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GAMES & Technology

Casinos sharpen CRM tools that boost efficiency

BY ROBYN TAYLOR PARETS

Fostering one-on-one relationships with casino customers is imperative in today's competitive gaming environment. So it's no surprise that many casinos are turning to customer relationship management, or CRM, to cull player information from data warehouses to develop promotions that appeal specifically to these patrons. This not only helps casinos develop stronger relationships with their customers, but it also leads to incremental revenue.

Casinos collect information through loyalty club programs, hotel property management systems, ATM machines, point-of-sale technology, casino Web sites and slot accounting packages. The aggregated data is typically

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pooled into a centralized data warehouse, and the casino can then use the information to develop targeted direct mail campaigns, telemarketing promotions and e-mail offers.

Yet in order to achieve success with CRM, casinos need to back up a bit and view CRM as an overall philosophy.

"People always tie CRM to technology, but in order for it to work and be successful, you have to view the hardware and software as enablers to communicate to your customers. You've got to have a vision and a commitment to an overall CRM program," said Troy Simpson, executive director of casino marketing at Barona Valley Ranch in California.

Tracy Austin, CIO at Mandalay Resort Group, agreed. "CRM is a lot more than direct mailings and technology. It's highly successful when coupled with the right kind of service delivery. If you don't think about it holistically, it will fail," she said.

Even casinos in the process of rolling out a CRM program recognize that it's not all about technology. Mohegan Sun, which runs a highly successful player rewards program, is in the beginning stages of creating its CRM initiative.

"We're working with a consultant to develop a plan on how we want to roll out CRM before we select a software vendor. We want to understand what we want to achieve throughout our departments before we move forward," said Michael Bloom, senior vice president of marketing at the Connecticut resort.

"There are probably many more cases of CRM failures than successes," said Bloom.

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Hotel-casinos are finding many more uses for touch screens, from gaming to hospitality to retail to customer service.



Tactile Transformation

Touch screens are making inroads across hotel-casino properties

BY ANNE BURKE

Old-timers may wax nostalgic about shiny, chrome levers and grumble that touch screens have taken the fun out of playing slots. But a peek inside pretty much any casino in the country tells another story. Touch screens are exploding in popularity.

Proponents say that touch screen slots are friendlier, faster and more efficient than buttons. Touch screens are more interactive, which means that players spend more time on device.

"In the past, slots weren't that interactive. They might go to the bonus round and the game would play itself out. Now, you're able to be much more interactive," said Alice Moran, marketing manager for 3M Touch Systems.

Having conquered the slot floor, touch screens are moving into every other area of slot and hospitality

operations. Workers in the gaming cage are touching screens to do financial transactions. Casino patrons are touching screens to buy tickets to floor shows. Diners in bars and restaurants are playing touch screen table games.

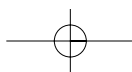
The touch screen is the "easiest, most intuitive interface available," Moran said.

A new report from Elo TouchSystems found that consumers, especially people in that crucial 18-34 demographic, feel comfortable using touch screens.

Elo hired the firm Penn Schoen & Berland, which conducts online surveys, to ask Internet users from 18 to 34 how they feel about using touch screens. Ninety-seven percent of respondents said touch screen technology is convenient, and 96 percent said touch screens make their lives easier, Elo reported.

Given a choice of waiting in a short line for a cashier at the supermarket and using a touch screen self check-

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out, 83 percent chose the finger-to-screen transaction, according to the survey. Eighty-six percent reported they would rather use a touch screen to place orders and pay at fast food restaurants, and 70 percent said they preferred touch screens to rent a car, the survey found. Nearly 90 percent said they believe touch screens will become the standard medium in the service industry in the next few years.

"Touch simplifies life," said Mike Sigona, market manager for Elo TouchSystems. "It allows the average person who isn't a computer expert to interact with computer technology."

"You just point at something and it works," adds Jim Morrow, vice president of advanced development for Bally Gaming & Systems.

Still, even young people who grew up on video games occasionally like to deal with a real person. Forty-four percent of respondents in Elo's survey said they prefer touch screens over customer service agents, leaving a full 56 percent who presumably do not. Elo put a positive spin on that result, noting that only a small percentage of service transactions are touch-enabled today, the suggestion being that once touch screens become a bigger part of daily life, more and more consumers will favor them over customer service agents.

Elo took its experience from the point-of-sale market and added new bells and whistles for casino applications. The company is currently touting its 1229L multifunction touchmonitor, which offers mix-and-match options according to an individual casino's needs.

Among the options is a rear-facing customer display so customers can see the purchase price for themselves. "You can see each transaction displayed, which is ideal for point-of-sale in shops and food service," Sigona said.

The 1229L also has a biometric fingerprint recognition device and an ergonomically placed magnetic stripe reader. The fingerprint recognition device is typically used for employee security access. But it has any number of potential applications for employees or consumers, among them issuing house credit, Sigona said.

"If you want to give credit to a player you can verify that he is who he says he is through a biometric fingerprint identification," he said. "You're doing an instant check right there on the spot."

