



THE REAL POKER STARS IN FRANCE

Technology is helping to drive the performance of Casino d'Evian, one of France's highest earning casinos and a location with big plans for the future

Casino d'Evian, located on the picturesque lake Geneva, is the number one independent casino in France. Competing for custom with major groups such as Barriere, Partouche, Joa and Tranchant, Casino d'Evian is consistently in the top 20 casinos in the country, which from a collective 197 locations in total, is an indicator of the success of this indie performer.

Located in a traditional French spa town, the first sites in France to be allowed casino gaming, today Casino d'Evian boasts 250 slot machines, nine gaming tables (two French roulettes, three American roulettes, three black jack, one stud poker), attracting a split of 40 per cent Swiss and 60 per cent French players. The casino has four restaurants/bars and a pub and was the first casino in France to install IGT's sbX server-based slots system, and the first to install Gaming Partners International's RFID Poker system. Casino Director Eric Perrin is a self-confessed technology-fan,

The latest four day poker tournament at Casino d'Evian took place March 22-25. The French Gaming Board operates a very strict poker cash game policy, insisting upon a four per cent rake without capping. The buy-in for the PokerStars.fr event is a minimum €250, with little and big blinds ranging between €5 and €55.

constantly looking to the next development to drive the industry forward.

The location of the casino, just 40 minutes from the financial capital of Geneva, is perfect for the hi-roller crowd, hence the two French roulette tables. However, Casino d'Evian pointedly stages a series of high visibility poker tournaments throughout the year in collaboration with PokerStars.fr and the France Poker Series, drawing a variety of players from across the nation, including the biggest names in French poker. The tournaments began in low-key fashion with just two tables with the casino working initially with Eurosports.

However, in its second year the casino installed two RFID poker tables to offer cash games live to players using this technology for the first time. This year, Casino d'Evian installed an additional two tables with four large displays, housing the tournament in a huge, beautiful, high

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ceilinged room that easily accommodates staff, players and spectators. The room is, however, separate from the rest of the table games and even slots within the casino, which is one of the few themed French locations having adopted an African style to its main slots floor.

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Gaming Partners International had to receive approval for its RFID poker system from the French police and Ministry of Finance, before being able to offer the



system to its customers in France. Even then, the local gaming board inspector is always on hand over the course of the tournament to ensure that all protocols are being followed to the letter by the casino.

In March, GPI's regional representative, Lionel Cazalis, was also on site to follow the progress of the tournament and the interaction of players, dealers and management of the RFID poker system. "The benefits of the system are multiple," explained Mr. Cazalis. "We are able to track all the transactions on each of the four tables, with each of the individual dealers given their own pin-codes as they log into and out of the table. This allows the operator to track the dealers at the different tables and view the number of hands played per table in any given period in real-time. The addition of the system also speeds up play itself. Dealers are no longer counting the chips, which results in extra hands played per hour. It's the equivalent to adding a card shuffler to the table in regards to the efficiency gains."

The feedback from players is that they appreciate the added live information delivered to the displays, which helps both those playing and management keep track of the status of the game in play. Players are given statistics about the current pot size, the last winner's gain, house rake amount, average and



maximum pot and the pots from the last five games, while spectators are also presented with this information, something that only RFID can deliver. Spectators at the Casino d'Evian tournament gathered around the displays to glean valuable information about the games in play, which otherwise would be difficult to follow. The information mirrors the data players are familiar with on the Internet, in which live pot counts and statistics are part of their everyday gaming experience.

All the RFID tables are linked to a main server, with information fed to the live games director's office, who can keep track of progress in real-time from the floor. "Management have instant information as to the rake, play at the tables and importantly, how much should be in the boxes," said Mr. Cazalis. "If any dealer makes a mistake, the RFID system will flag this in regards to the final amount in the rake box. Due to the fact that the system is automatically counting the pot there are no human errors to

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LIONEL CAZALIS.



POKER WAS INITIALLY WELCOMED IN FRANCE, BUT THE FOUR PER CENT RAKE HAD OPERATORS QUESTION ITS VALUE.

factor into the equation. The live game director simply prints a report at the end of the day's transactions and this reveals the pot amounts, rake, etc., with the global reconciliation of the rake with the physical rake box. The head cashier simply prints the report and it is stored on file for later inspection."

