



by Jon Inge



TROUBLE IN PARADISE?

Club systems have championship-level functionality, so why do so many clubs have sub-par satisfaction with them?

Who wouldn't want to be a club member? Clubs are idyllic places, havens against the world where staff and managers cater quietly and unobtrusively to a wide range of member needs. The club management systems that support these complex and specialized requirements have evolved steadily over the years, and now provide an often surprising depth of functionality. Yet beneath this promising surface lies a love-hate relationship; clubs may be very reliant on their systems, but few seem to be happy with them, and many vendors are frustrated with their clients. What's going on?

The club arguments most often heard are that while the ven-

dors are well-intentioned and supportive, the systems themselves are often unreliable, difficult to learn and use, and uneven in their depth of functionality. They also typically don't interface well with other systems, forcing managers to choose between accepting weak functionality in some areas of a single comprehensive system or trying to implement less-than-capable interfaces between a collection of more focused but separate systems.

The vendors counter that clubs are often techno-phobic. Treating their systems as a necessary evil rather than as essential management tools, buying as cheaply as possible and hanging on to obsolete versions for far too long, yet clubs still expect prompt, responsive support. There's a great deal of truth on both sides. >>

Functionality

What makes a typical club management system so complex? Clubs provide a wide and ever-growing range of services, with different options and privileges for different levels of membership that are often unique to a particular club. And while clubs don't usually provide overnight member accommodations (though that's changing these days as club owners expand to cover more areas) their other operations are usually more complex than the hotel equivalents. Vendors are faced with a constant stream of enhancement requests, no two exactly alike.

Since it's a small market – there are only about 5,000 to 6,000 clubs in the United States – the vendors must therefore generalize each club's requests to cover as many other permutations as they can think of to get maximum flexibility in configuration. The major specialist vendors – including Club Systems

Group, Abacus 21, Gary Jonas Computing, ClubTec, Smyth Systems, TAI Consulting, Postec and a host of smaller, regional suppliers – have done a remarkable job in developing tools to cover an amazing number of situations.

Consider the following operational areas, all of which are covered by modern club systems:

Memberships

These often have several levels, each with their own privileges. Family memberships usually have separate profiles for each member and different charging rights for children and adults, yet if any account slips into arrears this needs to be reflected on all of them to alert staff when further charges are incurred. Social members may not be able to access the main activity areas, such as the beach, or only on specific days and times. High-level memberships often have earlier access to golf tee-times or other activity availability before other levels, and so on. The depth of information on members' preferences and histories can be huge, with several hundred user-defined fields for data tracking supporting multiple screens of standard parameters.

Almost invariably, systems are required to pop-up the member's photo when they check into the club or charge an item at a POS workstation to verify their identity. To track usage of their facilities when specific reservations aren't required, many clubs also ask each member their main purpose on each visit – to spend time on the beach, workout in the weight room or just to have lunch.

To provide secure access with minimum inconvenience to arriving members and maximum service, some systems can now recognize a proximity card on a member's car windshield and allow unhindered entry. Then they simultaneously check their activity or dining reservations and send an alert message to the relevant department (including the club manager for VIPs) that Mr. Smith has arrived and will be with them shortly. Face recognition software must surely follow before long.

An added wrinkle comes from the need to monitor how often (and which) members bring guests to the club. Typically, a guest may only visit up to three times a year and must be invited by a member, though not necessarily the same one, on each occasion. But some clubs also track different categories of guests with much more complex restrictions; one example may be a guest staying at a member's home, who might be entitled to visit the club up to 21 days a year, but only in periods of seven consecutive days, only one of which can be during peak season. And of course it goes without saying that as much detail about each guest should be tracked as possible, since they're prime targets for future membership campaigns.

