



Is Your Club Software the Most Affordable?

...Easy to Use? ...Flexible? ...Reliable?

by Carole Oat

Your business is growing, your facilities and equipment are first-rate, your club staff is excellent and the services you provide are top quality. In fact, everything you're doing on the delivery side is running well, your customers are happy and membership is expanding. You couldn't be happier, except for one thing: The business side of your business is making you crazy, and you're not sure if your current service provider is right for you anymore.

Have you been plagued with late billing; dues that don't process, or members getting double billed? How about system down time; lost data, and lost time correcting EFT or credit card problems? Do you get effective customer support when problems occur, or is your service provider letting you down? Aside from problems, does your service provider offer the range of services and capabilities you need, or are they falling short? Are they flexible in their product and service offerings, or are they constraining?

Evaluating your current club management service provider – as well as new candidates – requires that you ask a lot of questions and make sure you get the real answers. It may be hard to stay objective if you've developed a personal relationship with your current provider, but objectivity is necessary, and you need to be ready to switch if they can't meet your needs. In general, your provider needs to be affordable and reliable; their products and services need to be easy to work with, and their programs need to be flexible. Are they?

Start with this list, add your own items, and use it to compare your current service with as many others as you can:

Affordable

1. Are the charges fair for the services you receive or do you feel you could bring it in-house for less?
2. Are you getting buried with extra charges you weren't planning on?
3. Is your staff performing tasks your provider should be doing, if so, how much is that really costing you?

Reliable

1. Are your billing runs and EFT/credit card transactions going smoothly, or are there frequent problems that you

- need to resolve?
2. What is the typical wait time for a support call-back?
 3. Are difficult support problems addressed and resolved in a timely manner?
 4. Is data back-up being handled properly? How secure is your data?
 5. What happens when the Internet goes down?

Easy

1. Is front-desk check-in easy to use and understand?
2. Does their software eliminate all double entry and repetitive work?
3. Do they have the expertise to help you with all the software, hardware, collections and networking issues involved in the process?
4. Can they handle hardware problems and offer guidance installing new computers, printers, etc.?



...Easy to Use?



...Affordable?

Flexible

1. Are you free to switch between service options, for example, between providing your own data entry versus having them do it?
2. Do you get what you want or are you forced to accept, and pay for, services you don't really want?
3. Are your reports easy to create, manipulate and understand to be effective tools for management?

Asking these questions will have you thinking about the issues that are most important to you and your business, and this is a perfect time to establish what you and your business should require from a service provider and to develop a plan for choosing the one that fits your business best.

Here's how:

List your requirements.

1. Make sure the list is clear, concise and complete in writing and in your own mind.
2. Communicate this list to your partners and staff, and get their input. Include your back-office staff – they are the ones who will ultimately make whatever service you choose succeed or fail, and you need their “buy-in,” or acceptance.
3. Share the final list with both current and potential vendors. Vendors will assume they fit all your needs until you spell them out clearly.

Outline your process.

Create a detailed outline of your business process, again with staff participation. Include everything from entry of new members through billing and collections; how you catch and correct problems, and how you use data to make management decisions. Note the strengths and weaknesses of the process, and show where mistakes or breakdowns commonly occur. Finally, state the improvements you would expect a new system to provide. This is important because:

1. Business owners or managers are often unaware of some aspects of their business process – usually smaller details. Overlooking even a minor aspect of your process can derail implementation.
2. A new system will change your process and it will change work procedures and roles for some staff. You must decide the changes that are acceptable and plan for them.
3. You'll be asking potential vendors to show you how their system and services will address your current process and help you improve it.

Measure the service against your criteria, not the other way around.

Armed with your requirements list and process outline, you can effectively evaluate prospective service providers. Compare their features with your needs, and have those who fit provide a comprehensive live demonstration for you and your staff. It is unlikely that any system will fit perfectly, but with all the cards on the table you'll know what they can and cannot do.

Rate the Vendor.

Your working relationship with a club management services vendor involves not only frequent interaction, it means trusting them with one of the most important functional roles in your business, and you need to feel comfortable with them. Get references, call each one and ask lots of questions. No vendor gives bad references (although it's a good idea to ask for a reference who quit their service), but with a detailed conversation you can get references to open up and reveal more than they otherwise would. Get a gut sense of what it's like to work with the vendor long term. How do they stack

up based on the “affordable/reliable/easy/flexible list” above and your additions to it? Take the time to go over their lists of services, features and functions, and again include your staff in the process!

Consider the Cost.

The least expensive club management solution should be the one that works best for you, regardless (within reason) of price, because it should save you enough in staff hours to pay for itself, or more. By the same token any solution that does not fit well is too expensive! The staff hours you'll spend to overcome its deficiencies will hurt you in the long run. If you have completed the previous steps, evaluating the cost should be easy as long as you understand your internal costs. For example, do you know the real cost of performing a particular transaction via your staff? The cost of outsourcing this function may sound high until you have a realistic appraisal of your staff's net productivity. Careful analysis of all overhead and associated costs in this area is worthwhile even if it means hiring your accountant to help.

The bottom line.

You're in this business because you love what you're doing on the delivery side – providing excellent health and fitness services – and you want to grow the business to be the best you can possibly make it. To do this, you need the freedom to work ON your business as well as IN it. Only a strong, relatively trouble-free back-office can provide the financial stability and profitability you need to achieve that freedom. Finding a club

management service provider that is Affordable, Reliable, Easy to Use and Flexible is the key to success!

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...Flexible?



SOFTWARE • BILLING • COLLECTIONS