



Carole Oat

## Choosing a Solution Provider

Club management software and billing solutions today are numerous with many viable vendors that will contend for your business. Today's technology provides the most reliable software needed to run a club business easily, effectively, and profitably. SQL databases using .Net framework are the most prevalent and reliable platforms to utilize. These allow for a synchronization vehicle to be built into the software for both in-club usage and remote access.



**Do you need remote access to help manage your club when you're not there?**

Ideally, clubs should choose software that has both desktop and Internet capabilities. This offers stability and flexibility. Desktop versions are very secure as the data resides on the server's hard drive. By having the data local, speed is optimized and if you ever lose Internet access, you can still run your club. The data should also synchronize to a central server so you can access your valuable club information from anywhere.

With Internet versions, remote access capabilities are excellent; yet overall the system is not usable with loss of Internet service. With a combined method, the club is never in danger of being out of contact. Make sure the software is network compliant; fully integratable, and includes the entire member database.

If you are in a new club situation, choosing software and billing services for the first time, or an existing facility, considering making a change, start by putting together a list of wants and needs. This list should have four key components: Software, Billing, Collections, and Hardware. All four need to have their abilities and functional capabilities evaluated.

### Software

Review your needs from front desk basics to entry of new members to billing and follow up. Keep in mind any special functionality that your club may require, such as: house charging or prepaid member account tracking; maintenance fee billings; session and

visit tracking; managing group or corporate accounts; tie-in to door controls; time clock; the option of interfacing with an accounting package, and the ability to do data back-ups.

Measure the service against your criteria. Ask about tech call-back time – when your club places a call to tech support, do they answer immediately, or do you have to leave a message? If you leave a message, the call-back time should be less than 20 minutes. These items are important to document. Avoid finding out later that the provider chosen is unable to fulfill your needs.

Next, really “see” the software, not just screen shots. Get a comprehensive live demo – one that can be genuinely used to evaluate ease of use and functionality. See how members get checked in; look at actual point of sale transactions happening; run sample reports, and a billing file – how long does it take, is it understandable? Look for real-time statistics, i.e. number of members, average dues, comparisons to prior months. Make sure you can track and communicate with prospects and leads, and that it provides email capabilities as well as booking and scheduling for personal training.



**Is the tech support readily available?**

### Billing

The most affordable solution is not always the best solution. Talk through the actual procedure. Ask, “If members get billed on the first of the month, when do I get paid?” You should get your money on the first of the month. Be leery if there's any lag time; money shouldn't be out there earning interest for someone else. No matter what, always make sure the vendor has been certified by the credit card industry as CISP compliant. This tells you that the vendor has structured their data storage and processing functions to safeguard your members' account information. At a minimum, all billing data and transmission of each billing file should be encrypted.

One of the most valuable assets of any club is their recurring monthly revenue stream. Avoid multiple bill days as there are no “real” reports that can tell an owner, general manager, or the accountant, what to really expect for cash flow and accompanying expenses in a true month picture. You should be able to easily identify those numbers each month. Sticking to one or two bill days per month will allow for administrative ease.

Look at sample billing reports for clarity and reading ability. They should make sense and provide a clear picture of the overall profile and accountability of the facility. Ask yourself if the billing control and data entry should be in-house or is it better to outsource it? A flexible company will allow the choice and option of whatever level of control best fits your needs. At times, in-house circumstances could warrant the need to switch easily between options with minimal interruption or interference.



**Will a full-service option be available if you need it?**

Today, some local banks offer EFT billing, but typically don't offer credit card billing. It often requires double entry of the data into club software and then banking software. The club software will interface and do all the billing in one file. It will then integrate the returns to update member records and transmit delinquent accounts directly to Collections.

#### Collection Services

This is the follow-up on the returned accounts. As much as clubs would like to outsource this entirely, some members will only deal with club staff – someone face-to-face. Otherwise, look for immediate follow-up to include: letters out within 24 to 48 hours of the return with phone calls to recover the unpaid dues and capture new billing information. Members who are dealt with properly will respond positively and provide the revised information when asked.

This service should be optional and free. Never pay activator fees or per account fees. It is very important that any service fees charged are stated in the membership contract. This is for your protection using whatever option is chosen for follow-up.

#### Hardware

Buying, leasing, or subletting, are the choices. Whenever equipment can be purchased outright, it's the best option. Incorporating the costs into an overall master equipment lease can also be financially helpful. Subletting from a provider often leads to overpayment and hefty finance charges.

A club facility needs computers that will be on seven days a week and 15 to 24 hours a day. Always get at least a one-year warranty, and it may be worth it to upgrade to a three-year warranty. Expect to

spend more than advertised pricing. Get PCs that can accommodate peripheral equipment; perform data back ups; be network ready, and have plenty of memory. If remote access is needed, a high-speed Internet connection is a must and allows for the best technical support.

Overall, looking at the four areas discussed here is like doing a business plan for the administrative aspect of a club. Define the issues that are important, and develop a plan for choosing the one that fits the business. Communicate it to partners and staff, and get their input. Include back-office personnel as they are the ones who will ultimately make whatever service you choose succeed or fail. The working relationship established involves frequent interaction and trusting the company chosen with a critical role in your business. Check references.

Consider the overall cost of software, billing, tech support, upgrades, training, and collections. A smart decision is critical. The staff hours spent to overcome a program's deficiencies will hurt in the long run if not chosen properly. Watch for hidden fees such as data entry costs per contract, prepaid agreement storage fees, or exit fees for members that cancel. Even ask the vendor to do the cost comparison and get input on how they compare to other possible choices.

**The bottom line:** You need the freedom to work ON your business as well as IN it. A strong, healthy, trouble-free back office can provide the financial stability and profitability needed to achieve that freedom. Evaluating software service providers requires taking the time to ask good questions as you look for affordability, and try to find something that will be easy as well as allow you to relax knowing you are in good hands.

**Twin Oaks Software** has been in business for 15+ years and is owned and operated by former club operators. We have put together an intelligent design for club operators, focusing on service, and providing reliable software and billing services to club owners of all size facilities. Our desktop and iSoftware products take tedious – yet crucial – administrative chores and make them quick, efficient, and accurate. And, we back it all up with a friendly, experienced technical support team. It's no wonder we boast an industry-leading 98% client retention rate. Twin Oaks is a strong, healthy, and growing company providing tomorrow's solutions today. **CS**

*Carole Oat is the National Sales Manager with Twin Oaks Software. She can be contacted at 866.278.6750, or by email at [coat@tosd.com](mailto:coat@tosd.com), or visit [www.tosd.com](http://www.tosd.com).*



SOFTWARE • BILLING • COLLECTIONS