



Maintaining a winning streak

STARTING UP ANY COMPANY AS A SINGLE MUM OF FOUR IS NO SMALL FEAT; STARTING UP STREAK GAMING – WHICH HAS SINCE BECOME SYNONYMOUS IN THE IGAMING WORLD FOR ITS ADMIRABLE WHITE HAT MARKETING STREAK THAT ALWAYS KEEPS PLAYER-PROTECTION CLOSE TO ITS HEART – IS A MEANER FEAT STILL. BUT ITS PRESIDENT AND FOUNDER **CHRISTINE MARRAH** HAS LIVED TO TELL THE TALE, AND FLOURISH ALL THE WHILE. SHE CAUGHT UP WITH **EMAN PULIS** AFTER HER PARTICIPATION AT THIS YEAR'S SIGMA CONFERENCE

Assuring me that her four children are a driving force, not a hindrance, Christine Marrah – Founder and President of Streak Gaming – cut a sensitive and impressive figure as she talked about both the personal and professional realities that are currently shaping the iGaming industry, and how it's those entities that ride roughshod over the trust of player and partners that will suffer the brunt of a bad reputation, in the end.

Marrah may be perfectly positioned to speak about the vulnerability of certain players within the iGaming sector – that refers to both actual players and those working within the industry – having pretty much stumbled into the industry more or less by accident. Over a decade ago, actually, and as the result of a little episode that also secured her a long-term business partner in the process....

“Way back in 2003, the industry was so new and I think there were only a few bingo and even less casino spots. My friend and I played many times at Interbingo until one day I just became bored. At this time, I had no web experience, so I started researching to find free bingo chips to play on.”

This search led Marrah to the “very old” Ezboard forums, and online rabbit hole that she describes as “a land in itself, back in the day”.

“The forums were a way to communicate with each other through forum chats (also bingo chat RMS). Eventually, I found myself once again bored to the point I started thinking to myself, ‘These ladies could be actually earning money for their family, and someone needs to organise something to make these forums more gambler safe, more of a business.’”

Coupled with this realisation was the possibility that such a move would help Marrah gain some influence within the gaming community, and she “wanted to make sure these players are being looked after”. It was also around this time – and on the forums themselves – that she met her future business partner Carolyn.

“She was working as a moderator/partner at one of the biggest and most popular forums back then. We ended up striking up a nice friendship which eventually turned into a business partnership.”

In 2004, the duo set up their own forum, dubbed ‘The Winning Streak’ before being changed into Streak Gaming, as the company itself is known now. Marrah describes the roles as being ‘split equally’, while noting that the duo perform markedly different tasks within the company. However, it was a common concern about player security and fairness within the field of iGaming that got the two talking about joining forces to set up their new venture, in the first place.

“Since unregulated gambling back in those days was pretty much the Wild West, Carolyn and I realised that it's high time players had an advocate for them when it comes to payments on wins and so on. So, we became the watchdog and fought for fair play and pay.” It was then a pro-active approach towards business relationships and a willingness to adapt to an ever-changing market that sealed the deal on the company's longevity.





business relationships – this allowed me to establish a healthy trust with operators. As a matter of fact, some of our direct competitors became, and still are, some of our best friends!” Marrah chalks this striking fact down to being yet another example of how the industry requires an ever-modern approach, and that “old school” models of what business relationships should look like just won’t cut it anymore.

“Fact is, we have the iGaming industry maturing with many large affiliate networks performing buy outs of the smaller affiliates. Streak Gaming is determined to survive the current shakeout. Attracting new players is another thing – we had many slot tournaments and prizes given on out on the forum.”

While Marrah confesses that the Wire Act post-2006 had its impact, and that they’ve “had to adapt and find a way to survive the shake-up.” Once again, a survival instinct – coupled with an added maternal drive – kicked into gear to provide some much-needed motivation.

“Many of our competitors were folding shop. But at this point we were both single mothers and we needed this income. We decided to take Streak Gaming global and fight hard to stay alive in this ever-changing industry. We taught ourselves to GEO target, hire in translators and such.”

Getting to the nitty gritty, Marrah informs us that Streak Gaming currently have 22 sites under their umbrella, with imminent plans to “downgrade a bit, while also updating the major sites” in the coming year. “Pre-Panda updates via Google, we found having our own network of sites on different IPs was much better to link to and from. We know we are white hat and we can always trust our own network. We have never paid for a link, we only rarely trade links with close friends. We anchor text within our own network of sites as well as using anchor text for SEO.”

As another sign of how Streak Gaming are making an effort to keep up with the times, Marrah reveals that social media is becoming more and more of a focus for the company’s SEO plan.

“We will still keep up with the old school SEO, of course, but I really think getting your brand out on Social Media is the new future of SEO.”

She adds that in a way, it is precisely this kind of effort put into staying ahead of the curve that has helped them remain afloat and thriving in a volatile commercial atmosphere. “We are American – we love a good challenge!” One of the main priorities for Streak Gaming is to ensure that not all of its eggs are in one basket, so as to maximise the potential for survival. Or as Marrah puts it, to avoid “getting caught with our pants down”.

“When the Panda and Penguin rolled out, we found several of our competitors knocked out of our way. Why? Because they focused on one vertical of iGaming and they put all their money on one horse so to speak,” Marrah adds, throwing yet another animal metaphor into the mix.