Activity Booking

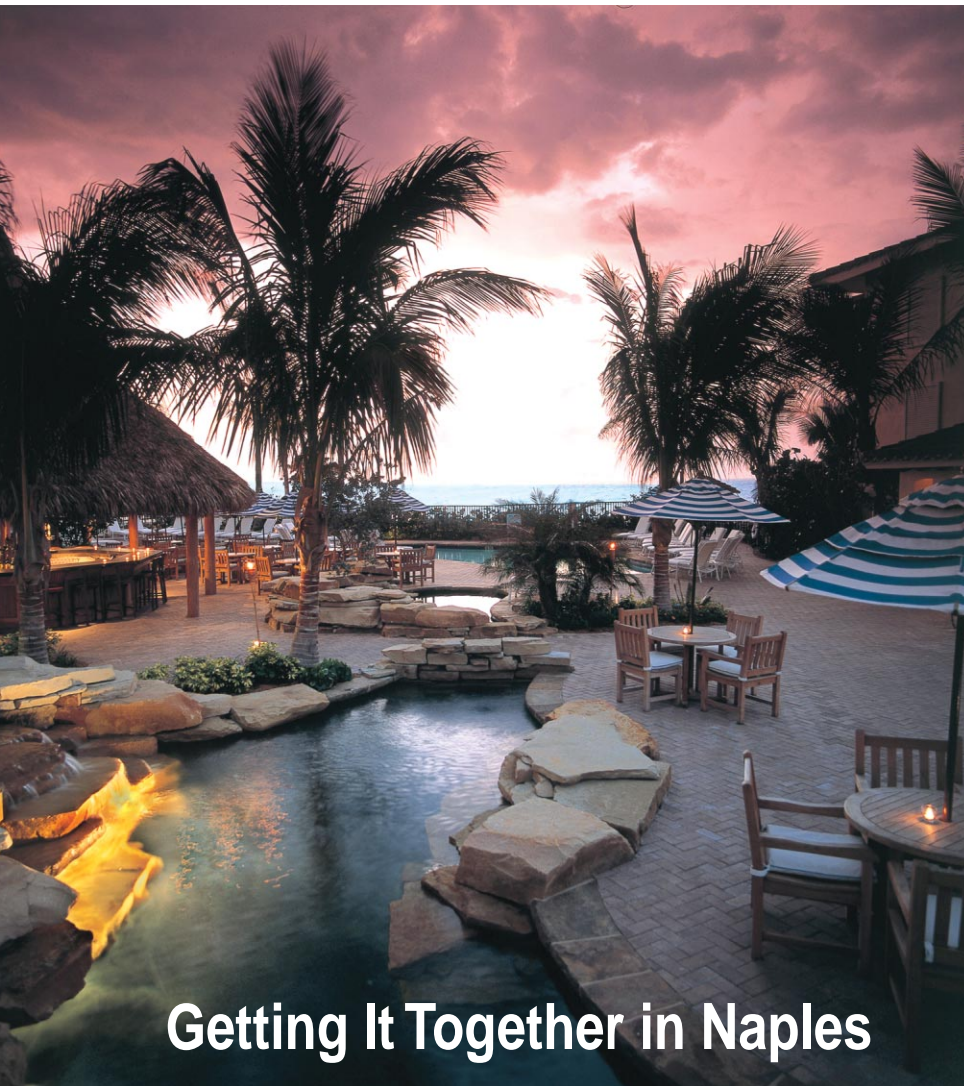
Some clubs provide facilities such as golf courses, tennis courts and so on as part of their general operations for members to use at any time without having to

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Wireless-connected handheld PDA units offer great flexibility wherever the staff needs to be on property. This example shows a simple menu of options for different areas, the opening of a member chit ordering food and beverage items from the golf cart and capturing the member's signature to authorize the charge.

Screens courtesy of Abacus 21, Inc.



Getting It Together in Naples

If you've been "losing it" for a while, you'd be hard-pressed to find a better place to get it back together again than LaPlaya Beach & Golf Resort, a Noble House property located on the beach in Naples, Fla. And "getting it together" is a key aspect of the technology there, according to Jay Robinson, the resorts' MIS manager.

