

Haywards Heath Golf Club has gained over a hundred new members by introducing its new flexible membership scheme, assisted by the Open Solutions points system



Club Name:

Haywards Heath Golf Club

County:

West Sussex

Installation Date:

2006 (member loyalty and till system)

2013 (points system added)

Website:

www.haywardsheathgolfclub.co.uk

Haywards Heath Golf Club and Open Solutions = Flexible Membership Success

With 111 Flexible members gained in less than one year, the success that Haywards Heath Golf Club in Sussex is enjoying with its new Flexible Membership scheme is proof that this format can be a winning formula for both membership recruitment and a healthier bottom line. Probably the most topical issue for many golf clubs, it has also become controversial and widely misunderstood. The key to success, as Haywards Heath shows, is in the research, the communication to members, the design of the format, and the software used to manage it.

Based on paying for points for rounds played, the club's own points-based system of credits is managed automatically by the market-leading GPOS till software from Open Solutions, making administration of an otherwise very complex set of tasks simplicity itself, and no extra hassle for the office or the Pro Shop.

Club Secretary Graham White's flexible membership initiative was launched in June 2013, and has achieved the following:

- 65 brand new members in the first 6 months
- 5 who joined as Flexible Members have since upgraded to the full or five day categories
- 16 past members have returned to the club to become Flexible Members
- 12 Social and Academy members have transferred to the Flexible Membership
- Just 21 Full and 5 Five Day downgraded to the Flexible category, most of whom would have left the club otherwise.

It has also improved the club's subscription income by some £40,000 and improved the bar and catering revenues, while helping to retain healthy membership levels generally speaking. Even the cost of managing the points-based Flexible system has been very straightforward.

As the club already had Open Solutions GPOS software and tills, the small amount of £150 secured the additional software option of managing a points-based card system. It was duly installed remotely, enabling the club to welcome flexible members to its ranks.

Flexible Membership: the usual objections

The over-riding concern of any club and its Treasurer is that offering a much cheaper format of playing membership will cause an unsustainable outflow of subscription income from those transferring from Full 7 and 5 Day memberships to the cheaper option.

Haywards Heath Golf Club was equally concerned at first, but by doing their research they soon found that by setting up their Flexible Membership carefully:

- To reflect a fair cost for those who only want to play once a month or less
- At a rate that cost more than those full members who played every week
- By surveying the members to establish the likelihood of transferrals
- By communicating with the members to get their understanding and support for the new initiative
- Timing the launch to avoid immediate transfers from full membership,

...it can be a very successful way of attracting new playing members whose lifestyles simply don't allow them to play more than once a month, and retaining those full members who would have left the club altogether when the subscriptions are due.

Getting the details right

Graham explains, "We'd been giving the concept of Flexible Membership a lot of thought, and our research showed that all the usual objections such as losing full members to a cheaper option, simply aren't an issue provided you set it up the right way."

"We also saw that other clubs operated tee time booking systems with their flexible package, something we didn't want to start doing. We simply wanted to offer a type of membership that gave people with busy lifestyles the opportunities to play whenever they wanted, but which still had to be easy and completely hassle-free for us to administrate."

"The main plank of our strategy was to ensure that our full members still got the best value as regular golfers playing once a week or more. So the Flexible Membership was set at a rate which offered good value compared to the green fees for people who genuinely couldn't play more than once a month, but wanted the privileges – golf at any time, handicap, playing in competitions, full use of the clubhouse, meeting other members, social events - of club membership."

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The Haywards Heath points system

So let's look at how Haywards Heath set it all up. First, the Flexible Membership package costs £390, with £25 being the subscription element, and the remaining £365 being a pound per point or 365 points. This price point took into account the £500 that clubs in the region like Crowborough Beacon Golf Club and Goodwood Golf & Country Club required, and the £290 that Reigate Hill Golf Club (near the M25 in Surrey) wanted for their Flexible Membership packages.

