

BRAND MARKETING BRINGS LOYAL RETURNS FOR EVERYONE



London-based Initial Poker, set-up in early 2007 by brand loyalty experts Lee and Jon Reuben, has just seen its most successful quarter yet, with over 10,000 customers redeeming various products from loyalty points earned. But some operators are yet to grasp the potentially huge brand marketing benefits of a loyalty platform.

BRAND MARKETING in the online gambling industry is somewhat unique in its approach and execution, with different strategies applying to several stages of customer acquisition, and retention. Firstly, you've got the big guns – advertising – laying down the initial foray to drive awareness and interest in the brand and what it offers. You've also got an army of allies – affiliate marketers – who can help bring new customers to your door through bonus schemes and a somewhat scatter gun approach. But amongst the other brand marketing strategies, perhaps one of the most important is to ensure customer retention.

After all the hard work put in to get the customers through the door in the first place, the last thing a brand needs is for those customers to start going somewhere else to spend their money. The churn experienced by the online gaming industry is more significant than in most other industries, and can be detrimental to the success of each and every brand.

With customer acquisition currently costing as much as £100 per sign up, churn can be an expensive casualty for any operator, so a strategy to keep those customers from leaving could be the Holy Grail for any brand marketer. Initial Poker believes that not only are its loyalty platforms just that, delivering customer satisfaction and retention, but they're also more cost effective than most other brand marketing activities.

One operator that has outgunned others with a strong brand promise and customer experience, is Sportingbet's ParadisePoker. They are currently the largest of eighteen operators reaping the benefits of Initial's integrated loyalty platforms, with a global programme rewarding players through incentive schemes in nearly twenty different languages. It's a strategy that Ben Freeman, Assistant Head of Poker at Sportingbet, believes helps to keep ParadisePoker at the top of players' online gambling destinations:

"Although ParadisePoker has had frequent player points since its inception, these were previously only for use in our online tournaments. We realised that our customers wanted more choice and in many cases, they like to buy into the ParadisePoker brand itself. In the European

markets, we see a real interest in players wanting to wear our branded merchandise."

Freeman sees the value in feeding this brand merry-go-round with players proud to wear the ParadisePoker logo, in turn, becoming brand ambassadors themselves. In choosing Initial Poker to develop their loyalty store to the next level, Freeman bought into the company's creativity to deliver a unique brand experience for players:

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"Jon and Lee have years of experience, and knew exactly what would work for our customers. They've made our branded merchandise in the past, so this was a natural progression. The loyalty store not only offers ParadisePoker branded items, but also larger value redemptions that support the aspirational side of our brand. Putting it together was one of the easiest marketing projects we've implemented."

With such sweeteners in its loyalty catalogue, from card shufflers and branded hoodies, to Cartier watches and exclusive holidays to sun-kissed private islands, ParadisePoker delivers on the expectations of all its players, from high-rollers to newbies – all reflecting ParadisePoker's promise of excellence and exclusivity.

AUTHOR PROFILE

Jools Moore is Director of Naked Ape PR, and has provided marketing and PR support to the remote gambling industry for seven years, working with clients including Antigua's Directorate of Gaming, Bodog Europe, and World Poker Exchange. Jools Moore can be contacted at: jools@naked-ape.co.uk

In terms of set up, it couldn't be easier. Initial Poker handles everything from back-end integration and branded product design to management of the platform, and all customer fulfilment. It offers a creative team that constantly develops unique branded products that appeal to the audience, and provides a tailored approach to fit with a brand's core values.

Lee Reuben, co-director of Initial Poker with his cousin Jon, believes that loyalty offers a unique way to develop an operator's brand. "We now have a way to give something back to the customer which is relevant to them. Whether it's an aspirational element, such as silver aces cufflinks or something that relates to their life outside of the online gambling world, customers react to promotional activities that touch their lives in a more individual way."

By personalising the relationship between brand and customer in this way, operators can stand out from the crowd and build greater trust. Having a specific USP for brand loyalty can deliver a unique following in terms of customer base, and often follows sponsorships or advertising initiatives where a partnership with another established brand can deliver a huge demographic of potential new customers.

In this way, many operators now sponsor football teams across Europe, offering greater relevance to their potential customers by trading loyalty points for tickets to games, and signed merchandise. It can even become a brand message in advertising campaigns in the same way that mobile networks, like O2, promote their services alongside the opportunity for customers to receive priority ticket offers to attend music and entertainment events.

As such, more operators are now waking up to the fact that loyalty schemes can deliver brand buy-in and customer retention, providing better cut-through than their competitors. Lee and Jon Reuben are busy making online gaming companies money by keeping their customers coming back for more, and everyone's happy, including the all-important players. A cost effective brand marketing strategy to stop the churn? I'll buy that for a loyalty dollar! ■