Robinson said, "With all the many activities of a luxury resort combined with a beach and golf club, it's really important to us to have as complete a picture as possible of our guests' and members' activities and preferences. We want to make life as simple as possible for them, and having the spa, golf, hotel, membership and all POS—retail and F&B—on the same system makes a big difference. It helps make sure things don't fall through the cracks by providing a single itinerary for all their activities, and lets us answer their questions quickly and completely. For example (we are able) to see all details of a POS check from the front desk."

LaPlaya uses Springer-Miller Systems' Host PMS, a Noble House corporate standard, and opted for the Springer-Miller membership, spa and golf modules, as well as its Touch POS, for the club. The only link to another system is for the datacard application that produces the members' photo ID cards. In another example of keeping things simple for the members, the cards have magnetic strips coded to match the POS and electronic door locks, so one card serves for identification, POS charging and access to various activity areas.

Doesn't it take a while for the staff to learn a system this comprehensive? "There is certainly a lot there," said Robinson. "But we recognize that thorough training makes for more effective use of the system and better guest service, and so we spend the extra funds to make sure it's done, including budgeting for annual refresher classes."

Sounds as refreshing for the staff as the ambience is for the guests and members.

make reservations. For those relying on these as revenue centers, however, and for operations such as marinas, quite sophisticated booking systems are required.

In addition to the usual multi-course golf tee-time reservations (including tournament management and handicap calculations), multi-court tennis bookings, spa treatments and so on, the systems need to recognize the booking member's identification and display only those availability dates, times and rates applicable to their profile. Dining reservations are particularly important for clubs that require minimum monthly F&B charges as a condition of membership.

These modules need to be linked to the member accounts and retail/F&B point-of-sale systems for charging. A more intriguing interface recently made available sends information wirelessly to a handheld PDA so that golf starters, for example, can see up-to-the-minute tee sheet details, including payment status, without being tied to a workstation in a hut. The extension of this to other management areas is inevitable, especially as wireless networks are installed in more club environments to provide members with access to the Internet.

Retail Point of Sale

This is absolutely essential for golf/tennis shops and spa operations, but must also be tied in with the relevant activity's reservation system and the club membership system so that all charges (greens fees and clothing or spa treatments with health products and lotions) are on one bill. It's also an advantage if the system will display a photo of the member when they check in for their tee-time or spa treatment to verify their identity. The situation can be complicated in some instances if a newly hired pro wants to bring in his or her own preferred system. The benefits of their familiarity with this must be weighed very carefully against how it can be integrated with both the booking systems and the membership accounts.

Food and Beverage POS

These can typically be a more mainstream product than other club software modules, since most F&B operations are quite straightforward. They do need to allow charging to member accounts and to provide full access to the POS check line-item detail from the membership billing

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module to help resolve disputes. Some of the more advanced systems also allow for signature capture at the POS terminal or provide immediate access to a member's previous POS checks to see which wine they ordered on their last visit, for example.

Banquet/Catering Events

A major area for many clubs, events must accommodate all the usual issues surrounding bookings for multiple, dividable function rooms over several days for major group events, with all the associated setup, menu, equipment and service details clearly defined and managed. This is one area where groups have more impact than individual members, bringing their own challenges regarding special rate negotiations and managing packages of activities and/or expenditure limits at various activity centers for group members.

Inventory/Purchasing

Given the self-contained nature of most clubs, an inventory and purchasing system can be very useful for managing both retail and high-value F&B stock items. This is another area where a fairly generic functionality set is all that is required, and also another one where wireless handheld units are making an impact in providing mobile access to current data.

Guestroom/Hotel Management

Most clubs have limited guestroom facilities if any at all, and standard PMS functionality works pretty well for them in the areas of reservations, rooms/folio management and so on. Housekeeping schedules may need more flexibility than usual, though, since members staying for several days or weeks will typically only need service on a weekly or some other basis.

Many club systems have very limited guestroom functionality, however, and clubs with a hotel operation are often tempted to install a standard hotel PMS instead. The problem is that few PMSs have effective interfaces to the other club systems, complicating the reservations process and making it very difficult to get a complete picture of a member's profile, activities and preferences across the complete operation.