Then there is the issue of managing the Flexible Membership points. Fortunately Haywards Heath Golf Club was already running the Open Solutions' GPOS till system, so one of the older tills was transferred to the Pro Shop and the software option for managing points-based systems was purchased and installed. The club was now equipped to make things easy for everybody concerned.

On joining the Flexible Member gets a swipe card which is used to access their points account and bar account in the usual way, i.e. the Flexible member goes to the Pro Shop where their card is swiped to deduct the points from their account for their round they want to play. When they come in afterwards, their card is swiped again in the Bar for drinks and food purchases, the money for which is held in a separate account from the points. The swipe card simply identifies the member to the staff on the Open Solutions GPOS system and then allows them to deduct either points or money accordingly.

Haywards Heath operates the points system just like a yield management system, charging more for peak times and less for off-peak. 30 points equates to a round of golf on the weekend mornings. Alternatively at 20 points per round, with 365 points to play with, a Flexible Member could play 18 full rounds during the weekday afternoons, or 36 times if it was nine holes each time. The table below shows how the club set up the points system.

Weekends and Bank Holidays		
	18 Holes	9 Holes
Morning	30 points	N/A
Afternoon - 12:00	25 points	15 points
Twilight - 16:00	15 points	10 points
Weekdays		
Morning	25 points	15 points
Afternoon - 12:00	20 points	10 points
Twilight - 16:00	10 points	5 points

Communication with, and survey of, the members

Given the widely-held and negative perception of the Flexible membership concept, the clever bit was the way in which the club:

- explained the new concept to the existing membership
- established the likelihood of members transferring from existing categories to Flexible
- timed the launch of the new format
- defined certain limitations.

Firstly, the Flexible concept was explained to the members, as it needed their support at an EGM to approve the new membership category. That gave the club the opportunity to explain how it was all going to work.

A survey of the membership was also conducted to see how many members – full and other categories - were seriously interested in transferring to Flexible, and once the 21% response rate was extrapolated, around 50 might do so. In fact, just 26 Full and Five Day members actually did so in January 2014, plus 13 from other categories. Crowborough Golf Club found a similar result following their survey of likely transfers compared to the number of actual transfers when the subscriptions became due.

Launch timing

The Flexible Membership was launched in June 2013, by which time the full members had already paid their annual subscriptions six months before. As they were not allowed to transfer for six months until the following January, the timing of the launch helped ensure the club's subscription income remained positive for 2013.

By the end of 2013 the club had attracted 91 members into their Flexible Membership scheme, including the 39 existing members that transferred.

In the first four months of 2014 a further 25 new Flexible members joined Haywards Heath Golf Club, making a total to date of 116, although five have since upgraded to Full or Five Day membership.

Management of, and restrictions on, Flexible Membership payments

The number of rounds a Flexible Member can play was restricted by placing a limit on the amount he or she can top up their card, which was set at a maximum of two times a year at 100 points i.e. £100 each time, on top of their subscription.

The Open Solutions GPOS system keeps a real time record of the credits or points used, and provides a report for the Course Marshals showing them who is on the course. And of course, the GPOS system allows Flexible Members to buy and place more points on their cards when topping up.

These points can't be used for buying a guest green fee, or buying anything else at the club's bar, catering or Pro Shop. That said, a £50 bar levy payable each year is compulsory, and is transferred to the Flexible Member's bar account, attracting a 10% discount on food and drink.

The Open Solutions GPOS system manages separate accounts for the points for golf rounds, and for the money for food and drinks, all with a simple swipe of the one card at the Pro Shop and/or bar. All the sales data can be checked as a report whenever Graham wants to see it on-screen and/or print it out for the Course Marshals.

Provided they have a CDH ID number and an England Golf handicap, Flexible Members can also use their points for entering competition rounds. Graham's intention in the near future is to enable all members to enter competitions online, and pay the entry payment required from their Open Solutions card-based account. However, only full members can play in club matches, one of the major attractions at Haywards Heath Golf Club of being a full member.



