



# Gambling Online, Social Responsibility and 'Foot-in-the-Door' Techniques

*"Bill Gates arrives at the port to heaven and hell. Petrus says "You see Bill, we don't know what to do with you. You may choose heaven or hell". Bill peeks in heaven and sees a couple of old boring men sitting around at a table. Bill takes a look in hell and sees really beautiful women, sex, drugs, rock and roll, and most of all, gambling. Bill says "I am a gambling man. I want to go to hell!" Once in hell, Bill is immediately thrown into the fire. Bill says "Hey, what the hell is this? I saw all the gambling, women, and sex?" The devil says "That was just a demo version."*

Hopefully this opening joke highlights that online gamblers need to be aware that commercial operators often use subtle psychological ploys to get them to part with their money. For the online gambling industry, it also raises issues around social responsibility and the extent to which operators should be using such tactics. In the rest of this article, I briefly overview some of the marketing strategies used by online gaming operators and suggest that some of these may not be the most socially responsible practices to employ – particularly if the aim is long-term retention of its clientele.

One of the most common ways that gamblers can be facilitated to gamble online is when they try out games in the 'demo', 'practice' or 'free play' mode. At one level, most would argue that playing for points rather than money is little more than innocuous fun and 'good value' to the player. Furthermore, playing games for free online is akin to 'skill schools' that exist offline, such as learning poker or blackjack in a casino. Offline, there are many constraints to 'learning to play' as the free opportunities may only be available on certain days and at certain times. On Internet gambling sites there is a lot of scope for players to practice games

for free before they play with real money. However, gaming operators need to realise that in terms of their social responsibility, games – even the 'demo' versions – need to be fair to players. Despite the undoubted positives, there are other not so positive aspects that have been identified in the scientific literature.

Some research carried out by psychologists at the University of Laval in Canada showed it was significantly more commonplace to win while 'gambling' on the first few goes on a 'demo' or 'free play' game. They also reported that it was

a quarter of them had played in 'money-free mode' on Internet sites in the week preceding the survey. Further analysis of these data by researchers at Salford University showed that gambling in the money-free mode was the single most important predictor of whether the child had gambled for money, and one of the most important predictors of children's problem gambling. However, the possibility and extent to which money-free gambling is responsible for real gambling participation and gambling-related risk and harm needs further research.

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commonplace for gamblers to have extended winning streaks during prolonged periods while playing the 'demo' version. Obviously, once gamblers to play for real, the odds of winning may be considerably reduced. Related to this are the urban myths that develop around online gambling. For instance, a very common myth is that a gambler's first bet after opening an online account is very often a winning one.

There are now a growing number of studies highlighting that playing for free online is popular among teenagers. 'Money free' gambling appears to play an important role for adolescents in conceptualising and experiencing Internet gambling. In a recent 2009 British study of gambling among nearly 9,000 adolescents aged 11 to 15 years, Ipsos MORI reported that just over

The use of 'greater than chance' win probabilities during 'demo' games is one example of the many tried and tested psychological 'foot-in-the-door' techniques used widely in the commercial sector. Another common foot-in-the-door technique is the use of sign-up bonuses where an online gambling operator offers to match a gambler's first deposit of (say) £100. However, as gamblers soon find out, they are often required to play several times this amount before they are permitted to get their bonus. Consequently, gamblers may be winning initially but have to gamble for longer to satisfy the financial withdrawal criteria. This form of 'pushed' loss can perpetuate chasing behaviour – one of the major risk factors of problem gambling. Another popular foot-in-the-door technique is now being used by a



number of online bingo companies who are giving their clientele the chance to play for free but to win money. This sounds like a 'win-win' situation for the gambler but the ploy is the equivalent of a supermarket's 'loss leader' that gets customers into the store in the first place.

One of the most interesting psychological ploys used by many online gambling operators is the use of 'bogus' players and their testimonials. This is a common practice used by the industry to generate hype about their sites. People are 'disguised' as unbiased players who then rave about particular online gambling sites in online player forums. There has been a lot of psychological research under what circumstances information like this is taken on board or disregarded. There is a long established theory that has highlighted the most effective way of getting a message across. Most importantly, the information source needs to be credible (the important features of credibility being expertise and trustworthiness).

Identifying yourself as an Internet gambler means that you are more likely to treat someone else that is part of your 'in group' as trustworthy. Psychologists have highlighted that source credibility in this situation can be effective for two reasons. The first is that it leads to the processing of information in a half-mindless state – either because the person is not motivated to think, doesn't have the time to consider, or lacks the abilities to understand the issues. Secondly, source credibility can stop questioning ("if other punters think it's a good site, then it must be alright").

Psychological research has also shown that successful persuasive messages should be short, clear, direct and one-sided for receptive audiences (two-sided arguments should be used if the audience is likely to be unsympathetic to the message). The message must be explicit rather than letting the audience draw their own conclusions (although for informed audiences it can be equally – if not more – effective to draw their own conclusions).

Finally, the message should be colourful

and vivid rather than full of technical terms and statistics. In short, the use of psychological research on communication to underpin marketing strategies, the online gaming industry generates mass emails and instant messages with typical claims like "I just found the greatest online casino on the Net. You should check it out". Obviously if it sounds too good to be true, then it probably is.

Obviously, online gambling companies are operating in a highly competitive market and almost every marketing tactic is employed to increase market share. However, the strategies used should be socially responsible and be fair to players. In the long run, online gamblers will give repeat business to those that they trust, and those companies are likely to be the ones who are the most socially responsible.

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