

FOLLOWING THE LEADER

Slots manufacturers are branching into social gaming platforms, delivering dynamic content to a new audience, while also taking existing customers on the journey

How do you engage with the traditional slot gaming audience and simultaneously reach out to attract a new, social media savvy crowd that should become the next set of customers for your games? G3 quizzed Bally Technologies Social Media guru, Riley Meredith, about the changes taking place within Bally and the social gaming revolution that's coming to casinos everywhere.

HOW DIFFERENT IS SOCIAL MEDIA AS A COMMUNICATION CHANNEL AS OPPOSED TO MORE TRADITIONAL METHODS?

It's incredibly different. Social media has immediacy unlike many traditional methods. It also has the potential to spread very far and very fast. Social media is also non-stop. It doesn't matter if it's the weekend or the middle of the night. Social media is always 'on.'

CAN YOU CHANGE THE PERCEPTION OF PLAYERS THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA?

You can absolutely change the perception of players through social media. You can change the way they view your games, your systems, and your company as a whole. There is definitely power in humanising your company, something which can be accomplished through social media to a higher degree and in a much shorter period of time than other, traditional communication channels. Putting a face and voice to your company can truly help players identify with your products and services, build brand loyalty, and deliver credibility.

SETTING CLEAR OBJECTIVES

WHAT SOCIAL NETWORKING EXAMPLES DO YOU CONSIDER TO BE EXEMPLARY? DID YOU FOLLOW OTHER EXAMPLES ALREADY IN THE MARKETPLACE IN THE CASINO SECTOR/OTHER SECTORS?

The airline industry is one which has done quite well with social media. It's only natural, since the business they're in and the customer service issues they face (both good and bad) often involve things in real-time or nearly so.

Southwest Airlines has done a great job. I also love some of the initiatives KLM has implemented. For example, they find passengers flying on their airline while they're waiting at various airports and deliver surprise gifts to them in person.

They research the passengers beforehand by looking at their social media profiles and posts – likes and dislikes, where they're going and what they're doing – and give them something based on this research. A small act of kindness and an actual, physical expression of dedication to your customers is a powerful thing.

As far as the casino industry goes, Luxor was an early standout and one which has continued to do great things. Pechanga Resort & Casino in southern California is certainly another – they're always ahead of the game when it comes to social and they have obviously made a serious commitment to their programs. It's definitely paying off.

WHAT MESSAGES DO YOU WANT TO COMMUNICATE TO YOUR AUDIENCE? WHAT DO YOU WANT THEM TO HEAR AND HOW DO YOU WANT THEM TO REACT?

Our audience is a bit different than most. We've always been a business-to-business (B2B) company – our customers and audience have always been and will continue to be casino operators. Social media, however, has brought the player and a B2C relationship to reality. When I think of who I'm communicating with through social media, it's just about everyone – our casino operator customers, the players who enjoy our games around the world, the media, financial analysts, company stakeholders, our employees – the list goes on and on.

For casino operators, we of course want to promote our products and services. But more than that, we want to act as a partner. We help them promote on-floor promotions, we re-tweet jackpot wins, 'like' their posts and photos. We provide content like marketing videos and images for them to post on their own social sites. The message we communicate with them is one of support. They're the ones that keep us in business, so I make it a point to first and foremost do what I can to support them in their efforts.

To players, we also want to communicate messages about products and services. But we also want to provide them with information. Is there a casino with the new Code Red slots near me? What games do you offer as mobile applications? Are you coming out with a



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follow-up game to Money Vault? They have questions and we always try to have the answer and have it quickly. If we don't know, we do our best to find out.

We also do our best to support the industry at large. We send out information on grand openings, favourable legislation, jackpot wins, industry innovations, news and more. You always have to remember when it comes to social media, the message should be much larger than your company and what it's doing. Your marketing message and company promotion is of course important, but it's crucial you also provide other useful and interesting content. People want more than sales messages.

How do we want our audience to react? We want them to engage and spread the word. A million followers and fans are worthless if you cannot get them to act and influence others.

HOW DID YOU IDENTIFY YOUR OBJECTIVES?

When it comes to social media, it's a mistake to tie objectives to numbers or something concretely quantifiable. Not only is it difficult to do, it doesn't provide much insight. Our objectives are fairly simple – promote our products and services, build positive brand identity, support our customers, players and the gaming industry, give people a look inside our company, and offer them a new, more personal perspective of who we are and what we do, and simply have a voice in the conversation. It's happening whether you like it or not, so you need to make sure you're heard.