This is changing, but less from within the club systems themselves and more from the PMS vendors. With the advent of better tools such as XML, some high-level interfaces have been developed between specific pairs of systems so that the creation of a profile in one system automatically creates a parallel record in the other. SoftBrands links its Rio Grand system, for example, with PMSs from Visual One, INNfinity and Inter-American Data as well as its own Portfolio and Medallion products.

Other PMS vendors are constantly improving their systems by expanding their own membership and club management modules. Springer-Miller is the prime example here, and has developed a very comprehensive membership module for its SMS|Host PMS over the years, but others such as Visual One are also moving in this direction.

Some clubs include private residence club operations, a form of time-share where the owners of, for instance, a tenth-share in a unit (who are also full club members) can book 21 of their 36 days at the beginning of the season, taking the rest on an as-available basis. For this and other activity bookings with a strongly seasonal demand, systems need to include

On the Road to Nirvana at Eldorado

Like many clubs, the **Eldorado Country Club** in Indian Wells, Calif. had been using a collection of separate systems for many years, some of which had been customized for them with all the functional advantages and support vulnerabilities that brings. Last year they decided that the advantages of a standard integrated system outweighed their familiarity with the existing products, and began a phased implementation of **Abacus 21's** new Windows-based system. How has it gone?

"Overall, we've been very pleased with the new system," said Katie Miller, the club's assistant controller, who has overall project responsibility. "The depth of functionality within each module is great, and having them all integrated has solved the interface problems we used to have."

How does the system's complexity affect training? "We take a very careful approach to what we teach," said Miller. "Having a separate training room for instruction helps a lot, especially as some of our Abacus 21 modules still use the older character-based screens. We're very specific about which functions are taught, and when we decide we want to expand that set I work closely with Abacus to decide the best way to go."

"Most of the challenges we've had have been those you'd expect with any new product. We were the first user of the Windows-based POS module and probably will be for timekeeping and inventory, too. The inevitable initial problems we encountered were frustrating, of course, and we've sent in a few enhancement requests, but I cannot say enough good things about the quality of the Abacus support team. They've been outstanding!"

As with any club, Eldorado's members expect things to be done just the way they want them. Miller said, "It's really refreshing to have a vendor who understands that."

a booking priority setting with the ability to rotate it from year to year so those members who had first pick of dates one year will be at the end of the line the next.

Accounting

As for PMS, club accounting requirements are generally pretty straightforward, but clearly benefit just as much from close ties with the other modules. A couple of areas they must be able to handle are minimum monthly billing amounts for each member, usually for F&B charges, and the ability to bill on several different schedules for each member. Dues are often billed annually, for example, but F&B charges may be invoiced monthly, with all other expenses on a quarterly basis.

This may seem like many modules, but this certainly isn't an exhaustive list and each most definitely has its place. And the brief list of functions doesn't even begin to scratch the surface of their capabilities.

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Challenges

So where do the problems come from? Most clubs won't use all of these functions and indeed many operations have fairly limited needs and are content to stay with old systems for many years. On the other hand, others constantly come up with new and more complex service concepts to offer and new subtleties in managing members and their guests. Clubs are accustomed to saying yes to their members and they expect the same response from their suppliers.

As a result, vendors are expected both to support old versions well into obsolescence (which not only becomes harder to do well but also diverts resources away from more modern developments) as well as to incorporate every new enhancement requested by each client. These latter must also be generalized, of course, so that similar requests from other clubs can be accommodated without major re-writing. As a result, most systems have more built-in options and functionality than most clients will ever need.

The ability to provide this degree of flexibility without making the systems hard to set up, hard to navigate and hard to make reliable constitutes one of the major challenges today. It's complicated by training budgets that are often frozen at a level more appropriate to older, simpler systems, if they exist at all. Even more than hotels, clubs are often reluctant to invest in regular refresher training to make sure their staff really understands how to use the system and use it effectively.

