

DIGITAL TABLES: ONLINE GOES LIVE

Digital poker tables can offer a direct marketing link between the brick and mortar world and the online space, says **Per Hildebrand**, director at electronic table firm Connected Table

in summary...

■ Digital poker tables allow brick and mortar operators to offer online gaming from their premises via multiplayer touch-screen terminals. The tables can be branded and dedicated to a particular poker site, offering online sites the possibility of attracting new players while gaining a presence in the live environment. The offline operators, meanwhile, can use the machines to attract more players to their premises and create new revenue streams

FACT BITES

■ The pioneer in the electronic poker table market was a company called PokerTek, which develops and markets a range of fully automated tables known as 'PokerPro'.

■ PokerPro made its live debut in a Florida casino in May 2005.

■ Since 2007, the Aussie Millions has included an A\$1,000 event played entirely on electronic tables.

As the online gaming market matures, traditional marketing channels such as TV and printed media, while still valuable, are becoming less effective. The cost per acquisition (CPA) is getting higher and therefore online gaming operators are looking for new, more cost-effective ways of promoting their services.

In order to be a successful online gaming operator over time, it's safe to assume that a strong presence in the offline world is crucial. To this end, operators such as PokerStars are heavily involved in sponsoring live events, while other operators are teaming up with chains of pubs, sports bars and snooker clubs in order to get exposure of their brand.

However, the value of these partnerships has always been limited. No matter how much brand exposure is gained, the online gaming services and the 'real world' events that bear their name have always remained essentially separate. Now, however, there is a new opportunity to market online gaming services in offline environments, one that is far more direct and immediate than any traditional method. Digital tables offer instant access to promoted poker sites at live events, thereby making it easier to get new registrations and to keep the players active at the site.

TOP TABLES

Digital poker tables can be viewed as fancy internet terminals with a number of additional tools and features installed. The furniture, as well as the software that runs on the screens (digital keyboard, start menu,

screen saver and banners) can be branded according to the sponsor's requirements. The software can also be configured in different ways, for example blocking all downloads and allowing or disallowing access to certain web pages.

It is also possible to charge customers for surfing the web while access to the sponsor's site remains free of charge. The tables are administrated remotely, making installation of software, configuration changes and trouble-shooting easy to perform. The promotional content can be updated in real time, meaning that the messages shown at the table can be time-sensitive and never need become outdated.

For example, an online poker tournament that starts at 7pm on a particular day can be promoted on screen savers and the start menu throughout the day, then once the tournament has started the message can be replaced automatically by a bonus offer. The digital tables can be built with different numbers of seats but the heads-up table is best suited to using the table for marketing purposes.

The same tables can also be installed with software (ElecPoker™) that can deal poker games from a local server. This system replaces the dealer that is needed in live games and is designed for poker clubs and casinos. In this way the tables function in a similar fashion to other 'electronic dealer' style tables increasingly being found in live casinos.

EVENTS BRANDING

Corporate poker events where staff are invited to learn more about poker and play in a freeroll tournament have become very popular of late. Normally, a poker day is arranged by an event organiser on behalf of a company seeking to arrange something fun for its staff, or for an online gaming operator that wants to hold a promotional event. In more traditional events the sponsor simply gets brand



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exposure but there is seldom any direct link that guarantees that the players participating will ever become customers.

At promotional events held on digital tables, however, the players would normally be required to have an account on the sponsor's gaming site in order to participate, as the tournament would be played online. The players would need to register in order to play and they could later be approached directly by the online gaming site. As such, the value for the sponsor increases considerably.

Digital tables can also create an opportunity for event companies to find sponsors for their events, as it is possible to expose several different brands at the same event. For example, a brewery might want to buy sponsorship on the physical table if an event takes place in a pub, while the online gaming operator might prefer to be seen on the screens. Such co-sponsorships could reduce the costs for each individual sponsor.

LEGAL ISSUES

When using digital tables it is important to be aware of local regulations, as the gaming industry is heavily regulated in many countries. For certain types of gaming, different licences may be needed in order to provide or market gambling services. Such regulations may restrict the possibilities of using digital tables in some markets or by certain operators. This is especially pertinent if the gaming activities in question take

place offline or on digital tables running software on a local server.

If a digital table is connected only to a remote gaming supplier it is likely that the table will be looked at as a 'gaming device' even if the connection is only through the internet. However, if the table can also be used for surfing the net or using other online services it should be treated like any other internet terminal. How extensively online gaming services can be promoted on an internet terminal is not clear, but the tables can easily be configured to operate within the local legal framework.

LIVE PRESENCE

Digital tables present an opportunity to bridge the gap between the online and offline poker worlds. Some online gaming operators, such as traditional bookmakers, already have a physical presence through their betting shops. In other cases the online operators need to team up with local partners in order to be seen on the tables. This can be done either directly or via a third party distributing digital tables and selling advertising on them, but either way the benefits to the operator are the same.

author notes

■ PER HILDEBRAND is the former CEO of 24hPoker.com, now working as a director of Swedish electronic poker table developer Connected Table. He is a former poker pro with over \$500,000 in lifetime earnings

Connected Table makes multiplayer and heads-up tables with built in touch-screen terminals. They are designed for poker but can also be used for online casino games, bingo and so on



BENEFITS FOR ONLINE GAMING OPERATORS

■ Possibility to market your brand on the table and screens

■ Players can access your site for free, while surfing at other sites can be made subject to a fee

■ At promotional events, players must register at your site before participating

■ Possibility of acquiring players not reached through traditional marketing

■ A new way to market services and attract new players at a low CPA

BENEFITS FOR LIVE PARTNERS

(HOSTING TABLES AT A PHYSICAL LOCATION)

■ Able to offer a high-profile branded product that attracts customers to the premises

■ Revenues from additional sales of other products

■ Possibility of receiving revenues as an affiliate of the online gaming operator

■ Tables can double as internet kiosks, creating additional pay-to-surf revenues

■ Low cost for the tables if they are sponsored