WHAT GOALS DID YOU SPECIFICALLY WANT TO ACHIEVE?

We have some specific follower, like, view, etc. numbers we're looking to achieve, but again, that's something companies want to gauge success by only in the very early stages. We're in those early stages here at Bally and we're well on our way to hitting our initial marks. We also want to develop an information channel that is efficient and effective – we want social media to be a place where our audience knows, without a doubt, they can find information and help. We want to increase our brand awareness, especially with players, and we want that brand awareness to translate into increased demand for our products. We want to create brand ambassadors – people who know, use, love, and spread the word about our products.

FACTS AND PRACTICALITIES

WHAT DATA DO YOU COLLECT AND HOW DO YOU USE AND MINE THIS INFORMATION?

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We collect anything and everything we can get – which when you are talking social media, means what people are willing to give you. We ask questions about our games and specific features of our games and cabinets. We also gather general information about what social media users are looking at, responding to, and when and how they're doing it. This information is shared with pertinent groups and individuals within our organisation to help improve those products and services and ultimately deliver a superior experience for players and a more profitable product for customers.

WHAT LEVEL OF ADDITIONAL IT INFRASTRUCTURE DID YOU NEED TO INSTIGATE THIS STRATEGY - OR WAS EVERYTHING ALREADY IN PLACE?

As a technology company, we didn't have to do much. The 'public-facing' social media channels also don't require much on the backend – they're designed for anyone and everyone to use so the technology doesn't need to be anything extraordinary.

WHAT ARE YOU LEGALLY OBLIGED TO CONSIDER WHEN CONTACTING/ENGAGING WITH CUSTOMERS - WHAT ARE YOU NOT ALLOWED TO DO FOR EXAMPLE? WHAT INFORMATION ARE YOU ABLE TO STORE AND BUILD IN REGARDS TO YOUR DATABASE?

As a publicly traded company, we have to be certain to abide by FTC regulations and be very cognisant of what we say and when we say it. We also have to be aware of trademark and copyright obligations. We're in a very competitive industry. It may sound foolish, but you always have to remember that much of the information you have access to is not ready for the public domain. It may be incredibly compelling and the most amazingly good content for social media, but until it is in the public domain officially, you have to sit on it. When it comes to what you can and can't say, common sense generally provides you with the answer.

The data we track and store is based on what people do and how they do it as opposed to any sort of personal data. We track mentions, likes, follower counts, views, sentiment, etc. and the trends that data creates.

When it comes to 'personal' data, that's something I track and use in a way a good casino host might. I don't think you're doing your job properly in social media unless you build a relationship with the people who are engaging with you and your company. When someone posts on the page, I seek to remember everything about them I've been able to

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discover through the information they've shared. If they've told me who they are, where they live, what slots they prefer to play and what their favorite properties are to play them at, it's my job to remember those things. It's no different than someone at your local pub knowing what you prefer to drink.

TAILORING YOUR CONTENT

HOW IMPORTANT ARE NEWSLETTERS AND WHAT CONTENT DO YOU SHARE? HOW DO YOU ENGAGE WITH YOUR AUDIENCE?

These can be great, but content is so important. Like your other social media messaging, it can't be solely marketing messages. You have to deliver useful content too. If you're constantly trying to sell to people, you'll find them ignoring you quickly. If you give them something that helps them with their business or their lives in general, they're much more apt to pay attention to the next time you try and sell them something. People want interesting, engaging and useful content. They want to laugh. They want to be surprised.

HOW DO YOU KEEP THE BRAND IDENTITY SAFE WHILE EXPOSING IT TO THE GENERAL PUBLIC?

Guess what? Your brand is already exposed whether you're involved in social media or not. Join the conversation. Whether you like it or not, people are talking about your company – good and

bad. Pretending they aren't or ignoring that they are folly. By simply acknowledging and participating in the conversation, you can do a wealth of good for your company. It doesn't matter what business you're in, customer service is always involved. It's no different when it comes to your brand on social media. Try and fix problems and offer help whenever and wherever you can. Acknowledge mistakes and fix them. Listen. Respond.

DO YOU TAILOR YOUR CONTENT TO DIFFERENT PLAYERS/CUSTOMERS?

We try to deliver content that's interesting and useful for all our different audiences. There is certainly content that may be tailored toward a specific audience, but you always have to remember that you're in a public space, so the other audiences will be seeing it as well. It should have some value for them too.

