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Head Office UK Cecile Park Publishing Limited, 17 The Timber Yard, Drysdale Street, London N1 6ND
tel +44 (0)20 7012 1380 fax +44 (0)20 7729 6093 info@e-comlaw.com
www.e-comlaw.com

Responsible online gambling and best practice

Professor Mark Griffiths, one of two authors of the British Gambling Prevalence Study, comments on the need for the online gambling industry to adopt best practice and what this should involve in order to dispel government and public concerns about addiction to online gambling.

The importance of social responsibility has increased significantly over the last decade and has become one of the major areas of work for our research unit. Our research and dissemination of good social responsibility practices focuses upon three main dimensions. These are:

- design;
- behavioural transparency; and
- customer support.

These three areas of social responsibility are within the wider sphere of more general corporate social responsibility that can include areas such as compliance to codes of conduct, age limits to prevent underage play and general support for social impact initiatives. Design mainly falls into two areas for the gaming industry - design of gaming venues (e.g., environmental design of venues such as casinos, betting shops, etc.) and design of games (e.g., instant win games on the internet, lottery product portfolios, etc.). Behavioural transparency covers those areas where the gaming industry imparts information about games to players (e.g., advertising, product purchase, staying in control), or feedback about player behaviour (e.g., behavioural monitoring). These diverse forms of information dissemination practice should be honest and imparted with integrity. Customer support relates to all those practices that either help staff to understand player behaviour (e.g., ongoing staff training) or help players get any help they need in relation to their playing behaviour (e.g., staff intervention, good referral services to helping agencies).

Corporate social responsibility

Industry compliance to codes of conduct

Operators within the internet

gaming industry should adhere not only to jurisdictional regulators (which are not always clear for internet gaming providers), but also to the codes of conduct and practice formulated by their trade associations. Furthermore, all personnel should be made aware of and understand the codes.

Access by minors

Children and adolescents need to be protected. In all instances, access to gambling by under-aged minors should be prohibited. Use of credit cards and/or social security numbers may minimise those under 18 years old accessing internet gaming sites.

Support for social impact initiatives

One of the ways that the internet gaming industry can be effective in the area of social responsibility is to support social impact initiatives. Recognition of a socially responsible approach is mutually beneficial to the industry as well as the players. Initiatives include:

- financial support to those organisations that develop gambling treatment, training, education and research programmes;
- support and encouragement of such organisations (including consultation with the industry at planning, design and promotion stages); and
- uptake of training programmes by such organisations.

Commitment to social responsibility

Internet gaming operators need to develop a culture that is supported by socially responsible policies and procedures. It is in everyone's interest to recognise that social responsibility is fundamental to the long-term development of the internet gaming industry.

Operators should have to attain a

certificate of social responsibility or some kind of external accreditation or audit before improved products or agreed deregulation can be introduced. These would be awarded after passing an external social audit.

Design

Game and gaming environment design

Although gambling behaviour can be influenced by a person's individual risk factors (e.g., genetic predispositions, personality factors, social environment in which the person was raised), gaming operators have a responsibility for the ways in which players are attracted to play on their products (e.g., ease of accessibility in gambling, advertising to attract custom, incentive bonuses to gamble), the design of their websites in attracting people to gamble (e.g., the use of light, colour, sound and music) and the design of the game itself (e.g., game speed, prize structure, jackpot size, and illusion of control features). Games should be designed to limit excessive play¹.

Behavioural transparency

Advertising and promotion

Quite clearly, it is appropriate that the internet gaming industry needs to advertise and promote its products. In addition to conforming to advertising codes of practice, the most important recommendation would be that advertisements and promotions should not appeal to vulnerable members of society (such as minors, those with severe learning difficulties, problem gamblers, etc.). Potential players should also be given all the information they are likely to need to make an informed choice (such as the chances of winning on the activity or the payout ratios). There is also an implicit assumption that all the

Operators should have to attain a certificate of social responsibility

games will be fair and designed in such a way to protect the player.

Information about staying in control

Although players are clearly responsible for their own gambling, they should still be reminded of the need to exercise control. Information in the form of simple website slogans should highlight the need to stay in control, and be prominently displayed on the webpage where they will be seen by players.

Product purchase

Providing help and advice to players is to be commended. However, players should under no circumstances be encouraged to:

- increase the amount of money they have decided to gamble with;
- enter into continuous gambling for a prolonged period of time;
- re-gamble their winnings; or
- chase losses.

Monitoring player behaviour

The monitoring of player behaviour on internet gambling sites is becoming increasingly popular with internet gaming operators. However, such technologies should be harnessed for protective and helpful intervention rather than be used to get heavy spending players to spend even more. The money generated by problem gamblers should not be a core marketing strategy of any socially responsible internet gaming operator.

Customer support

Staff training

Ongoing staff training around the area of social responsibility should be given at all levels to all those working in the internet gaming industry. Raising awareness of such issues is a necessity to enable staff to deal with relevant situations. Staff should also be able to identify

aspects of policy and practice relative to appropriate intervention that will contribute to minimising the harm attributable to uncontrolled gambling.

Appropriate staff intervention

Intervening in the case of a suspected problem gambler is a sensitive issue. Staff need to be trained to deal with such situations and must also know what to do if they are contacted by someone who needs help.

Providing information and/or help for those with gambling problems

At the core of exercising a duty of care lies the principle of assisting players to address any concern about their gambling. Website links, telephone numbers and addresses of helping agencies can be displayed on the website. Internet gaming operators should also have a good referral system with national helping agencies as their clientele are often international.

Dr. Mark Griffiths Professor of Gambling Studies
International Gaming Research Unit,
Nottingham Trent University
mark.griffiths@ntu.ac.uk

1. Griffiths, M.D., Wood, R.T.A., Parke, J. & Parke, A. (2007). Gaming research and best practice: Gaming industry, social responsibility and academia. *Casino and Gaming International*, 3, 97-103.