The tables in operation look no different from a regular poker table, aside from the PC tablet fitted within the chip tray and the RFID reading area marked out on the layout by discreet markers for the benefit of the dealers. The readers are connected to a PC, with the RFID tablet PC connected to a CAT 5 network linking it securely to the main servers. Should anything happen to the network, each individual table continues to store information independently until connection is reestablished. Even the displays are computers linked to the network and server, with the information

Watching play at the tables during the PokerStars.fr competition, it was obvious that the players are very comfortable with the technology, asking the dealers to count their buy-ins via the RFID reader to ensure that they received the right number of chips from the cash desk. The RFID system used at Evian is the 125khz technology pioneered by GPI, which can read up to 800 chips on a single reader within three seconds.

displayed fed live from the server.

To date, GPI has sold the majority of its RFID poker tables into the French market, having seen the most interest as poker was only recently introduced into the market in 2007. Unfortunately for GPI, the RFID system was market ready only one year later, which saw the technology arrive too late to capitalise on the wave of investment operators made in purchasing dedicated tables and chips.

Despite this, GPI has placed 39 tables across the country, with further tables installed in Belgium, Hungary and Monaco, with discussions ongoing in Germany and the UK. The key selling points of game speed, simplification and clarity of dealer function mean that it compares very favourably to other options by improving rounds per hour and eliminating dealer counting errors, while the minimal maintenance required by RFID means that there's also minor ongoing costs for using the system.

Investing in the RFID Poker system is a tricky prospect for casino directors looking to push the concept through with finance departments as 92 per cent of the revenue in French casinos is currently derived from slots. Casinos are compelled to offer table games to qualify for a pro rata number of slots, otherwise many of the casinos in France would probably convert to slot hall status. When poker was introduced in 2007, the French Gaming Board gave some concessions to

table games, dropping the paid entry requirement, while enforcing an ID policy for entry to both slots and table gaming areas. While table gaming benefited incrementally, the small change had a pronounced effect on the larger percentage of slots revenue. Subsequent smoking bans and the economic crisis have had a further deleterious effect.

The introduction of poker was initially welcomed in France, but the four per cent rake on the game had many operators questioning the value of this new addition. Today, the country remains split between fierce opponents to the game and equally fierce proponents. Most of the advocates have promoted the game heavily both online and through television channels, with current revenues within some casinos in France showing that poker is now generating 50 per cent of live gaming revenues, which is at no risk to the house. The counter to this is seen as the opposition to poker by hi-rollers. The removal of poker from locations in France has been driven by a realisation that as operators originally placed poker tables in their existing live gaming areas, traditional players and poker players mix together like foie gras and fizzy cola.

Many of the smaller casinos were unable to adequately provide separate areas for play, which in addition to senior management doubts as to the fiscal and promotional benefits of the game, has seen them abandon poker entirely. On the

other hand, larger locations have seen the benefits of attracting a new audience and additional revenue, often choosing to close French roulette tables to increase the number of poker tables they offer. Poker is becoming a classic game in France, but only in the right conditions does it seem to thrive.

The attraction for Casino d'Evian is the draw of new players to the location for the major tournaments and the association with land-based play of their online activities. Evian has seen that slots tournaments do not attract tables players and vice versa. However, poker tournaments increase the volume of play on slots, as the players are predisposed to slots gaming rather than identifying themselves as table players.

The benefit from increased restaurant and bar spend, plus the slots uptick, means that the casino is gaining additional revenue while associating land-based play with the same online game to a new, younger generation of players. The trend is interesting when viewed as part of the revenue picture across France. The casinos derive 92 per cent of their revenue from slots play and eight per cent from tables, but in the last two years revenues from slots have fallen 15-18 per cent, while table games have increased 5-10 per cent on average, with certain locations recording 55 per cent gains. However, the proportional increase remains small, which when combined with the slots fall has curbed further investment in live gaming.

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It is a technology that has been superseded in many ways by 13.56Mhz in that the new technology is faster and offers dynamically more options for tracking players and counting larger volumes much quicker, but for the purposes of the poker tournament at Casino d'Evian, the 125khz technology is more than sufficient to provide all the functionality required at a lower price point. While the latest 13.56Mhz technology might future-proof a location for forthcoming eventualities, the entry-point to RFID with 125khz technology is no less attractive for those looking for specific functionality, which this technology delivers with aplomb.



Interview Eric Perrin - Casino Director Casino d'Evian

G3: Poker is not a big money game in French casinos, so why do you stage tournaments at Evian?

