

TECHNOLOGY

Driving up the numbers

Andy Smith reviews a web development tool that can create comprehensive, tailor-made internet sites and open up a series of marketing opportunities

ALMOST EVERY GOLF club has a website nowadays but most are there primarily as an online brochure that rarely has anything new to say. To get a good-looking and interactive site clubs normally have to farm out their design to a specialist company but this can be very costly to set up and maintain and takes the website out of the hands of the club. Now, however, there is a third option which claims to provide an attractive, comprehensive and easy-to-maintain site that is designed to be an online newsletter and noticeboard rather than a set-in-stone prospectus, without having any of the previous drawbacks.

The latest of these is ClubView which has been developed over 18 months by Kevin Evans, a long-time member at Woodcote Park GC in Surrey, who has approached the design from a management perspective. Drawing on his experience serving the club's committee for several years, he has taken into account the many challenges facing clubs, both on the course and in the clubhouse and the software aims to help clubs promote their facilities to both members and/or visiting parties, and therefore increase club revenue.

"Being dynamic and database-driven, it's got virtually unlimited content capacity so clubs can have anything they like on the site," said Kevin, who runs WebCreativeUK, a website design and content management consultancy. "And while no-one looks at a Club's noticeboard, ClubView is designed so that people want to go online and see what's new – it's a living thing, not a one hit wonder.

"Secretaries and managers are busy people so we wanted to make it as easy to use as possible. The site can be maintained by anybody, even a secretary who is computer illiterate, and can include all the usual information a club has on its website and much more."

For example, some of the features include:

- Competition results which can be uploaded as soon as they are finished by simply cutting and pasting it from the club's regular management system.
- Each site is definable by the club and can



include all the colours, fonts and pictures they want.

- An online diary allows members to see exactly what is being held at the club every day. It is updatable instantly, so will never be out of date, and the club can upload as much future information as they like.
- Members fill in a short registration form to gain access to the site and a database is automatically formed from the information they give, immediately providing the club the members' e-mail addresses.
- The club can communicate at any time to any of the online members either in a group or individually, thus reducing mailing costs and opening up marketing opportunities.
- A members' directory area allows users to put in details about anything they may want to buy or sell or any services that could be of use to other golfers.
- An e-purchasing facility can be enabled for the professional to sell equipment and clothing online.

The system is in place at several clubs already and has been used at Woodcote Park since October last year, with encouraging results.

"We used the existing club newsletter to launch the new site, mailing it to every member and telling them how to initiate their online membership, and how to see the members' pages," said club secretary Adrian Dawson. "We've now around 300 online members and they love it.

"Secretaries may think the last thing they want is a website to maintain themselves but we have set up an editorial team to do the writing. The juniors, seniors and ladies all

run their own sections while I am editor-in-chief and vet all the copy before it is uploaded."

Woodcote's previous website was attracting on average 220 hits per month, now they attract over 30,000 per month, which opens up the possibility of banner advertising on the site, should the club want it, and greatly increases the marketing opportunities.

"Not so long ago we were losing money on our bar and catering every year but since we have been able to e-mail our 300 online members to tell them what functions we are holding we have seen a dramatic increase in turnover," continued Adrian. "The message is going to an individual rather than just being posted on a noticeboard in the clubhouse and many more people read it. When we market events via the group e-mail feature we are now reaching people who were previously on the fringes of the club."

Woodcote Park's clubhouse manager Phil Terry has seen dramatic changes in his functions. "We have had a 34 per cent increase in catering turnover while bar revenue has gone up 30 per cent. It helps the club provide cost-effective services to members and this in turn helps keep their subscriptions down."

Elsewhere in the club visitor income is up on 2003 and societies are at full capacity. Competitions see more members playing, which has increased the bar and catering sales, and more members are coming to the club more often. "There's a really good atmosphere and buzz to the place now, and the club's financial position is much more positive," added Adrian.

The cost of ClubView is initially £3,000, plus £850 a year for the web hosting and phone-based support, and a broadband internet connection is preferable but not essential to run the site. The one thing the system lacks at the moment is an online tee booking system but this is something Kevin plans to add in the near future.