketing.

He singles out three features of the club's app, developed by **Eagle**.

“Once they’ve downloaded it via a QR code or link, our Smartphone-using members like three particular features. The ‘Fixtures’ function – the club diary online – is now very easy for the club manager to update, which means the members see the latest dates of events, functions, matches and so on. The members’ contact list feature with one touch calling makes communication between members much simpler and quicker, while the news’ page is proving invaluable for the club’s news’ team to share information about social events, competitions and matches with the Smartphone-using membership. These app-based features are also helping the club reach the younger age groups as well as the 60-plus ones.”

From Reigate Heath’s perspective, the club’s website and the app are treated in two different ways.

“The Eagle app is aimed at enhancing our membership services significantly, and with over 70 clubs now using their app, Eagle’s generating all sorts of new content and features such as booking lessons online with our club pro, a live noticeboard for members to communicate with each other for – such as for getting a partner for a game, a ‘Team Manager’ feature for helping manage club match arranging, current catering menus, and ‘my golf’, giving the member access to their latest handicap and other data, all of which makes it a very attractive proposition going forward,” added de Haan. “The club’s website, on the other hand, is aimed at being our main marketing tool for prospective members, and casual and society visitors, so we are in the process of making that Smartphone-friendly. Both are important communications’ and marketing tools, both are Smartphone enabled, but are designed to work in different ways for their different audiences.”

Reigate Heath is also showing just what can be done with an app to entice potential advertisers and generate a valuable additional income stream.

“When negotiating a sponsorship package for a major new sponsor, I added in the promise of an automatic dropdown that would carry their logo and a hyperlink on the app’s opening page,” explained de Haan. “It soon became clear that it was in fact generating tremendous brand exposure for our new sponsor. Members visit the app daily, whereas emails to the members are maybe three to four times a week and member-based traffic to the club’s website is becoming less frequent still.

As the range of services available via the app grows, so will the scope for app-related advertising, and for businesses it should prove an attractive prospect as you can almost guarantee a high degree of brand exposure, awareness building and reach to a valuable database of members.”

**Coombe Hill Golf Club** was one of the Eagle app’s early adopters having heard good things about the trial at Reigate Heath.

“Diary updates, online bookings and the blog pages were all useful tools that simplify many of the traditional functions that could be time-consuming and costly,” explained

Colin Chapman, CEO of Coombe Hill Golf Club in Surrey, recently ranked a 'Top 100' course.

"I use the app's news' feature for newsbytes," he added, "as that's what the members check first to see if they need to open the full email version. The ability to make instant changes to bookings or competition entries, for example, is extremely useful." The versatility of the app's 'Gallery' feature is also adding a new dimension to what apps can bring to a club. "We aim to get our head greenkeeper to use the gallery feature, as this will be a great way of showing members the major works we're undertaking out on the course. It's much easier to do this with an image and a few words than write reams of text that probably won't be read, especially on the club noticeboard. Content can be updated via the administrator's dashboard from a Smartphone as well as a laptop," he said.

### Native apps in action

Technology developer **ESP** has been working under the radar for several years, honing its online bookings' system. As Smartphone usage has advanced so has its investment in research into apps. The ongoing performance of ESP's online booking system has been quietly impressive and currently has over 400,000 registered users and annually accounts for online booking transactions in excess of £30 million.

"We offer an all encompassing [native] app for clubs who want to improve communication with their members and give them the tools to take charge of their own accounts and make the running of the club more streamlined for management," explained managing director David Ross.

"The ability to book tee times and competitions is nothing new, but basic app functions like this are becoming much easier and more accessible with the Smartphone and tablet availability, which we offer."

Currently available is the '**Member app**' and the '**Ranger app**'; the latter targeting today's busy club managers and secretaries. ESP has moved beyond the basic booking functionality and has called on its technology know-how in other industries to enhance the offering for golf. The booking section of the 'Member app' allows the quick addition of supplementary items including buggy, trolley and club bookings as well as the ability for members to hire a function room or a table in the restaurant, all from the convenience of their smart phones.

"Our software can accommodate any booking activity unique to that club," explained Ross. "If members want to book a time with the club professional and pay for it via their phone, they can. We can also tailor the service to the individual member through our loyalty schemes. The GPS and push capabilities of native apps are crucial to the functionality and scope of the ESP offering.

"Sometimes Wi-Fi or the 3G signal will be poor in more rural locations," Ross said, "so our data can be downloaded to an offline mode while still retaining all the functionality.

