

Business Martin Hopley nets major returns from golf website
IN THE SWING, PAGES 28 & 29
EDITOR: PETER MACMAHON 0131-620 8589 businessdesk@scotsman.com

Business in full swing
for golf website in
spite of the gloomy
economic outlook

Monday Interview

MARTIN HOPLEY

PETER RANSCOMBE
BUSINESS REPORTER

GOLF started out as a hobby for Martin Hopley, but the sport has come to dominate his working life in the form of Golfalot.com, the website he runs from offices in Edinburgh.

With the Masters tournament at Augusta drawing to a close last night, Hopley is expecting a surge of interest in the website this week as golfers go online to read equipment reviews, buy two-for-one discount vouchers and watch videos.

The latest feature to be incorporated into the site is an online tee times comparison service, which allows players to search for slots on courses from the major providers, with the two largest companies already signed up.

Taking in courses throughout the UK – and this year also offering golf venues across Spain, Portugal, France and other European countries – the service lists nearly 1,000 sites. Next on Hop-

“The biggest golfing magazine sells around 83,000 copies per month. We get around 300,000 visits per month”

ley's hit list is a similar service covering other countries around the world, with Mauritius already on the site and further countries expected to be added later in the year.

The new services could take visitor figures beyond the 135,000 unique users who log on to the site each month.

“By comparison, the biggest golfing magazine sells around 83,000 copies per month and has a readership of about 200,000,” Hopley says. “We get around 300,000 visits per month.”

His office recently moved from premises in Juniper Green to the new club house at Swanston Golf Club, on the southern side of Edinburgh's city bypass. The website is run as a limited company, which Hopley says has returned a profit in the past four years. Eight people work on the website, four full-time in the office and the others working remotely via e-mail and the internet.

Hopley, who turned 40 this year, studied management at St Andrews University, but confesses to having spent more time

on the university's rugby pitches than he did on the hallowed turf of the Old Course.

After a career in marketing with Scottish Equitable, he set up a marketing department in Scotland for Arthur Anderson, the accountancy firm.

When the dotcom revolution came along, Hopley decided he wanted to become more involved with the internet.

“Having written content and produced marketing for my career, I wanted to write for the web,” Hopley explains. “There weren't a lot of people writing content for websites so I said to companies that, not only could I find someone to design and build their website, but I could also write and manage the content for them.”

He started Golfalot.com alongside his other website work in 1999 and then went full-time with the site after securing funding from his business contacts in Edinburgh. The website grew from having a golf game – which is still running and has about 12,000 registered players – to selling two-for-one golfing vouchers.

In 2003, the website launched the UK's first dedicated golf equipment price comparison site, which Hopley said has “redefined golf retailing in the UK”.

The site allows golfers to compare prices for their clubs and balls in the same way that consumers can compare mortgages and credit cards on Moneysupermarket.com

Online video has also become big business for Hopley – in 2006, his site launched its own golf video channel, which features equipment reviews and roundtable discussion programmes.

The online shows have featured Justin Rose – whom Golfalot.com sponsored between 2000 and last year – along with leading golf journalists and Ken Schofield, the former executive director of the European Tour, who is now a consultant the Hopley's company.

About 15,000 videos a month are downloaded from the website and the programmes have also been syndicated to YouTube, Virgin Media, AOL, *Sports Illustrated* magazine's website and Golfweek.com, in the United States.

As well as running Rose's website, Golfalot has also constructed sites for Ian Woosnam and Niclas Fasth in the past.

Hopley – who grew up in Edinburgh and went to school at George Watson's College – said: “I think one of the strengths of the business is that we're not exclu-



Martin Hopley's hobby has turned into a major business with

sively based on advertising revenue.

“Other income streams over the years have included selling the two-for-one golfing vouchers and building websites for golf clubs. We now also sell advertising on a display basis and create and syndicate videos.

“We've always had that mix of four or five different income channels. It's all about finding new ways of reaching people.

“There's no limit to what you can do technically – it's just

whether it's commercially viable.”

Following the relaunch of the site last year to include news feeds and podcasts, Hopley can now also sell short snippets of advertising space to accompany some of his videos or upload promotional material from paying customers.

Even though he has built his company from scratch, Hopley has not neglected his own game and now plays off a handicap of two at Gullane. But with the re-

IN NUMBERS

- 135,000 unique users visit Golfalot each month
- 2000, the year in which the website was launched
- 300,000 website visitors each month
- 8, the number of years for which Golfalot ran Justin Rose's website
- 10 countries covered by the online tee-times tool
- 12,000 players registered for online game
- 946 courses covered by the tee-times comparison tool
- 15,000 videos downloaded each month
- 446 courses in England covered by the tee-times tool
- 2 Martin Hopley's handicap at Gullane



hundreds of thousands of hits a month looking for news on the likes of Justin Rose, below, whom the site once sponsored Main picture: Neil Hanna

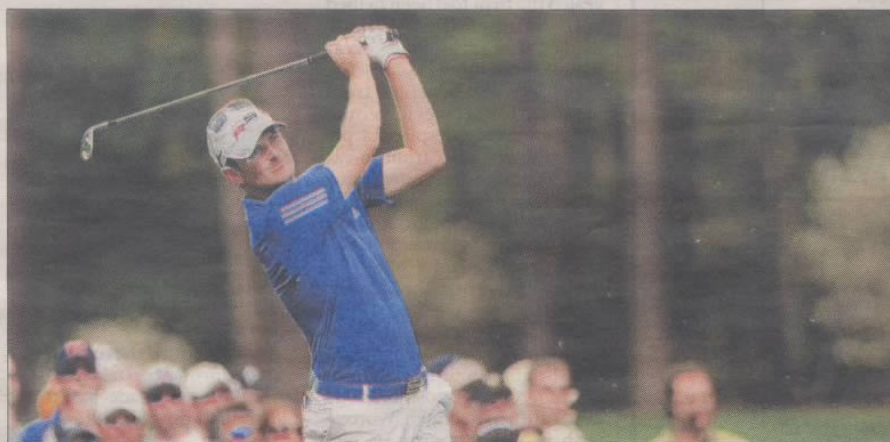
cession in full swing, will Hopley still have time to fit in a round or two? "I think there's a lot of change during a recession and change is an opportunity, in all aspects of business," Hopley says.

"A lot of our business is related to advertising spending—but we increased the direct spending on advertising by 6 per cent last year and we're probably going to do the same again this year.

"We've had a very good response from manufacturers who are switching online from offline advertising, partly because their budgets have been cut but also because they're looking for more value.

"Now that we're reaching a much larger audience than the golf magazines can reach, we're benefiting from that. People have been buying traditional banner adverts on the site, but we've also been doing e-mail marketing and videos for advertisers."

Hopley took on a new member of staff in September and replaced a departing worker with two others. He says: "The extra re-



sources have allowed us to do a lot more, using analytic programmes to track people through the site and look at how to keep them on the site for longer. We'll be adding interactive maps to our golf course database over the next few weeks.

"In terms of sales of two-for-one golf vouchers, we had our busiest month in March for 18

months and also matched our highest number for unique users."

While his sponsorship deal with Rose may have come to an end, Hopley is open to the idea of teaming up with another player.

"The deals are great fun and we enjoyed doing them," he says. "It was great following Justin round the tour, through his highs and

his lows. It puts a totally different perspective on watching a golf tournament when you have a vested interest."

pranscombe@scotsman.com



MORE INFO

www.golfalot.com