As more features are added, the support task also becomes more complex, yet in this small market the vendors are challenged to sell enough systems to generate sufficient revenue to support them properly. Some support efforts can be off-loaded by allowing clients to check FAQs and post trouble tickets via the Web and to research the progress of their call online, but many clubs feel that the vendors are fighting a losing battle.

Further, many vendors started out specializing in one particular area of club technology – member management, golf booking, spa management – and often chose a technology platform a little out of the mainstream. This was fine until clubs began to need multiple systems to cover different operational areas and interfacing between them, especially those with less-common technologies, became a real problem.

Vendors were thus encouraged to widen the scope of their systems and become all-in-one solutions, the clubs often being willing to accept less than optimal functionality in some modules rather than deal with interface issues between different products. A few vendors have stepped up to the interface challenge – Postec, for example, links Trako member management with MICROS POS and Great Plains accounting in its Harmony offering, and TAI also interfaces with MICROS – but most still try to cover all the bases themselves.

The clubs' same "low-risk" approach was reinforced when vendors began to move their systems to Windows to take advantage of its far better user interface and mainstream connectivity. As with all such projects, initial steps brought initial problems with system reliability, limited functionality compared with the long-developed DOS versions and the usual general data migration issues. These problems have long been overcome, but the memory lingers on, further encouraging the naturally cautious club managers to stay with their old DOS as long as they can.

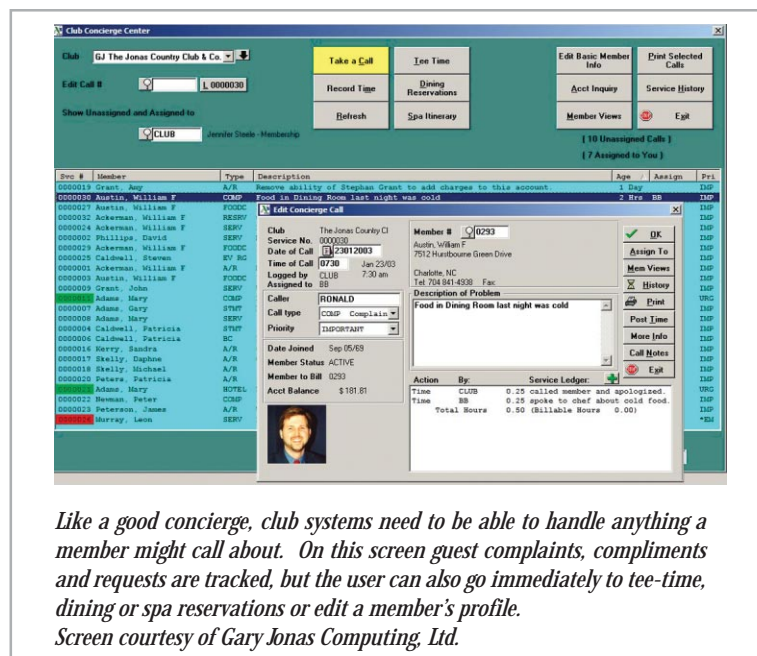
Clubs tend to budget only minimal amounts for technology, preferring to invest in improvements more easily visible to their members. Consequently they try to wring the maximum life out of every system even more than hotels do, keeping them running well beyond the point at which faster, more capable and reliable options are available.

While this policy may appear to demonstrate fiscal prudence in not overspending on computer systems, the operational costs of handicapping the staff and managers with obsolete systems are very real even if they're not specifically identified in the balance sheet. While many clubs' experience has been that software upgrades are too often problematical, the answer is to pressure the vendors to do better, not to avoid upgrades altogether.

Members may not – and should not – see the faster and more capable computer systems you invest in instead of upgraded facilities or public area equipment and furnishings. But they will see the benefits of fewer lost bookings, more accurate preference information available to everyone who can use it, Internet booking of activities and access to their account information, faster response times and friendlier staff who no longer have to fight old systems. And given that the systems contain the most vital information a club has (full details of its members and all their activities and needs) it only makes sense to keep it on modern, efficient and well-supported systems so that it's quickly and reliably accessible at all times.