ERIC PERRIN: You're right, poker isn't of major financial interest, but the tournament provides us with a marketing channel to new players. The tournaments attract a lot of new players to the casino and while individual tournaments breaks even, we win from additional spend at the slots, in our restaurants and bars. The poker tournament is a marketing tool for Casino d'Evian and it has been a very successful one too.

G3: What is the player demographic that you attract for the poker events? In a market renowned for hi-rollers, you're inviting a very different clientele to the casino.

EP: Yes, we are aware that the customers are very different. When poker arrived in France a lot of casinos located poker in

PokerStars.fr is an ideal partner in this respect. They have a great online offer, and we provide a professional real-casino experience. The best solution is to work collaboratively. We don't compete with PokerStars and they don't compete with us. We offer two completely different experiences. I don't know how to do their job, and they don't know mine. Instead, we have expertise in both areas and provide mutual benefits to each other by working together."

ERIC PERRIN,
Casino Director,
Casino d'Evian.

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their table games area, logically thinking that poker is a table game. However, this is not the reality in the minds of the players. The poker player is actually much closer to the slot the player, not a table player. For us, it is better to separate poker from the other offers. We have created three separate areas; tables, slots and poker. When we stage a hi-roller tournament, some of the players additionally play different table games, but it's a very small number and a very small gain. When we stage a poker

tournament, 80 per cent of those players also play the slot machines. These are players that would not visit the casino solely to play the slots. When they come to play poker they also play the slots, but they don't play the other table games.

G3: You're working with PokerStars and the France Poker Series - how important is it to establish a link with Internet players?

EP: This is the first time that we have worked with PokerStars and the difference has been dramatic. This is by far our best experience and one that is different from much of the thinking right now. In France, a lot of casinos created their own online websites, thinking they will win a lot of money. After 18 months they now know that they are in fact losing a lot of money from their websites. I believe the best solution is to work together with established online providers. PokerStars.fr is an ideal partner in this respect. They have a great online offer, and we provide a professional real-casino experience. The best solution is to work collaboratively. We don't compete with PokerStars and they don't compete with us. We offer two completely different experiences. I don't know how to do their job, and they don't know mine. Instead, we have expertise in both areas and provide mutual benefits to each other by working together.

G3: Poker is a low margin game for the house - what, therefore, was the financial reason to invest in an RFID poker system?

EP: We have three main reasons, the first concerning the dealers. When you don't have RFID, the dealer must constantly reconcile the pot, making rake calculations all the time. Using RFID, the system handles the calculations while the dealer can concentrate on the game, animating play at the table, taking better care of the customer, looking to ensure everyone is playing well, not making mistakes etc. It makes the job more interesting for the dealer and the customer too, which is the second benefit. Players want to know the level of the pot and with RFID they don't need to ask, they can see this on the screen. They can see the value of the previous pots, the average stack and from this information make informed decisions that affect their play. I'm also alone in my region in offering RFID tables to players and this is an important point of differentiation. Customers are comfortable with this technology, they remark upon the benefits we provide in comparison to other locations. And finally, from a financial perspective RFID delivers more hands per hour. The opening of the table is instantaneous, there is no counting of the

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LIONEL CAZELIS,
Gaming Partners
International
(pictured).



chips and therefore we turnover more hands as a result, which means more revenue to the casino.

G3: You only stage three poker competitions per year - is the RFID poker system a luxury?

EP: Our investment in RFID has already benefited us in regards to our current activities. However, in the future we are looking to offer players a regular 7-8 table room four to five days per week. We plan to transform our poker offer using the tournaments to market our live poker offer to players who are growing increasingly comfortable with both online and land-based play.

G3: What attracted you to RFID poker in the first place and has it performed as you expected?

EP: In the table gaming side of our business we have worked exclusively with GPI for many years. When I explained to Mr. Cazalis that I needed a number of poker tables he suggested that I look at this new technology. He explained it to me and then, when I saw

it in action, it took me a second to realise that I needed this technology. GPI installed its first RFID poker systems with the Joa Groupe in France. I had a thorough demonstration of the system within one of their locations and was convinced having seen it in operation. We installed the system in 2009 and since then it has performed perfectly. Our aim was to attract online players to our casino and now when they arrive they say: 'oh, this is similar to the game on my computer, but with better service, real people and a wonderful atmosphere. I prefer to go in the casino than play in my flat!'

