

SOCIAL ACCEPTABILITY AND FAMILIARITY THAT BREEDS TRUST AND LOYALTY

BY MARK GRIFFITHS

Over the past decade, the psychology of 'gambling marketing' has become big business. With the restriction on gambling advertising about to be lifted here in the UK, it is an opportune time to look at some of the issues surrounding branding. This article briefly examines the elements of advertising and branding success and some of its potential pitfalls.



The psychology of 'gambling advertising' is important in attracting potential punters. Gambling imagery is designed to make a person spend money, and in almost all advertisements there is terminological avoidance in the fact that there is almost no reference to the words 'gamble' and 'gambling'. Instead, guilt-reducing statements referring to leisure are used. Typical examples include 'try your luck', 'test your skill' and 'get into the holiday spirit.'

There has also been a conflation of gambling and gaming in certain quarters (especially in the US). This is part of the growing recognition of public sensitivity and a real reflection of what some would say is the explosive growth creating interest in sectors beyond the gaming industry. The underlying psychological agenda in both the terminological avoidance in branding and the guilt-reducing statements in advertising appears to be about 'normalising' gambling and making it an activity that is socially acceptable and socially condoned. There is little doubt that the image of gambling has changed over time. Historically (and some might say legislatively), gambling has gone from being a sin to a vice to a socially acceptable leisure activity. Advertising and branding have also had a 'softening' effect on the image of gambling.

IMAGE AND BRANDING

Image has become all important in the commercial arena and the gaming industry is no different. Having said that, the gaming industry has known that perception and image are important for well over a century. For instance, the first slot machine designed in 1895 was called '*The Liberty Bell*' and typified patriotism as it was the symbol of American Independence. Familiarity can also play a part as I will argue later in this article.

The real shift that I have noticed in recent years has been the increased strategic use of 'branding' products. Brands are highly defined products that go beyond the packaging and the material they are made of. They can be anything from goods such as soap powder through to major corporations, service companies, political parties and even people. They appear everywhere and gambling products are no different. Research by psychologists has shown that children as young as three years old can recognise a brand. In fact, one study showed that more schoolchildren recognized the "crossed fingers" *Camelot* logo than products such as *Coca Cola* and *McDonalds*!

So how are brands defined? The principal difference between an ordinary product and a brand is the intangibles beyond the product itself. A brand goes beyond functionality. In short it is how it is packaged, what it looks like, what its colour is, its personality. At the most basic level, product plus personality equals brand. My guess is that when you hear the words '*Ladbroke's*', '*Gala*', or '*Harrahs*' they invoke particular thoughts, moods, colours, and feelings. There appears to be increased pressure by marketing and advertising executives to turn company products into brands. This can be assisted in the advertising process by reinforcing and repeating positive salient features of the company in question.

The end result of the process is that branding becomes less about transient products and more about transfer of product brand recognition to company or group (e.g., *Gala*, *Ladbroke's*). The result is that collective value is accrued and used across both related and unrelated product lines. In short, the brand has to evoke something beyond gaming per se to achieve longevity and success. This can help in the 'normalisation' of gambling activity. Thus, the singular branded company identity has the potential to become more important than any one particular individual product and may help in the development of customer trust and loyalty.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF TRUST

Every great brand has an outstanding feature at its heart. A product also needs time and to be promoted and communicated consistently to become a brand. Repetition has appears to be one of the keys to establishing brand success. However, what really determines a brand – and this is especially important in the gambling arena – is trust. This is of paramount importance in getting punters to gamble online. Players will be more likely to gamble online with those companies that are well established than a little known company operating out of the Caribbean. Successful brands have a 'trustmark' rather than a trademark. With the embedding of regulatory and problem gambling regimes, a 'trustmark' is an apt gauge for social acceptability and social responsibility. However, getting transferability and connections across brands in the 'mainstream' is probably the key issue.

'Trustmarks' are now becoming one of the major reasons we prefer one particular product to other non-familiar ones. It says you have not been let down by it and you can reduce anxiety by using it. Again, this is especially important in a business whose primary aim is to relieve you of your money. At the heart of gambling there will always be the underlying fact that in the long run most punters lose. Whichever way the gaming industry plays out this truism, the general situation of punters mostly losing represents an underlying negativity that competes with the wit and innovation of demonstrating that the minority of real long-term winners are the central focus and purpose of participating. This is one of the main reasons why trust becomes so important.