"For course managers, GPS tracking allows them to know exactly who is on site, whether they're a member of the club or a stranger. If they are a member, all the information is just a click away," he explained. "Managers can see progress on the course and then individually target members accordingly. A club can send promotional food offers to

their app if they finish their round at lunch. If they've had a poor round, a unique alert can be administered offering time with the club professional. The possibilities are endless. The booking app allows managers to tap into this data and enables the club to provide a tailored service to its members."

Dynamics Golf entered the market just over a year ago. Time and money invested in native app technology in the years before its official launch have armed it with what it believes is the most all-encompassing app available, with over 40 features, from online buying tools, lesson bookings to a host of loyalty packages for private members and proprietary clubs.

"At the most basic level, the collection of good data, contact details and instant interaction with members is a huge benefit to club secretaries, who in many cases struggle with maintaining a good email database," explained Mark Kemp, owner of Dynamics Golf.

"Apps are moving technology on to a new plane, from your basic till and booking software to the kind of GPS and push technology-based features we offer. For members, the beauty of app features is that they make the running of their memberships that bit easier. A member on his way to the club for an early morning round can order a bacon sandwich through the app, pay for it via PayPal and pick it up on arrival. Likewise a group of golfers can pre-book a table for dinner and even order their food, all through the app."

Through advanced apps, clubs can tailor what they offer to members depending on the type of club they are. Anything sold at the club, whether food, clothing, clubs or time with the club professional, can be bought and paid for through smart phones and tablet devices.

"The importance of Smartphone and tablet applicable technology is more pertinent now as tablet computers are being used increasingly in preference to laptops," explained Kemp. "As more members get to grips with apps and how they can use them to make their memberships function better, they will want to be able to run their affairs through a number of devices, which is why we've placed a lot of importance on making sure our technology is fit for purpose and offers maximum benefits to members."

The wherewithal to buy almost anything through the app is proving fruitful for clubs like **Colne Valley Golf Club**, which operates a '**Freedom Golf Membership**' points system whereby members can purchase playing fee points (the larger the bundle purchased, the better the deal per point, for example 110 points for £200 is just £1.82 per point) through the app using PayPal as the secure payment gateway which can then be spent on green fees.

"It's a convenient way for members to purchase green fee points using a trusted payment gateway like PayPal via their Smartphone. Not only that, generally the app helps the club promote its services and can send offers or push notification messages within seconds to all their app customers," said Kemp.

He strongly believes that apps should not be a difficult product to sell to clubs:

“We’ve dealt with a number of clients so far who’ve needed very little persuasion. The benefits to members and staff are huge. Apps could be the future of golf and transform how clubs interact and provide services to members and guests,” he said.

**Worplesdon Golf Club** spotted the appeal for its members and the quality of the product that Dynamics Golf offered.

“What we required was really just the basic features – viewing scores, handicaps, member details, for example,” explained secretary Chris Lomas.

“Since I joined the club, technology and improving interaction with members has been a key goal. Our membership is quite traditional, so embracing new technologies has its challenges but so far over a quarter of the members now use the app in the short time we’ve had it,” he revealed.

“The fact that the app is tablet applicable is a real bonus as we’re all moving away from laptops. The ease of use of the app was pleasing and because we have a packed diary it’s essential that it’s kept up to date.”

Whatever the goals of the individual club, what all will agree on is that improved member interaction is key to retaining members and recruiting new ones. A club that has its finger on the pulse, is up to speed with new technology and can make the member experience more enjoyable is surely in a better position than one that doesn’t. The beauty of the range of apps on the market now is that they cover all bases; from those with basic, simple to use functionality to the more advanced technology that puts the member in control of their activities.

However you choose to interact with apps is up to you but choosing to do nothing is no longer an option. Technology will not wait around, so now’s the time to climb on board.

As Mark Kemp stated:

“The everyday club member has changed for good. If a club isn’t willing to improve communication with its membership then, chances are, the competitor down the road will be.” gcm

## Web versus native

### Web apps are:

- ☑ instantly accessible to users via a browser and do not require a download
- ☑ available on all operating systems
- ☑ easy to update by the club manager
- ☑ easy to integrate with a golf club’s existing administration system
- ☑ easily shared between, and updated by, users

### Native apps are:

- ☑ usable to some degree even without an internet connection
- ☑ able to use ‘push technology’



- ☞ generally faster performing
- ☞ better for accessing some smartphone's features
- ☞ better for manipulating data into complex charts or reports

## **Examples of what apps can do that websites cannot**

- ☞ Ability to order food and drinks while out on the course
- ☞ Ability to call other members with one touch
- ☞ Ability to update membership information immediately and easily
- ☞ Ability for staff to know who is on the course and where
- ☞ Ability to send relevant information to members during their rounds

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