I've often argued that smaller operations need more automation, not less. This can seem counter-intuitive since the staff in a smaller company has so many different things to do. But it's precisely because of their constant multi-tasking and lack of time that they need more automation, not less, as long as it's usable. They really benefit from having as complete information as possible available in as easily accessed a form as possible, just at the time when

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Like a good concierge, club systems need to be able to handle anything a member might call about. On this screen guest complaints, compliments and requests are tracked, but the user can also go immediately to tee-time, dining or spa reservations or edit a member's profile. Screen courtesy of Gary Jonas Computing, Ltd.

they need it. This means giving them systems that place just as much emphasis on usability as packing in more functions, and that integrate in meaningful ways with other systems in a useful and reliable manner.

Overall

Clubs have smaller operations than hotels, with more complex needs, yet with a greater reluctance to invest in the systems to satisfy them.

Clubs generally have even less technology expertise onsite than a hotel, and less time to support and manage the systems.

With a smaller market overall than hotels, vendors have fewer properties to recoup their development costs from and fewer to provide support income.

There is a very strong demand for integrated systems with a low interest in interfaces that is based on past bad experiences and doesn't take recent advances into account.

The vendors have a great willingness to please, so they keep adding more and more features without necessarily having the resources to support them, and without always challenging the clubs to determine just how great the need for a change really is. And it's a genuine willingness to please. Club after club said that they really like their vendor's staff, who respond rapidly to every call and always try to fix problems as quickly as possible. It's just that the bug fixes and enhancements don't seem to end; it's not unheard of for software upgrades to be sent out every month.

Ways Forward

By working on the following aspects we can move forward:

- **There must be steady improvement in software quality and reliability** from the vendors, especially when combined with improvements in screen design to help the staff find and use the functions they need.
- **Clubs must be aware of the value of the systems and the data contained in them**, leading to greater willingness to migrate to current version levels, invest in regular staff training and budget for regular system upgrades.
- **There must be greater interface flexibility and inter-vendor cooperation**, leading to better-matched solutions for specific club needs. There is less need for this than in the hotel world, since clubs are far more often independent, self-contained operations. But no one system does a superlative job in every area, and there should be no reason why a club should have to give up a food and beverage POS system it really likes just because its new membership management system doesn't have a good interface to it.
- **With possible vendor consolidation, there are fewer but stronger vendors with greater resources to fund development and support.** Vertical market consolidator Constellation Software gave the industry a wake-up call in June 2003 by purchasing key vendor Gary Jonas Computing, Ltd.

Will this lead to the acquisition of other vendors and the migration of their individual client bases to a single product? This has been Constellation's pattern in other industries. This might not be easy. Jonas has long considered one of its strengths to be that all of its clients are on a single version of the software, making support that much stronger. Taking on support for other vendors' products would undoubtedly complicate that significantly, at least in the short term.

Historically, too, many clubs have been reluctant to upgrade their systems even

The Need to INTERFACE

One hopeful sign is that the **Club Managers Association of America (CMAA)** is pushing for an initiative among the club systems vendors similar to the one the HTNG group launched for hotel systems. This covers a four-pronged approach:

- 1 | Encourage the vendors to work together more cooperatively for the good of their common clients
- 2 | Encourage more comprehensive and useful links between their systems
- 3 | Help the clubs and hotels gain a better appreciation of the value of the data on their systems and so to budget funds to keep them current
- 4 | Explore ways to provide systems for a monthly or transaction-based fee, so removing them from the capital-expenditure battles that handicap both new orders and upgrades. This approach isn't for everyone, though, and the impact on vendor finances has to be considered carefully.

within a single vendor's range, though this may be less from loyalty to the vendor than from fear of uncaging the demons that lurk in any system migration. A well-financed vendor committed to simplifying this process and strong enough to provide outstanding support could make quite a difference.

Watch This Space

The current situation has been building for years and can't continue much longer. Clubs will continue to provide superlative service in a quiet, unobtrusive way that never lets their members be aware of the technology supporting it. Behind the scenes, though, challenge and change are definitely in the air.

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