The Importance of Retail & Digital Integration in the iGaming Sector
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Digital advances of the 21ˢᵗ Century have significantly improved how consumers integrate digital elements into their everyday lives. From shopping to banking and the use of social media to stay connected, a lot is now achievable from a smartphone in the palm of your hand. Digital technologies have secured themselves as a critical part of any product strategy. Now, more than ever, it is important to offer customers the opportunity to interact with your brand or purchase your product digitally via a phone or tablet.

With a focus in the gaming, betting, and lottery sector, there is a big effort from operators to integrate digital elements into their existing retail stronghold. The COVID-19 outbreak dealt a heavy blow to retail lottery and betting sales, as many retailers were forced to temporarily close. This demonstrated that having an online presence has never been more important. That being said, the "death of the high-street," meaning the collapse of retail shops and operations, is not as imminent as was once thought. For lotteries in particular, retailers are a still at the core of their ecosystem and the footfall of players looking to buy lottery tickets in a retail environment cannot be underestimated. Thus, it is important to diversify a product offering to incorporate both retail and digital elements.

Evolving online does not have to be a choice between retail or digital. Having both a retail and digital presence covers all bases and appeals to all demographics. Integrating digital is vital to engaging a new generation of players who expect to do everything with a mobile phone, however, retail often appeals more to the traditional player. Operators should be looking to innovate and evolve their products to appeal to a range of demographics that can suit multiple environments and channels. By implementing a robust integration strategy that benefits all stakeholders and leverages the latest technology, operators can merge retail and digital into the 360-degree, omnichannel experience that players can use but also expect.

The purpose of introducing digital products into the retail environment is to make the customer experience more convenient and streamlined whilst elevating a player's engagement, whether that experience is purchasing a lottery ticket, placing a wager on a sporting event, or spending time in a casino. Here, innovation is key! For example, 'building' a lottery ticket on a phone and generating a barcode or QR code to scan at a checkout in a store allows the player to save time, offering a smoother and quicker ticket purchase experience. Moreover, players can easily access favourite numbers, or use additional tools such as a random number picker to build this ticket creating a more personalised user experience.

Another interesting piece of functionality is offering players a "Club Finder" function for those who still wish to have an in-person gaming experience in a bingo hall or casino. This enables the user to use a digital product to enter their location and find their nearest retail experience while also allowing the operator to send specific content or notifications around this action, for example, in-store promotions or offers.

Using digital elements should not always focus on what you can do inside a retail experience, but also on what a player can do outside retail. For example, a player has bought a lottery ticket at a store and wants to know if they have won the jackpot. A "Ticket Scanner" function can scan a lottery barcode or numbers with a camera on a mobile device, whether that is an app or webapp, so the player can get instant results and quickly move a player to second-chance games, if available. You can evolve this functionality further into 'Mobile Cashing,' allowing customers to digitally collect their winnings on their device, from a ticket purchased in retail. Moreover, if regulation allows for customers to purchase a lottery ticket or place a wager on a mobile device outside of retail, a digital offering is an essential tool to give power to a customer to decide when and where they play.

A customer's betting experience can often differ between regions, so one size does not fit all. For example, the UK retail experience in a betting shop is predominantly all about speed of purchase, best odds, and

variation of markets, with customers spending limited time inside a bookie. This is in contrast to the US, where bettors are used to "the Vegas Experience" of spending considerable time and money inside a retail environment of grandeur, where they can also purchase food and drinks or dabble in a casino or poker game. It is important to prioritise digital functions that will benefit a player in any scenario, for example the option to integrate wallets or player loyalty accounts to make purchasing in retail on a mobile device as quick and efficient as possible.

For operators to grow their online presence while still reinforcing their existing brick-and-mortar business model, they need to create a digital fingerprint of the player from the retail point of sale to slowly integrate digital elements. Digital touchpoints can be used by operators to track a player digitally, with the player's permission, and start offering personalised information about relevant products and services. For instance, allowing players to pick their lucky numbers on their phone and scan a QR code in a retail environment creates an overall enhanced customer experience and provides valuable analytics that help to build up a marketing profile. This way, retailers remain an important part of the eco-system in the shift to digital and can help convert anonymous retail players into a "known player." "Known play" opens up a whole new world for retail-only operators who have historically had limited access to information about their player base.

Whichever way operators incorporate digital or retail elements into their product offering, the two experiences need to be seen as one for the integration to work effectively. Brand consistency is key, particularly if operators wish for their retail users to adopt unfamiliar digital technologies. Operators should avoid a disconnect between online and offline brand messaging as this makes it difficult for customers to understand how a digital product can enhance their retail experience. It is important to ensure that the customer is aware of the connection between the digital device application and the retail environment they are in.

If operators truly invest in a digital strategy and not just make it an afterthought, they could see great rewards that go beyond higher sales and increased customer satisfaction, including improved access to enhanced data that helps operators better serve their customers. As competition grows to attain and retain players in the iGaming space, integrating digital and retail with one another will serve operators immensely in achieving an enhanced and entertaining experience for their players.

Will joined mkodo as an entry-level Account Executive in 2013, shortly after graduating from the University of Western England, before joining mkodo's leadership team in early 2020. Over the past nine years, Will has helped mkodo's clients create world-class apps in the lottery and iGaming sector, whilst playing a key role in the growth of the company.

Will is passionate about the betting, gaming, and lottery industry, particularly with regards to innovation, front-end products, and excellent user-experience.

Will spends his spare time watching, talking, and playing all sports and is never happier than when he's at the cricket.