As mentioned above, 'trustmarks' are likely to be important in relation to social responsibility and the perception of it by punters. In recent a recent study that the International Gaming Research Unit conducted with online gamblers around the world, we found that many of them feel



that responsible gaming practises demonstrate that a gaming operator has integrity, and that they care about their customers' wellbeing. Many of the players did not want their winnings to come from players who could not afford to lose it. They reported that responsible gaming practises allowed them to feel comfortable that their winnings had not come from people with gambling problems. Given that one of the biggest obstacles that prevent people playing online is a lack of trust of operators, we think that this is a significant and important finding that gaming operators should take note of.

Trust is an historical concept because we need repeated interactions coupled with good feelings to build it. Branding experts claim it takes at least three years to establish the feeling of goodwill among consumers. The good news for companies – including the gaming industry – is that we don't even need to have experienced the product ourselves. We might engage in things because others have used or engaged in the product for years. Although little studied in empirical gambling investigations, trust is thought to be an important variable in both the initial decision to gamble and the maintenance of the behaviour. In a recent study carried out by my research unit, four-fifths of Internet gamblers (79%) in our study considered the Internet a trustworthy medium of gambling. However, most Internet gamblers preferred to gamble on websites of well-known and trusted 'high street' bookmakers (90%).

One of the most important things about brands for the gaming industry is that they help us define our self-image and who we are – at least on some psychological level. For some people, this 'personal branding' may be more important than their social identities within a community. For example, the car we drive or the newspaper we read, are particularly strong cultural indicators of what sort of person we are. Where you gamble and on what games can be an extension of this. However, total trust acceptance may also lead to an uncritical assessment of acceptability by the punter. For instance, some trusted non-gambling websites now provide links and endorsements to either their own gambling sites, or those of affiliates. Our gaming research unit recently highlighted a case of an online problem gambler who had been led to an online gambling site by watching a popular (and trusted) day time television programme that promoted its own online gaming site!

PSYCHOLOGICAL BRANDING

Brands appear to mean much more than they ever did probably because successful brands are worth millions of pounds. Nowadays, gambling brands are linked to ideas, hopes and dreams and match the punter's thinking and self-image. It is not enough that going to a casino will be a lot of fun. It has to say something as well. Gaming companies try to match their products and games to consumers through extensive market research by surveying potential clientele about their attitudes, habits and pleasures. The gaming industry spends a lot of resources (time and money) turning their products into brands. If the product is successful it will soon be open to competition from others who want to cash in on the market for the particular product. The gaming industry therefore has to find a way of showing that their brand of products gives something better than the competitors.

Over time, even the best brands can lose customer loyalty, which is why the gaming industry needs to stay fresh and innovative. Brands rely on image and are vulnerable to

scandal. That is where the gambling industry walks a fine line. High profile stories about gambling addiction or gambling-related suicides will not bring in new punters and is why there is now such a major investment in areas such as corporate social responsibility and celebrity endorsement.

CELEBRITY ENDORSEMENT

The use of celebrity endorsement by gaming companies is probably the biggest shifts I have noticed over recent years. However, to what extent does celebrity endorsement increase the likelihood of someone gambling? Does the presence of Ben Affleck or James Woods really make someone more likely to play poker? Commercial gambling has only relatively recently got in on the celebrity endorsement bandwagon mainly because gambling advertising has always been very restricted. However, as already noted, this is about to change.

When a poker company uses a celebrity endorser, they are signing up an image that is itself a gamble. At the very least, gaming companies should get what they pay for but it can all go horribly wrong. When a purple-bearded Billy Connolly was used to promote the National Lottery, sales decreased. The adverts had high recall by the public but were hated by a large proportion of the British public who found Connolly highly irritating.

The message is clear. Any gaming company wanting to use celebrity endorsement as part of its marketing drive has to carefully evaluate a celebrity's image and reputation. Steps need to be taken to make sure the celebrity's image and reputation matches the needs of the company. Sales can take a tumble especially if the celebrity used does something that compromises the company's image. For instance, UK comedian Vic Reeves drink-driving conviction wasn't very good for the car insurance company he was promoting! However, in most situations, the relationship between the company and the celebrity will be mutually beneficial.

