

What women want



Although it has long been on many observers' radars, great things are expected of online bingo this year, with some of the major land-based operators moving into the space and putting their resources behind it. With more women coming online and playing in their droves, it seems the sector is poised for a big leap forward.

But before *eGaming Review* starts praising online bingo's prospects for the near future, it is worth remembering it has not had the impact that could be legitimately expected of a game that has a huge following offline.

Holding factors

However, Dylan Schlosberg, chief executive of Herotech, the marketing agency for bingo operator thinkbingo.co.uk, says he feels this is because the industry has been reluctant to changes in the typical online gamer to date.

"I would say that is one of the reasons why it hasn't made the impact some expected. It is only coming into its own now and there are a few reasons for this: the traditional online casino industry has always been very male-oriented and they may have been a macho element that made it shy away from bingo."

In addition, online casinos over time have become accustomed to customers logging on and losing large sums of money in a short space of time, so for them to get involved in a gaming environment where the stakes entered are much lower and the image less glamorous, does indeed seem illogical. But as promotion increases and the target audience familiarises itself with online bingo, operators will hope to increase the accessibility, attractiveness and value of the product and start making serious money.

"While the business rationale right now may not seem obvious, of all the online gaming propositions out there we believe bingo will be the most exciting," Schlosberg argues.

"Why? Because the internet mirrors the real world and when you look at what is out there, people spend more offline on

Once again bingo is being tipped to take off in 2005, but Jake Pollard questions if it can match expectations and examines the factors that will decide whether it will be this year's success story

bingo than they do on poker and this will eventually translate online as the technology and products improve considerably."

Andrew Branscombe, sales vice-president for Canadian bingo software specialist Parlay, believes the involvement of the mainstream operators will bring bingo a lot of attention.

"As the big, online and offline players make their entry into the market we will see bingo mentioned a lot more. Even now, some of the busier UK sites are still niche players that have built up over time, rather than the main gaming or entertainment brands," he says.

Drawing parallels with online poker, Parlay and the operators are confident that once the marketing efforts and branding are in place, then coverage and exposure through the mainstream media will follow.

"The integration of offline media and branding with online games make for an ideal combination. This hasn't happened yet for bingo, but the profile is already much higher than it was 12 months ago and it will only keep growing," Branscombe adds.

Addressing player profiles

One of the themes that keeps coming back is the profile of the existing land-based players: women aged over 28 who may not be entirely comfortable with the web, which does not equate with the current sportsbook or casino player and the increase in the gaming market in general. These figures, however, can be viewed in a different light. The single biggest leisure pursuit for women aged over 28 in the UK is land-based bingo, and with the marketing and promotional push planned for the coming months, Schlosberg believes this will create the momentum to bring those punters online.

"The US market has proved that online bingo attracts enough players, so UK and European casinos will look at that client base, if anything just to address its sheer volume, and realise its potential."

Ben Warn, commercial director of UK operator bluesquare.com, agrees: "Not enough operators have bingo products out

there at the moment. Mecca [which owns Blue Square and is owned by Rank] and Gala, the two biggest offline operators, are about to get into it in a very serious way with new bingo products and that's why it will become a mass-market game. It will create a critical mass and will generate its own pace and interest in the process."

Before everyone gets carried away with the prospects for online bingo this year, it is worth bearing in mind that the players must first find an operator they are happy with and can trust fully.

As Trent Schwarz, product manager at Parlay, says: "Some sites have tried to target the UK market but were offering a 75-number game, while the UK plays a 90-number game. So from the very first moment the format wasn't right and that is one of the reasons why bingo hasn't been that big so far – the products were simply not relevant to the market."

"I think the sites that succeed will be the ones that understand the mentality of the players"
Dylan Schlosberg

But the bingo market is much bigger than the UK, and its massive global popularity is a major opportunity. The land-based penetration of bingo along with its overall format also has its advantages.

"That is why I think it will overtake the levels of poker," Branscombe says. "If you look at offline poker, it either takes place through neighbourhood games or underground clubs. The opportunities are clearly limited in that regard and that has an effect on take up levels, whereas there are hundreds of bingo halls playing the same format around the world and every language can be addressed – Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, French and so on."

Like all gaming propositions, there needs to be credibility with the mass market and this credibility can only be

earned through a combination of factors: getting the customers in, ensuring the online communities replicate the land-based halls by taking the physical community and making it a virtual one and enabling players to chat and interact as they would in a real bingo hall.

And with women on the whole likely to be the main bingo demographic represented online, customer service and how requests are dealt with will also play a crucial role.

"Operators will have to deal with clients who may have lost just US\$1 in the same way they would with someone who has lost US\$5,000, all that will make a difference," Schlosberg says.

Progress through technology

Online bingo would simply not be possible without the right technology. Online community and chat software have never been the easiest technical issues to deal with and it is no different for bingo.

Schlosberg agrees: "Whether you are looking at the speed of connection, the reliability and stability of the platforms, how the moderators and players access the system, while implementing it all with marketing schemes such as loyalty and reward points, it means the software really has to perform and developed well. I think the sites that succeed will be the ones that understand the mentality of the players and address their questions appropriately," he says.

For all the talk of mass popularity and marketing drives though, one fact remains: with bingo margins being so tight, the only way to generate major income is by having customers back on your site regularly. The only way that will happen is if the technology, customer service and overall infrastructure are in place and working well, which is easier said than done. And with poker still showing huge growth and skill gaming rapidly becoming a major focus for many operators, perhaps those resource demands may bingo may be forced to wait another 12 months for its year in the sun.