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Flexible Membership – great for your club's bottom line

Graham's delighted with the results to date, which show that Haywards Heath's Flexible Membership package is a genuine success, as he explains, "First of all, the survey told us what to expect in the way of likely transfers, although in fact by January 2014, only around 50% or 39 from all categories actually did. So we dealt with the main objection to Flexible Membership – unsustainable loss of subscription income - by knowing what to expect financially in the way of likely transferrals."

"The communications with the members prior to the EGM was essential because it ensured everyone understood what we were really trying to achieve, and why it wasn't simply a cheaper way to play a lot of golf at Haywards Heath! The timing and establishing some restrictions were also critical to the success of the package. At the launch, only Social members were allowed to transfer immediately, which indeed some did."

"Over the six months from launch the Flexible package attracted 65 new members fairly quickly, and that number's grown since then. With the annual subscriptions in the following January we definitely retained around 17 members that decided to transfer from Full to Flexible, members who I know would have otherwise left the club altogether."

"Of the new Flexible Members, several have since transferred to the Full category in January this year, which underlines how important it is to make the Full package the one that offers the best value for those who want to play a lot."

"Over the six months from launch, the Flexible package attracted 65 new members fairly quickly, and that number's grown since then"

Good for the long term health of Haywards Heath Golf Club

Graham is acutely aware of the need for any golf club to adjust to its marketplace and the lifestyles of potential members when it comes to the bottom line, as he comments, "The Flexible Membership initiative has enabled us to achieve several things. We've enabled the club to adapt to the needs of the modern lifestyles.

"For those who are time poor and are looking for a cost of membership that is justifiable, Haywards Heath has become an attractive golf club to join and play. We're offering them exactly what they want, which is the opportunity to join a club and play occasionally at a reasonable rate.

"While our full members still enjoy the best rates per round, for those who find it's harder to justify because they're playing less, the Flexible Membership helps us retain their membership in a different form, and enables them to enjoy the social side of the club, which means we retain their input to bar and catering income.

"The times when the course used to be empty are also starting to fill up with Flexible Members who are taking advantage of the points system's off-peak benefits, so the club feels busier. In its first year the Flexible category has enhanced the club's subscription income by over £40,000 as well as providing a useful boost to the Club's bar and catering turnover.

Flexible membership management and Open Solutions go hand-in-glove

Graham acknowledges the vital role of the club's Open Solutions' till systems, as he outlines, "Management of the Flexible Membership category is very different from the other categories. Behind the scenes, the Open Solutions GPOS system means the otherwise very complex management of the new Flexible Membership's points system is completely automated. That means it's just a simple matter of the Flexible member swiping a card in the Pro Shop or the Bar, and for those of us in the office, it's just a couple of clicks to download a report with all the real time data we need, whenever we want.

"Behind the scenes, the Open Solutions GPOS system means the otherwise very complex management of the new Flexible Membership's points system is completely automated"

Summary

The concept of Flexible Membership works, provided clubs do their research and really get to grips with the details. If they do that, then it will succeed, as Graham says, "The whole Flexible Membership initiative from start to finish has exceeded our expectations, and overturned all the perceived challenges. Because we have the right software thanks to Open Solutions, it's been very easy to manage as well. That's why for Haywards Heath Golf Club, Flexible Membership is a genuine win win."

If you are already using Open Solutions software, please contact us for further information if you are thinking of using the points system to help manage flexible memberships.

Where you have another system in place, we will be happy to quote for an upgrade, to include the points system if required. Please contact us via any of the following methods:

Open Solutions International Ltd

1 Derek Ashton Court, 77 Mottram Road, Stalybridge, Cheshire, SK15 2LY

TEL: 0800 107 5285

EMAIL: sales@gpos-uk.com

www.opensolutionsinternational.com

TWITTER: @opensol2013

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