The monitor can be screwed onto a tabletop, making the device easily convertible into a minikiosk. A player can swipe a loyalty card and touch an icon to find out how many points he or she has accumulated, then press another icon to find out what the points can be redeemed for.

Sigona sees the 1229L heading into the sports book, keno and bingo arenas. "We're just saying, here's a product, here's the technology. It's really up to the casino to say what they want to use it for," he explained.

Moran agreed that the sports book area is ripe for conquest by touch screens. "Why stand in line when you can sit in your comfortable Barcalounger and use a touch screen to process your interactions and process

your bets?" she said.

The 12-monitor on Elo's 1229L can work with a finger, gloved hand, fingernail or object such as a credit card. But not all touch screens respond the same way. 3M's MicroTouch ClearTek capacitive touch screens respond to a human finger but not other objects. If a player's elbow accidentally hits the screen, nothing happens.

"That's helps avoid disputes from accidental touching," Moran said.

Slots are all about time on device, so manufacturers are coming up with creative ways to get players to stay put.

Bally Gaming, for instance, has been testing a new product, the iView, a 3-inch-by-6-inch color graphic touch screen that would put a variety of functions just a touch away from the player. Fitting compactly into the player tracking system area of the slot machine, the touch screen can be used for player

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tracking, marketing or customer service, Morrow said.

"When you insert your player card, it may welcome you to the casino with a text message or a graphic message about a special promotion that the casino is putting on," Morrow said.

The iView has been undergoing testing at Isle of Capri Casino in Black Hawk, Colo. The casino has integrated the product into a Hummer promotional giveaway. When a player sits down at a slot machine, information about how to enter the giveaway immediately appears on the touch screen.

Players can order drinks or request slot service by touching the iView screen. The result is better customer service, Morrow said. The possible downside is that since touch screens are friendlier and easier to use than buttons, demand for service may outstrip the supply of attendants on duty at that particular time. "If you only have 20 people working, it could take 15 minutes before somebody comes to help you," he said.

Morrow said casinos can use this colorful little screen and key pad to make sure that slot players are getting the paybacks, credits and comps that they've earned. Currently, players are often clueless about such reward systems until an employee happens to stop by to help

them out.

With the iView, players can find out for themselves. Players can request point balances and transfer promotional money down to the game.

"If the casino offered that option, you could comp yourself. That would be a big time saver. You wouldn't have to wait for the host," Morrow said.

The screens act as an ersatz billboard for casinos to advertise promotional offers in a close, intimate way. "It's a better way for the casino to interact with each player," he said.

Morrow sees a day not too far off when these screens will be used to display Web pages created by the casino itself. They could also be used for secondary games, trivia quizzes or other contests. The choices are limited only by the imagination of the casino's management and marketing department, Morrow said.

"The display key pad area is really the casino's. It's the one thing that's common across their floor. Having a nice graphic gives the operator the opportunity to distinguish his property from that of the competition, Morrow said.

Moran said the role of touch screens in gaming is becoming more important as casinos compete for player loyalty.

Employees are using touch technology more and more. The large, easy-to-understand icons are especially friendly to older workers who aren't computer

savvy. Touch screens are easier to use than mouses and take up less room than a mouse and keyboard, Sigona noted.

"From the back office side, what touch is doing is saving the casino money because it's speeding transactions and reducing training time," Sigona said.

Keep an eye out for more touch screen table games in U.S. casinos. Companies such as TCS John Huxley and StarGames are solving the problem of crowded roulette tables with touch screen games that feed off a live roulette table. StarGames has its popular Rapid Roulette in Harrah's Las Vegas.

TCS John Huxley's system, called Novo TouchBet Live Roulette, allows up to 250 additional players to place wagers on the live table. Players sit at individual electronic terminals that each replicate the roulette layout. The touch screen allows the player to place bets, just like putting bets on a table.

TouchBet Roulette is popular in Great Britain, where it's "the closest thing to a slot machine," said Raul Bouchot, an executive vice president with TCS John Huxley. The game is enjoying new success in Canadian casinos, with installations in Quebec and Vancouver, B.C. The game is awaiting approval in Ontario, Bouchot said.

Bouchot said the touch screen version of roulette is a good way to attract players who want to learn the game but

are too timid to join the crowd at the live table.

"You can make all kinds of mistakes, bet as much as you like, lose as much as you like, and you're the only one who knows about it," Bouchot said.

Once these newbie players become familiar with the game, they'll graduate to the live table, Bouchot said.

Moran agrees that table games are a new frontier in the touch screen market. While roulette without a croupier may seem heretic to some, Moran predicts that players will enjoy the touch screen versions of table games as much if not more than the real thing.

"When you stand at a roulette table, you sit and wait for that ball to stop, and boy, it seems like a long time," she said. "I think with the automated version of roulette, it would happen faster, with more music, glitz and snazziness."

Moran said 3M has touch screen table games in prototype and believes that their entry into the market is "imminent."

The touch screen industry says that the grumble bunnies have it backward. As paradoxical as it may sound, touch screens are not adding to the cold sterility of the post-modern world. It's just the opposite, they claim.

Touch is tactile, which makes it an emotional experience, Morrow said.

"Touch," added Sigona, "is fun."

IGWB