“Seriously, though, I would suggest anyone in this industry to take the time to research and jump in the newer – and notably, less saturated – markets. Stay ahead of the rest.” To this end, Marrah is proud of the global focus she insists on with Streak Gaming... with the exception of Asia. “We have not dared enter that market – it is way too dark for our taste.” And speaking of over-saturated markets, Marrah has

a thing or two to say about what the gaming terrain is set to look like from here on in. Revealing that “online casinos are still our most successful vertical today,” she adds that mobile brands and live casinos have also been recent additions. Sports Gaming remains a bit of a touch-and-go (or rather, wait-and-see) area for Streak Gaming, as both regulation and audience appeal leaves its impact there. “However, we do plan on revisiting marketing eSports around the third quarter of 2017,” Marrah says, adding that poker, on the other hand, “seems to be at a standstill at the moment”.

“I personally think it was oversaturated a few years back... maybe if there are new platforms to emerge, players will once again feel confident to play online.”

But she speculates that institutional problems also played a part in the decline of online poker.

“I think the shakeup of the big three has players shy to play online – many lost a lot of money during that time. Some are still waiting to be paid and – if we’re being honest – may never be paid.”

For reasons such as these, Marrah admits that keeping up with regulations “has become a full time job in itself”, while adding that the “live casino craze” may just become top priority for Streak Gaming in the near future.

Another interesting factor that will drive the future of Streak Gaming – if not gaming worldwide – is the national dynamics that come into play when considering the way different countries and regions approach the world of iGaming. Being from the US, Marrah has both the necessary insight and choice words to dissect and reveal the kind of realities that the American industry has been facing.

“The big difference between the US market and others is that players just jump in and play, heedless of the rules and regulations. It was partly for this reason that prior to 2006, the scene was very much a Wild West kind of thing: plenty of casinos targeting US players, not all of them trustworthy!”

Now that regulation has entered the mix, Marrah claims that players are having a hard time with depositing, with the end result being that the US market is “pretty much choked off”.

“There are very few states where players are able to play online. Progress is happening, but it’s very slow. Then in the EU there is also regulation happening across that market and keeping up with regulation is a task all in itself.”

Marrah confesses that she finds players in the Nordic, Eastern Europe and the UK to be “very intelligent” when compared to their American counterparts. “They read terms and conditions and are far more responsible gamers, in my opinion. I respect that many players will set a limit of what they can deposit a month and be done after they reached their own self-imposed limit, and I also appreciate that many gamblers are allowed to self-exclude themselves from the casinos.”

However, from an industry perspective Marrah has sensed a bit of a “crunch” in the Nordic market, with many affiliates rushing in to compete against each other. “Since Streak Gaming operates on an exclusively white hat policy across the board, this sometimes makes retaining competitiveness a bit of a challenge, as not everyone uses white hat marketing.” Payment issues are another hurdle in these same



Marrah is very glad to hear that, for instance, SiGMA17 will be vetting operators – arguably a first in iGaming history – to root out any shady players from infiltrating into the scene – a move that Streak Gaming, along with entities like Affiliate Guard Dog – have been campaigning for quite some time.

markets, as a lot of players were left unable to make deposits after Neteller and Skrill pulled out of over 100 countries.

However, it is Germany that's proving to be the toughest nut to crack, since it's very difficult for operators to obtain a license for legal operation in the country, though bafflingly enough, players cannot be prosecuted for playing online ("It's all very grey, to be honest"). And since Australia has become completely out of the question for Streak Gaming, Marrah says their efforts will be focused on South America and Canada during 2017.

Turning the geographical lens on Malta in general and SiGMA conference in particular, Marrah has nothing but words of praise for the conference and the island itself, and even confesses to seeing herself spending at least a few months in Malta each year.

"After visiting Malta I can actually understand why it is known to be iGaming central. I am in love with the country! There is no doubt in my mind Malta can be a place for affiliate marketers to live and work remote. I am planning to attend SiGMA17 and I am highly recommending to all my friends to do the same. We can go sightseeing, and visit Gozo!"

However, the aftermath of the conference also flagged certain key issues for the iGaming industry. Marrah is very glad to hear that, for instance, SiGMA17 will be vetting operators – arguably a first in iGaming history – to root out any shady players from infiltrating into the scene – a move that Streak Gaming, along with entities like Affiliate Guard Dog – have been campaigning for quite some time.

"The reality is that conferences are costly, and so they need sponsorship. I understand there are certain levels of sponsorship and you can really only have so many levels – i.e., Gold, Silver and Bronze – and this cannot be cheap, so you won't find all that many companies who can afford this kind of sponsorship.

"Unfortunately, in our business many of those who can afford are not good trustworthy companies, they have made millions of dollars off the back of affiliates. For years, some of us bigger affiliates have been advocating for vetting of the main conference sponsors, but as we all know: money talks and bullshit walks."

To this end, Marrah firmly believes that SiGMA is well-positioned to team up with bodies like Affiliate Guard Dog and other influential advocates in the business to create an environment that is actually completely affiliate friendly.

"If this were to happen, you will see attendance shoot through the roof! The thing is, I would rather see 5 or 6 levels of sponsorship by smaller trusting affiliate programs. I seriously know of several affiliates who refuse to attend conferences due to the sponsors, some will not eat sponsored paid lunches. Some will not take the free drinks, and in this industry, we know it takes a lot for an affiliate to turn a free drink down. I hate to see anyone hurt or taken advantage of, this happens a lot when affiliate programs operate with black hat marketing or predatory terms. Affiliates lose hard earned money and that is not fair." ■