

Is It Time To Change Your Sports Registration Provider?

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Contents

Introduction

Anthony Bruno breaks down his experience as a sports administrator while also being the CEO of SportsSignup, a former registration company.

1

The Registration Provider

A quick history on registration software providers. How it started and how it's evolved.

2

Catalysts for Change

Key reasons your organization may be considering a change.

3

What's Next? Exploring Your Options

A breakdown on how to best explore new registration solutions and sports management technology.

5

Conclusion

The time is now! Take action and prepare for a seamless season from start to finish.

6

AUTHOR BIO



Anthony Bruno has over 25 years of technology entrepreneurship experience working to grow startup companies in Silicon Valley and around the world. From 2007 to 2015, he was the CEO of SportsSignup, one of the first mainstream online sports management solutions on the market. He led the company during a period of explosive growth, serving a few sports organizations to several thousand. SportsSignup was acquired by Time Inc. in 2015. Anthony is currently the principal of Aspen Ridge Consulting and lives in Queensbury, NY with his family of 5 and 2 pups.

Introduction

You are (probably) an under-appreciated sports administrator, and I totally understand this. I was once in your shoes as a registrar for a local youth hockey association. Since my phone number was listed on the league website, calls would come in, day and night: “Can my son ‘play up’ a division”, “Do you have a payment plan”, “I’m having trouble logging in”, “What division does my daughter belong in?”. And the list goes on. Does this sound familiar?

I can remember the day when we first moved to online registration ... for at least two seasons, we still had “in person” registration at the rink, for the sole purpose of getting people over their anxiety of completing sign up and payment online. Those days are long gone!

For full disclosure, I was also the CEO of the company that made the registration software used by our

hockey association—SportsSignup. You may have heard the expression, “eating your own dog food”. Yep, that was me. I drove our software developers crazy, because being on the front lines gave me tons of perspective on what’s important in a product that is aimed to make things easier and more efficient.

As a previous sports administrator, I recognize rapidly changing technology creates another challenge for your organization’s success. When you get comfortable with something, you tend to not want to let go, because change is inherently hard. This all makes sense. But there does come a time when change is necessary and important. As the title of this article indicates, I will explore why you might want to consider changing your registration provider in a bit more detail.

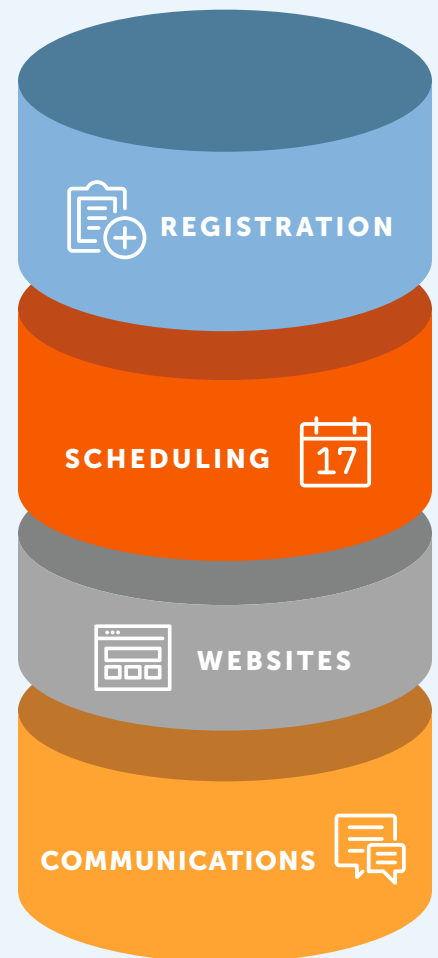
The Registration Provider

First off, let's deal with some context and scope. The term "registration provider", in its most basic form refers to the company that makes the system used to *register participants* and *collect applicable fees*. However, this also can refer to a broader set of features including assigning players to teams, scheduling, websites, completing background checks, and other tools to facilitate communications between administrators/coaches and your participants.

The first "registration systems" in the sports realm were available in the 90's, with companies like The Active Network using the internet to register runners for road races all across the country. In the early 2000's, other registration software startups began to apply similar concepts to team sports. Today, the use of one or more online systems to keep things efficient and organized is considered standard operation. As you already know, there are a lot more moving parts to operating a team based sports organization, and unlike a road race that is one-and-done, team sports involves a full season that can last weeks and months at a time. This is more complex and there are more jobs to do than signups and collecting money.

Your organization is likely using one or more vendors to accomplish or manage these tasks, and one solution may be better than others.

SPORTS MANAGEMENT TECHNOLOGY



Catalysts for Change

There are several reasons why your organization might consider making a change to some or all of your technology stacks, and each are discussed in more detail below:

- **Board member turnover**
- **Industry consolidation**
- **Technology overload**
- **System failures/data integrity**
- **Cost increases by current vendor**
- **Obsolete and/or unsupported platform**
- **Technology upgrade from current system**
- **Mandate from parent organization(s)**
- **Poor member/user experience**



Board member turnover

At some point you won't be doing this job and some other lucky volunteer will take your place. Your replacement(s) may have other ideas on how to operate your organization, or may be familiar with other online platforms. This is a healthy way to reevaluate the technology stack for your organization.



