

Communication and community have always been the driving forces behind the internet's success and the success of the internet's best-known brands: MSN, AOL and Yahoo!. What began with email has evolved into chat rooms, dating communities and bloggers. Instant Messenger, a relative newcomer, already attracts almost 200 million people. Chat brings us together and makes us feel like we belong. Clearly, chatting online is extremely popular and replacing the phone and physical interaction for the broadband generation.

But what has chat got to do with gaming? The answer is everything. Chatting is something we all have in common, a social activity that drives community, friendships, gossip, entertainment and much more. Gaming draws many parallels, offering interaction, excitement and community. So when you put the two together, the outcome is awesome. There is no clearer example of this than in the bingo halls and on the poker tables of egaming.

Take online bingo. Yes, the game is about your numbers coming up. However, the reason players come back to play bingo online is to interact with their peers. Whether you are a security guard doing the night shift or a middle-aged lady who can't sleep, online bingo gives you a reason and safe environment in which to chat.

Community feeling

Chat is user-generated, reality-based content, much like the most-watched television shows. The more you play, the more you chat and the more popular you become. Your status quickly rises and you soon become well known to other players. That is the draw – the community brings you back to the game. On a typical day, we would expect to see more than 7,500 lines of chat an hour going through our bingo chat rooms, from players who return on average 20 times a month. This demonstrates why chat is such an excellent player-retention tool.

Players want to join communities operated by brands they know and trust. They also want to chat with like-minded people. That is why chat provides such a solid bridge from gambling to

The power of chat

Leigh Nissim explains why chat is the key to player retention and encourages operators to take it seriously

mass-market gaming – if you can chat to your friends about the game or ask for help when required, you feel more comfortable about depositing funds. The environment becomes less intimidating and socially acceptable. Generally players don't mind paying for trust, community and entertainment, spending a bit of money, chatting to friends, meeting new people with the chance of winning substantial prizes.

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Safety is key and creating trust is a crucial element in making people feel safe. That is where chat moderators (CMs) play such a central role in leading the community. CMs will welcome the players on board, help them through any knowledge barriers and build player confidence, provide a real-time replacement for frequently asked questions (FAQs) and are a source of immediate feedback on promotions or technical issues. They are the face of your game, the brand you want to convey – so you have to ensure they treat the players with the level of care that you would expect.

Manage carefully

However, there are dangers and it is extremely important to take your chat rooms seriously, manage them closely and

direct the community. It's no use employing someone from home. What happens if the phone rings? Or they fancy a cup of coffee? Where is the control? Managing chat isn't easy. It is no simple task to manage a room of 75 gamers without training – how should we deal with abusive characters? Under-age gambling?

Recruitment and training are key. Many online bingo operators will moan about the management of chat and how complex it is, 24/7, 365 days a year. So they cut corners, employing CMs who work remotely from home with little training. But they are missing the point – chat is the essence of online bingo. Any operator worth its salt should invest heavily in the community through the employment and training of quality CMs, the community leaders.

A CM will manage the community much like a captain leads their rugby team – by encouragement, rewarding players, stamping out dissent and leading the team to follow a game plan. In the online environment, trivia quizzes with cash bonuses for winners are popular. Talking about winners in the chat rooms keeps the focus positive. Quickly you will find the community starts to regulate itself, with the abusers ostracised and the winners congratulated. Online community chat is no different from the real world – treat your community with respect and you will gain respect.

Some readers may not necessarily agree with all this. But if you are not convinced, take a few quality minutes to call your loved-one for a chat – I guarantee you will both enjoy it.

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