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It's Time for Club Managers to Become Tech Savvy

I have a pretty good idea of what private club managers know, and don't know, about technology. That comes after working with more than 400 club managers over the past three decades, and speaking with hundreds more at conferences and industry meetings.

And the news isn't good.

For the most part, club managers know very little about critical technologies that affect the day-to-day operations of their clubs. Worse still, they are generally unaware of key new technologies that can enhance the member experience at their clubs. Now, many managers might say:

"So what? That's why I have a knowledgeable CFO/controller, or an in-house IT professional(s), or outsourced to an IT support company. It's their job to keep up with technology. Not mine."

Twenty years ago, or maybe even 10, such a statement could have been true. But no more. The days of club managers depending upon others to understand and manage technology are fast disappearing. For good reason.

Today's technologies are affecting the member experience – directly. And if the member experience is in play, the club manager had better be on top of it.

Think for a moment if managers took the same approach to other key club functions as they often do with technology... for instance, the food and beverage operation. How many managers would say, "I don't need to know the details of what's going on in the dining room and kitchen. That's why I have an F&B director and an executive chef."

Or how about ... "Don't bother me with the ins and outs of golf course maintenance. That's why I have a golf course superintendent." Or maybe... "Fitness and Spa? I don't have time for that. Talk to my staff in charge of those operations."

Of course, such an attitude is unthinkable for club managers. These are critical amenities that are important to the members. So, by definition, they must be important to the club manager. And to make good management decisions about those amenities, club managers must be well educated in their operations.

Then there's technology. For decades technology has been seen by managers as a sort of utility (think HVAC, water and electricity). Relatively invisible to the members. As long as it's up and running, no one pays any attention.

The idea of technology as a member amenity only surfaced when member websites became the norm in private clubs. In the year 2000, less than 10 percent of clubs had a member website. By 2008, 80 percent, and today, 99 percent.

Member websites opened the door to technology as a member amenity. And that website door has continued to swing wide open with a variety of online functions such as reservations (club dining and events, tee times, courts, etc.), access to member billing information and bill pay, timely news and alerts, robust member directories and member-to-member communications, detailed events calendars and much more.

Over the years many new and important technology dimensions have emerged to compliment member websites. Mobile apps sporting most of the traditional website functions also offer push notifications, F&B *order ahead*, member recognition with beacon technology and geo-fencing. Plus, instant SMS surveys of member satisfaction in targeted areas, with sophisticated database queries of member behavior, preferences and buying patterns, and advanced analysis of historical data to predict future member behavior.

Add to these new technologies the insatiable appetite for technology by the Gen Xers and Millennials (your members of the near future) and the verdict is clear – club managers must become tech savvy – quickly.

But what qualifies as tech savvy for managers? In my opinion, managers should have a good *conceptual understanding* of the major technologies affecting private clubs. Here's an everyday example of a conceptual understanding versus a technical understanding.

Most of us understand how a photocopier works – conceptually. We understand that it can reproduce printed documents in color or black and white. We know that it can make multiple copies, that those multiples can be collated and maybe stapled.

We know that we have to add paper and toner to keep things going. We know that many copiers also serve as network printers and scanners and may be able to email documents, and so forth. Essentially, we know what a copier is *capable of doing*.

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What we don't know, from a technical standpoint, is how a copier actually works. We don't know the mechanics of xerography, or how a scanner actually captures an image, or how the paper sorter actually collates pages, or how a computer document is translated into a printed image. And we don't need to know that level of detail. Instead, we must know what a copier can do for us – conceptually – and how that can benefit our operations.

And so it goes with technology in general. Managers must conceptually understand the key technologies affecting club operations and the member experience. Those technologies include:
- On-site computer networks and their associated gear
- Off-site hosted environments
- Wired connectivity
- Wireless systems (WiFi, RF, laser)
- Telephone systems (which are actually computer systems)
- Peripherals (PCs, printers, scanners, mag card readers, etc.), and
- Websites (mobilized, responsive).

In addition, managers conceptually must understand club management software solutions, including:
- Membership database
- Accounting
- Dining POS
- Retail POS and inventory
- Purchasing
- Spa and fitness
- Member websites and apps
- Reservations (tee times, courts, events, dining, lodging, marina, etc.)
- Blast email communications, and
- Business intelligence queries and reporting.

Plus, managers must understand other tech issues such as:
- Cyber security (PCI, systems protection and monitoring methods, employee education)
- IT strategic planning and budgeting
- Systems evaluation and selection
- Software re-engineering
- Software deployment
- Up-front and on-going employee education.

Where can managers gain the conceptual knowledge needed? Unfortunately, the private club industry is not well-positioned to educate managers on technology concepts. The leading industry associations offer little in the way of meaningful technology education for general managers. Want a detailed knowledge of wines and spirts – no problem. Want to know how a wireless network operates – not so much.

But there are resources available to club managers to expand their conceptual understanding of technology. First and foremost are the IT folks supporting the club's current systems. Whether that's in-house staff or an outside company, your IT professionals should be able to provide a conceptual overview of all these key topics. Their tendency will be to go too deep into the details so you will have to remind them that you just need to know the following about each technology:
- A conceptual overview of how the technology operates
- The general benefits offered by the technology
- Any club-specific benefits of the technology
- Any issues or drawbacks to be aware of
- The general costs associated with the technology – initial and on-going, and
- What it takes to manage the technology long term.

You can also learn more about how tech impacts your club through "reverse mentoring", working with staff members to learn how they currently use technology, and what they would like to use it for in the future.

The bottom line is this: Club managers must have a conceptual understanding of key technologies and procedures in order to make good management decisions, improve club operations and enhance the member experience. Technology is now an amenity – just like dining, golf, tennis, spa/fitness, lodging and the rest. Don't be left out of the technology loop! **BR**

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When we irrigate onto an area with the physical properties out of balance, we are wasting water. If the area to be watered is sealed off (less than two inches of infiltration rate per hour) from compaction, excessive thatch, high organic matter, high percent of fines in the sand or soil, etc. than the water cannot penetrate into the root zone system and will run off to the surrounding areas.

If another area to be watered is too droughty (more than 20 inches of infiltration an hour), the water will pass through the area we are trying to water, and in most cases out through our drains.

Not knowing what chemicals need to be applied and in what amounts, and wasting water when irrigating, will normally result in more wasted dollars than the combined testing costs.

Recently, a superintendent in Florida explained to me that his total budget was $1,200,000 per year and that he budgeted $6,000 per year for testing, which amounted to one half of one percent of his total budget. Another superintendent in the Midwest with a total budget of $700,000 allocates $3,500 a year for testing, which also amounts to one half of one percent a year of his total budget. They each felt that it was one of the best investments they make. **BR**