



WEB OF INTRIGUE

Jane Carter writes the third in a series of articles on marketing and discusses how you can achieve a good website presence.

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Good websites lead to increased business, but how do you achieve the best web presence? Jane Carter is here to help.

“British Golf Clubs not business minded, say US marketing experts.”

That was the headline that greeted me recently on a golf industry news website. The company concerned, which had recently launched in the UK, accused golf clubs of not being proactive enough with regard to their marketing – a subject close to my own heart.

Having delivered more than a dozen marketing workshops up and down the country with the English Golf Union (and a further series planned for the autumn / winter) I would argue that the accusation that golf clubs aren't business minded enough is unfair in many cases.

On the contrary, more and more golf clubs are realising that the business landscape is changing at a pace they could probably never have envisioned and many would dearly like to change with it.

However, the traditional barriers of constantly-changing committees, less than understanding members and a lack of resources – time and money – has led to the impression that clubs are less than proactive in these key areas.

Bite-sized chunks

From feedback from the workshops and in my work on case studies with clubs at varying levels of 'proactivity', I have reached the conclusion that the only way for golf clubs to start improving in this area is to tackle it in bite-sized chunks.

Whilst panic is quick to set in when faced with declining revenues, to change a lifetime of no marketing to one of active marketing can cause an even greater sense of consternation- both from the committee and members.

Any club ringing me for advice or inviting me to a meeting of its newly-formed marketing committee receives the same wise words: work to a plan and put the processes in place.

The process is the most important first step. Golf clubs are run by (on the whole) bright people, albeit volunteers, who have often come from a business world where marketing was the norm. Marketing is not a dark science and as members of a golf club and therefore golfers, any committee will have been subjected to most marketing techniques, whether it is to buy a membership, a green fee or book a society day. Reproducing them within your own club is therefore not hard.

It is not the ‘what to do’ but the actual doing where I find most clubs come unstuck and here the usual lack of resources, time and money, is often to blame.

The successful clubs are those that tackle marketing methodically and soon start to establish what I describe as those ‘quick wins’.

These are those marketing techniques which are simple to implement but quick to pull in results. Results means benefits and benefits lead to a motivated committee willing to dedicate more resources, and then you’re off and running (well, jogging at least!)

The two marketing allies

Whilst it may all seem overwhelming at first glance, golf clubs have one unlikely ally in their marketing efforts and that is the golf consumer! Golf is a product which is bought, not sold, and therefore golfers are as keen as mustard when it comes to finding out where and when they can play. They actively seek information and here steps in our second biggest ally, the internet, and the first major process any golf club should put in place, a website.

‘Aaargh, no, websites’, I hear you cry and memories of hours spent trying to upload news, photographs or even a simple email flood into your consciousness. However, a good website backed by sound, integrated information and communications systems can be a revelation to any small business – and don’t have to be expensive.

One company which has been making its mark in this area is Gemini Network Media with the roll-out of Golf Club Network in November of last year. Marketing director Bev Vincent bristles if you refer to the firm as a website development company.

“It is so much more. Providing a cost-effective website solution is the starting point for our relationship with any golf club, but a website is really a means to an end. It has to work for you both in terms of communication to members and visitors and ultimately marketing,” she said.

“When we launched Golf Club Network we didn’t want to leave golf clubs with another headache and just something else to look after. Their website is their marketing tool – in many cases the only one and it is there to do a job not just look good! It needs to work hard for you and if it isn’t driving new business, you need to rethink why that is.”

Direct communication

One quick win which I have seen first-hand and can produce real results for a club is collecting and using data, for members and visitors. A golf club which has a targeted and expanding database is starting to incrementally reduce its marketing costs by directly communicating with its consumers. Collecting the data is the hard bit but again a website can prove a real ally in this area. “Every golf club website should have at least five data collection points, culminating in a database which can be easily segmented and used. Your database is your most valuable marketing asset so you need to ensure it can be integrated easily into your email programme. It’s worth investing in specialist email software or better still do it through your website so you can send emails quickly and easily and track all activity,” said Vincent.

When panic has set in because 50 members have left around renewal time, then having a good database of prospects, regular visitors or even referrals from members can be a real boon. It reduces the pressure of finding potential new customers and means that lo and behold a golf club has the ability to be proactive when it comes to marketing.

One of the biggest issues I find when talking to golf clubs is that many realise the importance of their website and it needs to grow with their business but often it has been built and maintained by an enthusiastic member. Now no one wants to upset their members and diplomacy is the order of the day. One successful technique I have used is to actively involve the member in the discussions about a new site or updating the old one and how much easier it will make their lives with a new content management system, or added functionality. You would be amazed in many cases how the member is just as keen to get rid of the responsibility but didn’t want to let the club down!

If you answer ‘no’ to 5 or more, your club website needs attention

The Customer Experience Yes/No

1. Good design?
2. Up-to-date content?
3. New content on a daily basis?
4. Good navigation?
5. Easy to read?
6. Easy to find all information (three clicks)?
7. No unnecessary distractions (flash, splash pages, music)?
8. Easy to book (do business with you)?
9. Immediate response to enquiries?
10. Quick to download (no big files)?

The Marketing Machine Yes/No

11. Are there five data collection points?
12. Can you update your site at any time with no expertise?

13. Can you request forms with automated responses?
14. Does the site update itself with new golf content?
15. Does your site ask for 'action' on every page?
16. Is there a media section with downloadable images and text?
17. Can you send emails at any time with no expertise?
18. Is there a full colour e-newsletter to keep in touch?
19. Does it create business with search engines?
20. Does it report site activity?

ICT in Wales

In Wales, with the 2010 Ryder Cup at Celtic Manor, the importance of putting a process in place to help with marketing has been recognised by a whole grant structure in place to help clubs improve their information and communication technology (ICT) which can include improving their website.

Rob Holt, chief executive of Ryder Cup Wales said: "The funding that has been allocated to clubs is just one of a number of benefits which has resulted from the Ryder Cup coming to Wales. It represents a great opportunity for clubs to step up the game in terms of their marketing strategy and by improving their ICT facilities; clubs are able to effectively attract visitors both locally and overseas."

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