G3: Would you recommend the system to other operators?

EP: I would definitely recommend this system to other operators. It is the right direction to choose RFID. However, when poker arrived in French casinos, this RFID system was not ready, which meant that many bought traditional poker tables and chips. The system arrived one year too late, with operators having already bought traditional tables. Adding readers to existing tables is not expensive, but

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Konrad Hechtbauer is the Director of the Project & Application Development Team and as such has been heading the planning and realisation of casino projects around the world for more than ten years.

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replacing the chip stock too is costly when you've only just made that investment. It is a great shame as I am convinced that had RFID arrived 12 months earlier, every casino in France would have adopted this technology.

G3: You are something of a technophile, having adopted RFID and installed IGT's sbX on your floor - what are your feelings in regards to technology on the gaming floor - and especially in the area of table gaming, which in France is such a small part of the revenue these days?

EP: Two things interest me about technology - for the players, new technology can offer a better experience. In the case of RFID and server-based gaming, our customers can play new games, changing them at will and they can play in the same way as they do on the Internet in an environment unmatched by the home environment. We know that providing a better experience equates to more play. The second benefit is for the casino itself. New technology gives us access to details about our clients; how they play, when

WHEN BUSINESS IS HARD YOU MUST DRIVE EVEN HARDER. YOU MUST BE A GOOD PILOT AND TECHNOLOGY HELPS YOU STEER THE RIGHT COURSE.

they play, which game they prefer. This level of information means that I can drive my business better. Everyone speaks about the economic crisis, but when the business is hard you must drive your business even harder, you must be a good pilot and new technology helps you steer the right course.

G3: How has the economic crisis affected your investment decisions?

EP: During the crisis a lot of operators cut everything and only speak about the costs. I think it is better if you speak about the ways you can win. If you speak only about the cost it is a very restrictive view and the end of this way of thinking comes very fast. You can't cut everything and offer the best experience for your customers. Of course, you can't afford everything and it's more important than ever that you make the right decisions in



the crisis and be careful with costs. However, it is still better to ask what can I change to make the experience better for clients, to win additional business and increase revenue by investing. It's a philosophy that has proved to be successful for Casino d'Evian. The decision to install IGT's sbX server-based system was a major one for this casino last year. It was a big investment, but when we made our business forecasts we predicted that it would payback the investment in 15 months. I admit that we created a really powerful marketing proposition, which generated a lot of additional commercial activity, but the overall outcome has been that the ROI on sbX has actually been eight and a half months, almost half our original forecast. Having sought to convince the financial department of the proposal, now they ask when am I ordering more of those server-based machines?

G3: Investing in new technology is surely more of a gamble than following tried and trusted models?

EP: This all comes from thinking differently. We think about how we can win. When I speak with my management team about the results, they can describe the reasons why revenue is down or business did not meet expectations - blah, blah, blah. I'm not interested in this analysis. I want to know the solution. I want to know how we can win. What

"sbX is designed to blend the changing demands of players with the real business needs of casinos, enabling the gaming floor to stay relevant and differentiated in a highly competitive market. Casino d'Evian is perfect proof that you can exceed players' expectations and deliver effective business growth with the right strategic investments. We are thrilled with the performance of sbX at Casino d'Evian and look forward to helping them continue to offer a unique experience for their customers."

SABBY GILL,
Regional VP EMEA,
IGT.

decisions do we need to take to change the business for the better. I don't think about the reasons why we haven't won - only what we can win.

G3: So what's the next project you're working upon?

EP: For us, we are working hard on a very big project, as we start planning a large scale refurbishment of the casino. This renovation will be undertaken during 2012, a period in which we will remain open for business, changing one area before moving on to the next. Our vision for the makeover is an evolution that follows the changing expectations of our customers. The casino will be split into two levels, with the lower level catering for traditional players with table games, a beautiful restaurant with terrace, lobby and slots area. The atmosphere will be aimed at hi-rollers with VIP decor and ambiance. The second level targets a younger audience. We will offer poker, a bar and lounge area, with a dedicated space for tournaments and gala performances and slots on the second floor. We will offer new technology, light shows and video walls and music. Each level will be served from the same entrance with clients led through the slots area before channeling off into their space of choice. We have changed the gaming offer to meet the expectations of our customers and now we are adapting the environment too.

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