

Internet gambling and social responsibility

Within the last few years we have seen a substantial increase in the amount of gambling opportunities offered on the internet. There is no doubt that this market will grow further over the next few years, increasing gambling opportunities for the customer and possibly attracting new customers to this industry. The dilemma for this new market is how to ensure the future of internet gambling is regulated, controlled and socially responsible.

The emergence of internet gambling means that a new and very different delivery platform for gambling has come into the mainstream gambling industry. The 24-hour accessibility and availability of gambling opportunities can be provided in the comfort of a person's own home or workplace. Whilst having benefits for the gaming industry and the customer, such a situation could hold certain risks for both the industry and the customer who may be unable to control their gambling. A number of organisations have started to help the gaming industry to develop a socially responsible approach towards its customers in order to protect the vulnerable (e.g. adolescents, problem gamblers, those under the influence of alcohol/drugs etc.)

We would like to see the gaming industry continue the socially responsible stance that many have adopted in the past. This is especially relevant considering the new risks and dilemmas that will be faced as internet gaming grows.

Although not an exhaustive list, the following areas of concern differentiate internet gambling from the traditional gambling mediums:

- Access and availability to gambling 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, has the potential to lead to excessive gambling behaviour^{1,2}.
- Some accepted forms of payment at internet gambling sites mean that they are unable to immediately determine whether the customer is within the legal age, unless stringent checks are made on every new customer.
- Allowing access to gambling into homes could lead to younger children being exposed to gambling and gives control to the adults to let their children participate in gambling³.
- The perception of the value of money decreases when playing

with electronic cash, as it has the ability to suspend judgment in much the same way as chips used in casinos⁴. This could increase the risk of excessive gambling and accumulation of debts.

- There will be no control over those who may be gambling whilst drunk or on drugs¹.
- Any possible intervention to help someone who may have a gambling problem will be extremely limited, due to the lack of personal contact with that customer.
- Gambling on the internet could shift gambling from a social activity into a more asocial one, which could lead to a greater risk of problem gambling¹.
- The customer may be at risk from offshore, unregulated and disreputable internet gaming sites, unless able to differentiate between such sites and socially responsible, regulated and reputable ones¹.

Online gambling: social responsibility checklist

Given these concerns, we have drawn up a list of guidelines for socially responsible practice. We believe that following such guidelines will not only help to protect the underage and those at risk, but will also attract customers by demonstrating a socially responsible practice. The following list is not exhaustive but represents the ground rules we would see as important regarding an online gambling site. A number of points are equally applicable to terrestrial operations.

- There needs to be a system built into debit and credit card transactions that proves an effective check on age.
- Advertising and promotional material should not target those under 18 years of age, should be honest, fair and give a balanced message with regard to winning and losing.

- In addition to credit worthiness checks on account holders, limits should be placed on how much they can commit. This can either be a financial limit per session or per day.
- There should be references to the need to keep gambling under control (i.e. a 'risks of the game' message) that is a cautionary note rather than a health warning and these should be sited where they will be read.
- The homepage should carry the logo of the preferred social responsibility partner (e.g. GamCare) and a statement as to why the company is supportive of the partnership. (The latter does not have to be on the homepage). This notice should be accompanied with a link to the website of the preferred social responsibility partner.
- A notice to where a gambler who is concerned with their own (or someone else's) gambling can get help should appear at least twice. Once prominently mentioned in the text of the site and alongside the menu box on the page where an online customer transfers money into their gambling account.
- Whilst it is good commercial practice to promote products and provide the customer with information, there should be no encouragement to either re-invest winnings or chase losses. Gamblers should not be enticed to play on. The decision must be their own.
- All gambling opportunities (but especially the rapid and interactive games), should have a built-in pause at predetermined intervals allowing the gambler to reflect on their desire to continue or withdraw. This is particularly important for those who may find it more difficult to stick to self-imposed limits.
- Customers should have the opportunity to self-exclude

themselves from an internet gambling site. A system that enables them to do this should be in place and clearly explained. Any self-exclusion scheme should be easy to carry out and run for at least six months.

- Any free practice mode that is offered to the customer must have an appropriate message regarding responsible gambling. We recommend that access to practice modes is prevented for those under the legal age to gamble. Giving access to such simulators could encourage someone underage to seek opportunities to gamble for real money.
- Company staff, particularly senior management and customer support personnel, should be trained/made aware of the importance of social impact issues and that there is no conflict between a company policy that maximises opportunity and minimises harm.
- The company adopts a culture and practice that is able to demonstrate, and believe in, a socially responsible approach.
- The site should be attractive enough to encourage online gamblers to use it in preference to those sites that are less well regulated or which are not committed to social responsibility.
- The company commits itself to supporting organisations that provide treatment, training and education for problem gamblers, those at risk and young gamblers.
- Before launching a new product or developing an existing one the company consults, commercially in confidence, with the lead body involved with the social impact of gambling.

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