Technology overload

Is your organization using two or more systems to manage the tasks of registration, game/practice scheduling, websites, and team communication? There are many benefits to getting these tasks under one roof, including easier management and transfer of knowledge during board turnover.



Industry consolidation

As with most rapidly growing industries, companies get bought and sold. This is no different for registration providers—and there's a strong chance that your provider was acquired by another within the past few years. This can create real problems, especially when the new owner has their own platform and they "sunset" the system you are working with, forcing you to migrate.



System failures/data integrity

Have you had a system outage recently? Have you ever lost registration information due to a system glitch? Not all registration platforms have invested in what is required to keep your data private and safe. There's really no reason for this to happen, ever. If it has, you should run, not walk, to another solution for your organization.

Catalysts for Change



Cost increases

Has your current registration provider increased their pricing? Was your system once “free” but now has per-registration charges assessed? In general, “free” is almost always “not free”. There’s always a catch, for example, fine print that says the vendor can use or sell your data for commercial purposes. When this model fails, the vendor may be forced to explicitly charge for their services—this is a great time to know what other options exist on the market.



Obsolete and/or unsupported platform

Has your current registration provider stopped making updates and improvements to the system? Have you found that it is close to impossible to get product support? Do you find your system is full of bugs? If the answer is “Yes” to any of these questions, it is possible that your system is being kept on life support. This can happen when a company is aquired—where their system is not part of the “go forward” product roadmap (see Industry consolidation).



Technology upgrade from current system

Let’s face it, some registration platforms are just too old and are not capable of operating in today’s mobile-centric environment. In this case, moving to a new platform can be seen and pitched as an upgrade to your members vs. your current system.



Mandate from parent organization(s)

Does your organization actually require that you use a specific registration vendor? Or is it more of a suggestion? More often than not, the reality is you can use any system so long as certain conditions are met—for example, how team rosters are formatted and submitted. Or it may be a specific task, like background checks, where all participants need to use the same platform to be qualified. Parent organizations typically allow their constituent organizations to have autonomy on how they operate their “business”, including what systems they use to collect personal information and money. So the question to ask is, is this a “vendor mandate” or a “data format mandate”? If the latter, you should be free to use whatever system that makes business sense.



Poor member/user experience

More often than not, a poor user experience is often associated with having too many separate systems involved to get the job done (see “technology overload” above). This can frustrate admins and members alike. And as previously mentioned, registration takes a few minutes, but your season lasts for weeks or months. During the season, the focus turns almost exclusively to communication - between admins and coaches, coaches and participants, and everyone in between. If your current system can’t easily facilitate this communication or has a poor or nonexistent mobile app as part of the platform, it is time to look for one that does.

What's Next?

Exploring Your Options

If your organization has experienced one or more of the “catalysts for change” shown above, there’s nothing lost by researching the solutions available on the market today. Many of the established vendors have been acquired or have made acquisitions, or have made dramatic improvements to their product suite since you made the decision on your current platform. Some have gone out of business. And some have made significant investments in their platforms and/or support infrastructure.

If you have read this far, it seems you want to keep your organization current with the latest technology, and your participants happy. Here are some ideas on what to do next:

Identify 2 or 3 sports registration vendors

How?

- Do your research and utilize resources like Capterra to compare platforms. Request trials and set up sales demos.
- Survey of your participants—be sure to ask what other systems their family has used/prefer.
- Talk to other organizations in your town/city. What are they using? Are they happy?

Schedule demos with these vendors

Take notes and share the results with your board. Some questions you might ask:

- Can I try building registration forms and test registrations before I purchase a subscription?
- What type of communication tools exist for players and parents, and does it connect with the league platform?
- What type of on-boarding and help desk services are provided for administrators?
- Can you help us manage the change and migrate our data?
- Do you offer coaches and participants a mobile app to create/view schedules and communicate with each other?

Conclusion

If your sports organization has been using the same registration management system for several years, it is imperative to periodically research other options available to help your administrators and your participants. It may very well be that your current system is “good enough” and gets the job done. However, as we have covered here—now is a great time to understand other options available to your organization.

Your customers ARE your members/ participants (players, coaches, parents, etc.). It is often the case that the selection of technology is weighted towards what works best for administrators, without ample consideration for what coaches and participants need to communicate and manage their day-to-day activities. As

the process of registration and collecting fees becomes more commoditized, the differentiator between registration platforms has shifted to more member-focused features and the ability to deliver a great experience on mobile platforms. This should be top of mind when considering a change.

Lastly, don't be afraid. Don't be afraid of exploring your options. Don't be afraid of making a move - a reputable provider will help you migrate your data and relevant information. If you are ready, go for it! Change is sometimes difficult for all involved, but is often quite necessary to keep your organization organized, strong and prepared for the future!