The company receives all of the perks associated with the celebrity such as publicity, positive connotation, recognition, respect and trust. The celebrity – at the very least – benefits financially. However, there can be a thin dividing line between celebrity scandals that can scupper longevity of brand definition and status that allows a company name to be applied to almost anything to evoke a sense of trust and confidence.

The advertising industry claims that brand recognition, recall and awareness are the most important outcomes of successful marketing campaigns. This, they believe, will result in greater sales and increased revenue. However, as with the Billy Connolly example, this isn't always the case. Celebrity endorsement is perhaps even more important in online commercial activities like playing Internet poker where identity, trust and reliability equate to potential punters. As a consequence, many online commercial enterprises appear to opt for short-term, high impact celebrity endorsement and 'buzz marketing' rather than investing for the long term. These types of marketing tend to create an instant image and reputation but may not necessarily be good for the company's longevity. To be market leaders amid the competition, online gaming operators will need to couple strategic marketing with solid brand management.

Interestingly, a recent survey carried out by Marketing UK asked marketers from a sample of the top 1000 British companies which techniques they thought were the most

successful in increasing sales and at building long-term relationships with customers. It found that celebrity endorsements ranked last, beneath things like loyalty schemes, sales promotions, and general display advertising. However, it doesn't make sense to isolate celebrity endorsements, because they are just one of many marketing elements that are used in a successful campaign. What's more, if marketers didn't believe celebrities help in generating long-term sales and profits, they wouldn't keep paying the large fees they command.

While the jury is out on whether celebrity endorsement is a sales winner, one question that has yet to be answered through research is, what type of gambler does a celebrity endorsement impress and/or influence in their decision play? Is it the novices, long-standing players, or both? Maybe different types of celebrities appeal to different clientele. For me, the most interesting development of the celebrity endorsement culture is how the big poker tournament winners have now become celebrities in their own right.

For instance, the star after-dinner speaker at a recent (academic) gambling conference I was at in Lake Tahoe was World Series of Poker veteran Howard Lederer. This type of celebrity endorsement may be more appealing to players. The fact that someone has become a celebrity through skill and talent in an activity that gamblers are already positively predisposed towards suggests they will want to have more of a psychological association with these celebrities than those the celebrities who just happen to play poker as a hobby.

Gaming companies have to ask themselves how much they are willing to gamble on celebrity endorsement in trying to carve out a niche in the market. Companies have got to be clear that they are targeting the right product with the right celebrity with the right message. It can be a long hard slog to shape an image or reputation but it can take just a few seconds of celebrity madness to destroy it.

INTRINSIC ASSOCIATION AND THE PSYCHOLOGY OF FAMILIARITY

Celebrity endorsements also tap into the psychology of 'intrinsic association'. This is the degree to which the gambling activity is positively associated with other interests, people and/or attractions. Intrinsic association also taps into the psychology of familiarity and help explain why so many UK slot machines feature themes relating to television shows, films, popular board games, video games or celebrities. It makes punters feel they know something about the product before they have even played it.

Familiarity is a very important psychological aspect of why themed slot machines have been more prominent over the last decade. Familiar themes have the capacity to induce a 'psycho-structural interaction' between the gambler and the gambling activity. This is where the gambler's own psychology interacts with the machine's structural characteristics and produces different consequences for each person depending upon what the feature means to them personally. If the themes are increasingly familiar, a gambler might be more likely to persevere with the complexities of a machine.

Gamblers may find it more enjoyable because they can easily interact with recognisable images they experience. Therefore, the use of familiar themes may have a very persuasive effect, leading to an increase in the number of people using them, and the money they spend. Whilst there are many other aspects that influence an individual's decision

to gamble, the possible persuasive nature of the themes should not be underestimated.

There is a strong overlap between the psychology of familiarity and the psychology of persuasion. In very simple terms, a gambler must be exposed to the product and be aware of its presence before they can even make the decision to gamble. This is relatively easy to achieve given the ubiquity of slot machines in the UK and the fact that current machines will use any number of techniques to grab an individual's attention. These include television or film theme tunes, bright flashing lights, and/or pictures or voices of celebrities. Once a gambler's attention has been gained, the product must be likeable and familiar enough for them to think about gambling and wanting to interact with the machine further. Immediately familiar images and sounds are likely to lead to a much quicker decision to gamble. All of which goes to show - the industry knows what it is doing. **CGI**

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