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RugbyCall - A New Service Enabling
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“Rugby is a game for big buggers; if you're not a big bugger, you get hurt. I wasn't a big bugger but I was a fast bugger and therefore I avoided the big buggers,” Spike Milligan, member of the pre-war London Irish 'B' team.

Founded in 1898, London Irish RFC is a home from home for all Irishmen living in England and for all true rugby enthusiasts of every nationality who live in southwest London. The club is both proud of its heritage and determined to harness innovative, leading-edge ideas and technologies to help it stay ahead of the field.

The tasks facing every commercial and marketing Director of Premiership Rugby clubs since the advent of professionalism in the game have been daunting. In the old amateur days a crowd of 1,000 turning up at the club for a home game would have had a significant positive impact on cash flow and profitability. Today, with the costs of players' wages and the complete professional infrastructure of coaches, physios, marketing and administration most clubs need a minimum of 5000 spectators at a home game just to break even.

The traditional London Irish rugby crowd was made up of club members and their families, with an occasional influx of "non-tribal" supporters when

one of the big name clubs came to visit. To be commercially viable in the professional era the club had to extend its appeal every week way beyond its traditional supporter base.

Malcolm Ball arrived at London Irish as Sales and Marketing Director at the start of the 1999/2000 season faced with all of the above problems, plus one more major challenge. For years the Irish have played their rugby at The Avenue in Sunbury-on-Thames. This has always been one of the most hospitable and welcoming places to spend a Saturday afternoon. However, with a total capacity of less than 4,500 the club decided to move their home games to the Stoop Memorial Ground in Twickenham, home of the Harlequins Club and with a seating capacity of nearly 9,000. Season Ticket holders, club members, friends, families, casual visitors and of course the opponents supporters all had to be convinced that the famous atmosphere at The Avenue could be reproduced at the Stoop.

Under the banner of "The Craic at The Stoop. It's more than 80 minutes of Rugby!" Ball has been steadfastly creating a brand with which the diehard Irish fan can identify, while at the same time attracting as many of the "non tribal" rugby fans of south west London as possible.

Having created the brand, the next challenge is to make sure that as many of the diverse customer base as possible are aware of when each home game is taking place. Given the vagaries of fixture arrangements imposed by the RFU and the TV schedulers, and the possibilities of weather induced postponements, and the uncertainties of progress in the various knock-out cup competitions, there is a need to communicate fixture information on a weekly basis to ensure everyone knows what is actually going on.

The challenge facing Malcolm Ball was how to do this cost-effectively given the diverse nature of the club's customer base. A typical crowd is made up of club members who are season ticket holders, club members who are not season ticket holders, regular fans who are not actually club members, casual "walk-ups" and of course, this week's opponent's supporters.

The solution came in the form of the RugbyCall Genie, an automated push telephony service operated on an Application Service Provider basis by Criticall Limited as part of its TicketCall service.

As Marcus Strallen, Managing Director of Criticall (and by complete coincidence an absolute rugby fanatic who lives in south west London) explained, "The RugbyCall Genie is the perfect supporter's service for the true fan. Each fan defines what information they want, and where, when and how they want that information delivered to them. Because they receive all the essential information and relevant offers at precisely the right time, they are much more likely to take the desired action, like reserve tickets for this weeks game when contacted on Thursday night."

The RugbyCall Genie was launched at London Irish at the beginning of the 1999 season and is proving both popular with the fans and a highly effective Customer Relationship Management tool for the club. Not only can it deliver highly personalised messages that are anticipated, timely and relevant; it is also extremely cost effective.

Criticall Limited owns and manages all the technical infrastructure and telephone lines used by the RugbyCall service which is capable of making up to 5000 calls each hour. The RugbyCall service is marketed to subscribers who define how they would prefer to be contacted and give their permission for the RugbyCall Genie to contact them.

Membership is free and fans can choose to have messages delivered by any combination of phone, mobile phone or email.

Every week, London Irish RFC and RugbyCall agree the content of the message, which will go out to subscribers and also decide which group of people need to be contacted. It takes less than 6 hours every week for the RugbyCall Genie to be fully scripted and ready to deliver the messages. Each Thursday and Friday evening during the rugby season, the RugbyCall Genie service calls each fan individually to deliver the relevant pre-recorded message to tell them about what's happening that weekend. The message will vary for each customer depending on the sort of fan that is being contacted. For example, a season ticket holder won't need a ticket themselves but may be interested in purchasing additional tickets for friends or family.

The sort of information that the Genie service delivers is:

- Ticket availability with the option to buy tickets instantly using the phone keypad
- Changes to the fixture list including changed dates or kick-off times
- Travel deals to away fixtures in the UK and Europe
- Free merchandise offers when buying ticket
- The latest team news from behind the scenes
- Early advice on cup ticket availability

Every week the structure and the urgency of the message is different. If the club doesn't have a home game for a couple of weeks, they use the opportunity to sell forward travel packages. If there is a home game and the expectation is that the crowd won't be very good, they will use the opportunity to put together exciting incentives for fans to come to the game. If there's a home game and it's expected to be a sell-out, they can offer loyal fans the opportunity to reserve best seat tickets ahead of the match.

Criticall is responsible for making sure that all the calls are made, and provides a detailed analysis on the results of the phone calls for London Irish. This not only includes a report on who has reserved tickets for which games, booked travel packages etc. but also the breakdown of "successful" calls, how many people were left voicemails, how many people asked to be called later etc. This sort of detailed analysis is available by 9.00am on the morning following a "callout", and has enabled London Irish and RugbyCall to evolve and adapt the service in the light of immediate customer reaction.

The cost of a successful RugbyCall phone call is somewhere between 12-20p, which is about a quarter of the cost of a cheap direct mail piece. Like any outbound telephony campaigns, the RugbyCall Genie will reach about one in three of the people

it tries to get hold of, having automatically re-tried to contact people if it first detects an engaged line or "no answer". It will leave a voicemail message at a cost of about 4pence if it detects an answering machine of any sort.

The service is free to the supporters, quick to implement and there are none of the print, copywriting or postage costs usually associated with marketing to the supporters through direct mail. It is a very powerful weapon in the Customer Relationship Management armoury of any organisation that has a need to communicate regularly with diverse groups of customers.

Malcolm Ball, says "We are constantly looking for new ways to encourage as many people as possible to turn up regularly and help establish the Craic at the Stoop as the rugby event to come to. We see RugbyCall as a great new service. Over the coming months RugbyCall Genie will be one of the many tools we will use to provide all of our supporters with useful information and exciting reasons to come and support the team and the club."

About Criticall

Criticall Limited is a leading developer of Event Driven Communication (EDC) solutions and services to clients in the Customer Relationship Management, Permission Marketing and Emergency Alert markets.

Criticall uses automated, intelligent, telephone notification technology to receive real-time event information from any software application or on-line system and then dynamically generate automated messages to deliver the content of that event to any individual or group of people.

Event information is delivered by any combination of phone, mobile phone, alpha, digital or tone pager, SMS, fax and email; based on an individual contact profile for each person - how, where, when & in what language they can be contacted.

Criticall's technology is available as a range of packaged solutions or subscription based services.

For further information about
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