Computer Talk
for Running Your Club

[management solution]

by Carole Oat

Try to imagine your club without treadmills or strength training equipment. It wouldn't function properly or sell many memberships. The same applies with the use of computers in the industry. If you really want to succeed, you must utilize the available database management systems and take advantage of the tools provided with them.

Like your cardio equipment that typically has a lifespan of three to five years, your technology devices should be replaced every two to four years. Computers become slower, outdated, bogged down with software and other unused applications. And like your equipment, ongoing maintenance and care needs to happen.

Below are some common terms and language that are being used today with explanations in layman's terms to help anyone understand it.

Back ups: This is a method for storing your member data with an external device. The different methods include Zip Drives, Tape systems, CD Burners. Even if you use an outside company to do all of your data entry, they typically will not have a record of usage, on-site purchases, program registrations and/or fitness tracking. Typical costs range from $150-$500 (far cheaper than the expense of having to recreate lost data).

The critical part of maintenance in the club industry is to have at least a weekly regimented back up system. The rule of thumb is to back up as frequently as you don't want to re-enter data if it is lost. Use a removable device that can be and should be taken off site so you have a recovery solution in case of theft or fire. If you're not sure how to do this or if it's being done, talk to your software/ hardware provider.

Antivirus software: For around $20 a year, you can update and ensure a virus free computer. Regardless of Internet access, a computer can pick up a virus from other loaded software, a bad floppy disk, email, a hacker planting one, or it can come through the internal network from another computer. Just getting antivirus software isn't enough, "definitions" must be updated, (minimally once a week, it takes minutes and requires Internet access). Most new computers come with a free three month trial subscription. And although the software doesn't expire, the ability to update does.

DSL: Digital subscriber line, a method of moving data over regular phone lines. DSL is proximity based, meaning the closer you are physically to the station, the faster your speed.

Typical cost is $25-$30 a month. You do not need a special phone line; it actually uses a high frequency portion of your existing line that is not used by the telephone. You do however have to insert a special filter into each phone jack in the building that will filter out the high frequency signal of your DSL. The exception would be the jack that leads into a modem.

Interestingly, smaller companies supplying DSL buy their bandwidth from phone companies. Generally, the lower the price you pay for DSL, the less bandwidth you get and thus a slower speed.

Cable Internet: This requires a co-axial cable, identical to what you have at home, that is fed into your club through a cable jack. Monthly fees are paid to the cable company to maintain the service. This is a user limited product in that everyone on a "loop" is sharing the same line. The more people that are logged on at a given time within the loop, the slower the service. Theoretically faster than DSL, but is subject to lag time during peak usage.

Note, both DSL and cable Internet require a modem that would be supplied by the Internet provider. A high speed Internet connection should never be directly connected to your computer.

Routers & firewalls: Firewall is terminology to define another method of computer security designed to prevent unauthorized access to software and data. Buy a router that includes a firewall, approximately $80, and you avoid the confusion. A router is a switching device that transfers incoming requests to outgoing links via the most efficient route possible. Stable, reliable protection is worth the price. This is a small investment to ensure protection from hackers.

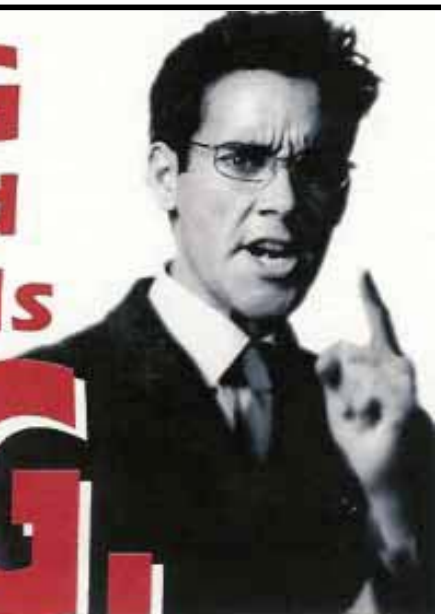*Remote access software:* If this is recommended to you, get it. Usual cost is about $165. Far less than what you would pay for an on-site technical call. This software allows your software provider to get into your computer, with permission, to repair files, provide support and quickly remedy most software problems.

These are the most common items that affect the typical club environment. For a lot of club owners, they want someone else to worry about the computers and upkeep. While this is all well and good, a little knowledge in this field could save you from losing valuable information and/or spending money where you don't have to. Your technology provider should be assisting you with the purchase, usage, and installation of the above devices.

As a club owner or operator, if you've never taken a basic computer course, do it now. They're offered very inexpensively at the local colleges or typically through adult education classes at convenient times. Invest in yourself as well as your club.

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