

# To Swipe... or Not to Swipe?

**DURING THE PAST 18 MONTHS OR SO WE'VE BEEN RECEIVING INQUIRIES FROM CLUBS ABOUT MEMBER ID CARDS. SPECIFICALLY, CLUBS ARE ASKING ABOUT USING PLASTIC ID CARDS WITH MAGNETIC STRIPS TO IDENTIFY MEMBERS AT ACCESS POINTS AND AT POS.**

Let's take a look at the history of ID cards in private clubs, and where card swiping might fit in.

## MEMBER IDENTIFICATION

Almost all private clubs issue membership cards to their members. These cards range from simple paper versions, which include the member name and account number, to elaborate plastic cards sporting color photos, member category/access information and a magnetic strip.

Clubs choose the type and complexity of their cards based on their need to control member behavior. The more elaborate the card, the greater the perceived need to control. There are a number of applications for member ID cards, including:

- Gate access at property entrances.
- Unattended access to club facilities.
- Attended access at the main entrance of the clubhouse.
- Attended access to specific club facilities.
- Charging at POS.

Let's take a look at each of these applications in some detail.

**Gate access at property entrances:** Plastic access cards with bar codes or magnetic strips were popular some

years ago with gated communities/clubs – especially at secondary entrances not attended by security personnel. Drivers were required to swipe a card through a reader to gain access to the property. However, this approach has largely been replaced with advanced bar code reading technology, which registers the member's validity by scanning a bar code affixed the vehicle exterior.

**Unattended access to club facilities:** This has been used by some clubs, allowing member access to specific areas that are unattended during certain hours. Small fitness centers are an example. Many clubs provide limited hours of supervision of small fitness rooms, or no supervision at all. Plastic ID cards can be used to control member access through locked doors, and to track who is using the facility, and when. Another example might be access to a city or athletic club through a secondary entrance that is unattended.

**Attended access at the main entrance of the clubhouse:** City and athletic clubs have used this method of control for decades. Generally there is a single entrance into the clubhouse continually staffed with door personnel. To assure that non-members do not attempt to enter the club, everyone is required to show an ID card upon arriving at the main entrance. The cards range from a simple paper version with limited printed information to an elaborate plastic card with color photo and magnetically encoded account information.

While these applications are factors in the overall discussion of ID



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card technology, they are not the ones generating the current inquiries from club managers and boards. Here what's garnering the most attention today:

**Attended access to specific club facilities:** A number of clubs are showing interest in controlling member access to areas of the club fully staffed during operating hours. Dining areas, spas and fitness centers seem to be the most popular control areas, although we have also seen interest in pool areas, halfway houses, etc. The idea put forth by many clubs is to use ID cards to make sure that members are in good standing, and that their accounts are active (especially with seasonal members) before they enter the facility. The identification process helps avoid problems later when the member attempts to charge to a suspended or invalid account.

A secondary and more sophisticated use of this approach is to assure that the person's membership category allows them access to the particular area on a particular day or at a particular time. This level of control is related to access restrictions assigned to certain member categories, and is common to clubs with high-end spa and fitness facilities.

In either case, the identification procedures can be as simple as having the member display an ID card to staff at the entrance, and as complex as swiping the member card to receive a real-time validation from the computer system. Requiring member identification at attended facilities may also be a part of the final application of ID cards – charging at POS.

**Charging at POS:** By far, this is the application most often mentioned by club managers and boards. Using a member ID card assures that charges are applied to the correct member account. By swiping a member card, the chance of mistakes is greatly reduced.

Do we really need ID cards? To answer that question, we have to understand just what spawns the ID card idea in the first place. When we meet with club managers and board members to dig a little for the details, we generally find that the driving force is either a concern about charges going to incorrect member accounts (predominantly dining), or suspicions that “suspended” or “inactive” members are using the club.

ID cards, it is said, will solve those problems by guaranteeing the correct accounts are charged, and assuring that unauthorized members will be stopped in their tracks.

However, when we talk to the club’s accounting personnel about the level of write-offs to incorrect member accounts, they generally report that the dollars involved are minimal. Accounting personnel and management also routinely report that suspended and inactive members are not using the club, and in any event, the POS system would pick them up if they tried.

Accordingly, the first question we ask clubs who are considering the use of ID cards is this: “Do you really have a problem big enough to warrant this solution?”

Especially for established clubs with a long tradition of not presenting ID cards, asking members to change their habits can be a traumatic experience. “I’ve been a member here for 20 years – you’re supposed to know me!” is the attitude of many when the idea of presenting ID’s is floated to the membership at large.

And understandably so since personal service is the hallmark of private clubs.

**Some practical applications:** Beyond worrying about the occasional misposted charge or hazy suspicions of unauthorized member usage, there are some tough situations clubs face that could be improved with the use of ID cards.

For example, clubs with a variety of member categories that carry restrictions for certain amenities may be good candidates for ID cards. Controlling spa and fitness access for seasonal members can be a real challenge, since use of those amenities doesn’t always require a charge to be made (no control through POS).

Similarly, controlling the activities of renters and guests with access limited by a date range or even time of day may be a difficult chore. In these cases, swiping member cards makes sense – as long as the problems to be solved merit the investment needed and the resulting member inconvenience.

**Member compliance:** To make member ID card presentation and/or swiping successful, the entire membership must buy-in

to the concept, and cooperate fully. That’s not a problem if card swiping is introduced the day the club opens. But for a club with a lengthy history of not presenting/swiping ID cards, member acceptance can be a serious problem. Several key factors can determine how well such a transition will be received:

**1. Member Communications** – Once the decision to present/swipe is made, communications with the membership is critical. Announcements on the club’s website, newsletter articles, posters, table tent cards, cable TV channel ads, and the use any other communications method will help to inform and prepare the members.

**2. Consistent Message** – The ID procedures must be well thought out and communicated in a consistent manner. Much confusion and resistance can arise when new procedures are communicated haphazardly. Make sure all departments have input on the procedures before they are finalized, to avoid any unpleasant surprises.

**3. Employee Training** – The club’s employees must apply and enforce the new procedures. Make sure they’re fully trained on how the ID procedures are to be deployed, and especially, what to do in the event that a member does not comply.

**4. Board Support** – The club’s board of directors must stand united in supporting the new procedures. Individual wavering will open the door to a host of compliance issues.

Before moving forward, clubs considering the use of ID card presentation or swiping should ask themselves the following questions:

- Do we have a problem big enough to warrant using these procedures?
- Does the problem outweigh the potential impact on the club’s atmosphere and member satisfaction?
- Are there other approaches that can address the issues short of requiring member identification? (i.e. additional training of wait staff to confirm member accounts at POS.)
- Will the board stand behind management and staff when the you-know-what hits the fan with the members?

If the problems are deemed to be serious, then ID card presentation or swiping can help. Just make sure you think things through before pulling the trigger! **BR**

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