



### ***It's Time to Get Active with Interactive***

by Peter Yesawich, Jr.

**D**uring discussions with casino marketing executives throughout the country, the topic invariably turns to E-marketing. And, just as invariably, the comment is made that casino players typically don't use the internet that much, are uncomfortable with email, etc.

However, statistics are increasingly indicating otherwise. And that means casino marketing executives should consider becoming more active in interactive marketing.

Certainly, direct mail continues to be the key tactic used to connect and motivate players to return to a property. When asked how they want to be contacted, players still note that they prefer direct mail over other forms of communication.

However, there's a growing trend in internet usage, specifically by leisure travelers...which include gamers. One key reason is the internet has now been around for a while and all of us - even those categorized as "seniors"- are logging on more and more. Plus, the internet is increasingly easier to use, more convenient, less intimidating. And the numbers don't lie.

According to The Y Partnership, 50 percent of leisure travelers utilize the internet in the purchase and planning of travel. In June of 2006, ComScore announced that nearly 150 million consumers visited a travel site in 2005, a 35 percent increase year over year from 2004. Online travel revenues from 2005 exceeded \$60 billion dollars, representing a 20 percent increase versus 2004, with all travel segments posting gains. If we look specifically at U.S. consumer online travel bookings, 35 million consumers used web search to research travel during 2005. Of those 35 million consumers, 32% purchased a travel-related service within eight weeks of their initial search. Finally, 80% (8.9 million) of these consumers converted in the online channel driving \$6.6 billion in travel sales.

And a few more compelling figures to consider...

- In 2005, advertisers spent \$5.75 billion on Search Engine Marketing (SEM).
- In 2010, that figure is projected to be \$9 - \$11 billion.
- US firms spent \$400 million on email marketing in 2006.
- Approximately 155.2 million people watch video on the internet.

While these statistics are travel-based or general in nature, it's clear that E-marketing should no longer be a luxury line item in casino/resort budgets. E-marketing is now a necessity for creating brand awareness and driving more qualified traffic to websites because they are the first destination before guests embark on their journey to the casino.

Also, marketers are finding that E-marketing dollars are some of the best spent because of the highly sophisticated ROI

tracking tools in place. Marketing departments should be listening to their guests from the moment they land on their webpage.

Naturally, a casino marketer needs the foundation of a solid strategy and strong positioning prior to launching any marketing initiative - whether it's direct mail, mass media or E-marketing. But, when it's time to implement tactical executions, here are some being employed through E-marketing campaigns:

- A solid, well rounded SEO (Search Engine Optimization) strategy. A site should be optimized appropriately with "alt" tags, content, text, images, title tags and keywords. This will help guests and players find the site easily within major search engines such as Google, Yahoo, Ask, MSN and AOL.
- A well designed website with easy navigation and booking capabilities. Even slight adjustments to a website design and construction can greatly boost the number of online bookings.
- SEM (Search Engine Marketing) campaigns allow for more qualified traffic to a site at a low cost. Many casinos are surprised by the ways they are able to boost their visitor traffic substantially simply by using advanced search and ROI tracking technologies.
- Strategic linking with other sites including on-site spas, golf courses, as well as, food and beverage outlets can generate much higher traffic and conversions.
- Email has substantially improved the way casinos and resorts engage in E-marketing. The most important lessons learned are in the areas of personalization, customization and post click activity tracking and analytics. Each email campaign is an opportunity to learn.
- Banner advertising on low cost media sites. Working closely with an experienced interactive firm can result in additional exposure at a substantially lower cost.
- Cross selling and up selling is a lost art form. Casinos outside of Las Vegas have traditionally utilized their websites for information only purposes. Now, casinos are realizing how their websites can become the ultimate cross and up-sell tool available. Offering dynamic packages or player rewards programs provides incentives for guests to spend more time online and ultimately on property.
- Opt-In programs are the next big wave. Personalization and customization are important new trends in this area. Having multiple areas to key in email addresses on your site is a great way to begin tracking guests. A frequent newsletter with special discounts, free play, and other

offers are enticing ways to get in front of a potential customer with their permission of using an email address.

Also, when gauging ROI via interactive campaigns, each property engages in the analysis quite differently. Some of the most important factors to look at include:

- Conversion of search marketing campaigns (Google, Yahoo, Looksmart, AOL, Ask, Miva, etc.)
- Tracking of conversions from banner advertisements.
- ROI of paid inclusion links (additional text link listings).
- Tracking referring domains, knowing how and where your guests are coming from can assist in effective media placements.
- Analytics, track pathing and click reports. Understanding how users are entering and exiting a site will help better understand everything from site aesthetics to conversion history.
- Flash analytics tools are available to track activity including rollovers and drop down activity.
- Be sure to get in the habit of comparing past interactive and website campaign activity.

Looking forward, several major trends continue to grow within the casino and resort interactive marketing realm.

Social network marketing, or marketing on sites such as MySpace, Facebook, Friendster, etc. continues to grow at rapid rates. According to Hitwise, an Internet competitive intelligence firm, social networking sites accounted for 6.5% of all Internet traffic in February, 2007. The total U.S. market share increased 11.5% over January of 2007. According to E-Marketer, advertising spending will rise from \$350 million in 2006 to \$865 million by end of 2007. Projections tap social networking sites to obtain \$2.15 billion in advertising sales by 2010. Many major hotel chains have discovered value in advertising on these sites.

Blog marketing is another trend on the rise. As mass media began to focus more upon the World Poker Tour, many casinos took advantage of advertising both on poker blogs as well as creating blogs of their own. On the advertising side, media placement is inexpensive and can touch

many people in cyber space. As for internal blog development, this is a way for casinos and resorts to promote poker rooms, new amenities, etc. at no cost. The only time associated with developing these blogs is authoring new entries on a frequent basis. ♣

*Peter Yesawich, Jr. is the Director of Integrated Marketing for G. A. Wright Marketing, Inc., The Direct Agency for Gaming and Hospitality. He can be reached by calling (303) 393-4530 or email [petery@gawright.com](mailto:petery@gawright.com)*

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2965 S. Jones Blvd., Suite C Las Vegas, NV 89146  
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