WHAT RATIO OF CENTRAL AND LOCAL CONTENT HAVE YOU ESTABLISHED AND WHOSE RESPONSIBILITY IS IT TO PROVIDE THE LOCAL CONTENT?

Our content is certainly Las Vegas/corporate centric to a large extent. This is simply a function of that content being readily available in the early stages of our program development. That's changing though. As we've continued to build our social-media initiatives, we're doing a better job of bringing in content from our many local offices around the



in what they're going to say.

I also think many companies tend to forget the value of negative comments. They can point to problems you may not have considered or discovered; they can help improve your products and services. There are also few brand advocates as strong as those who had a complaint or problem you were able to solve efficiently and with respect.

FACEBOOK FANS - HOW DO YOU PUT A VALUE ON THEM?

Facebook fans have value based on if they engage with your page and influence others positively. If you have 10 million Facebook fans, they're just a number unless you can get them to engage, act, and influence others.

WHAT HAS BEEN THE RESPONSE BOTH FROM WITHIN THE ORGANISATION AND EXTERNALLY?

It's been very positive thus far. People within the company are excited we've gone social and are enthusiastic about the capabilities it provides. Externally, the media, public and others have responded well. We have a long way to go, but the initial reaction makes me incredibly optimistic about the future of our program.

HOW DO YOU PRESENT A CONSISTENT MESSAGE TO YOUR CUSTOMERS WHEN YOU HAVE SO MANY DIFFERENT PEOPLE ENGAGING WITH THEM? IN THE PAST THERE WOULD BE A SINGLE MARKETING SOURCE THAT CONTROLLED THE BRAND - NOW YOU'RE ENGAGING AT NUMEROUS LEVELS WITH A MUCH WIDER NETWORK OF PEOPLE - HOW DO YOU KEEP THEM ALL 'ON-MESSAGE'?

We don't truly face this problem yet. With very few people involved, we can filter and unify our messaging easily and keep it in line with our other efforts. Even as our program grows, I don't believe this will be a problem. You simply have to work in concert with your other messaging and ensure that those involved in your social programs are professionals.

WHAT EXAMPLES DO YOU HAVE OF CUSTOMERS ENGAGING WITH THIS CHANNEL??

We have players asking where to find games, when games will be released, and about specific game and product functions among many other things. Players also respond well to questions we ask which can range from things about our products to general question related to social media or just about any topic.

Our casino customers engage with us about on-floor promotions, jackpot winners, new games hitting their floor, events, tradeshow and more.

world, trade shows we attend, and more. We've identified and designated "social-media liaisons" who are responsible for delivering content in their area of the world or based on their particular role in the company. As a global company we are committed to providing global content.

PUTTING PLANS INTO ACTION

HOW ENTHUSIASTIC WERE THE DIFFERENT TEAM MEMBERS TO THE PROPOSALS? IS THERE AN AGE DIVIDE WHEN TALKING ABOUT SOCIAL MEDIA, OR DOES EVERYONE UNDERSTAND ITS IMPORTANCE AND VALUE?

There was a great deal of enthusiasm. Bally came to social media late, but I don't think that was due to a lack of interest or understanding. So many companies simply jump in because "everyone is doing it." That's a mistake. You have to know why and how you're getting involved and understand what you want to accomplish. As far as an age divide, I don't see one at our company. There are people, young, old, and everywhere in between interested and involved in social media.

HOW DO YOU COORDINATE THE POLICY ACROSS ALL THE DIFFERENT CHANNELS? IS THERE SOMEONE WHOSE RESPONSIBILITY IT IS TO OVERSEE THE ENTIRE HUB AND SPOKE APPROACH?

As our program is still very new, I am responsible for it in most respects. I have

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support from various members of marketing as well as HR and Legal where it makes sense. As our program expands, we'll definitely continue to evolve how we manage social media.

CALL AND RESPONSE

HOW DO YOU MANAGE/CONTROL THIS MEDIA AND WHAT THE PUBLIC IS SAYING ABOUT YOUR COMPANY?

We have great software that helps to manage and monitor our social efforts and also what the public is saying about our company. Because there are very few people able to post as the "official voice" of Bally Technologies, it's fairly easy to control the messaging. I don't believe you can ever truly control what the public is saying about your company. You can, however, build relationships with them, deliver valuable content, listen and respond to them. By influencing them positively, you can be fairly comfortable

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