

Virgin Bet: preparing for a winter World Cup

Held from late November through to mid-December, this year's World Cup will break with tradition to avoid the blistering summer heat of Qatar. Ahead of his panel appearance on the subject at Betting on Sports Europe, Virgin Bet's Sportsbook Director, James McKay, explains how sportsbooks are preparing operationally for a shorter tournament with more early games in a potentially fatigued betting market.



James McKay
Sportsbook Director, Virgin Bet

It's an interesting proposition and four games back-to-back in a big tournament will be new for us all. I am personally excited about the longer days, but also understand that I probably won't have an interest or watch every game.

This will also affect turnover and I am sure that the shorter format will not be as lucrative as the longer format for us as operators. Simply put, four days with three games per day would generate more turnover than three days with four games, that's for sure.

With that being said, I think the competition taking place during the European domestic season could play into our hands both in the early stages and post-event.

Early Stages - Instead of the footballing world coming to the end of the season with a run of cup finals, we will still be in the cut-and-thrust of all major leagues playing both on weekends and midweek. The continuation into a World Cup should mean that more of our customers are active in the days before the event and we

should be able to keep them when the tournament kicks off.

Post-event - As well as considering the benefits of the early stages, one must consider the fact that we immediately return to the action domestically as a major plus. As much as the decision was controversial to move it to the winter, had they affected the UK festive football schedule there'd have been even more fire.

Similarly, I am sure all operators are looking forward to being able to give all customers tier one events almost immediately after a big event. As we know with big summer tournaments, there is a lull in tier one events and retention over this period being everyone's focus. Then it's a big reactivation drive when the top leagues are back.

In the weeks after Qatar, it should be a case of just keeping customers on site, which should be easier when the top leagues head into a key period for all their respective seasons.

How can marketing and product departments collaborate better in the lead-up to a major event such as the World Cup to ensure innovative products aren't lost amidst the noise of a high-spend marketing season and a highly competitive schedule?

Collaboration is one of the most important factors in any successful business. Our teams working closely together has been one of the many keys to our success over the years. The results of this are that we make sure we have the best products to market and the marketing teams understand the key functionality that



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would be improve their marketing campaigns by selling the key USP's.

Acquisition marketing itself can not only rely on an offer, to cut through in such a competitive market we need to be able to offer so much more. Major events give our colleagues the opportunity to make sure these extra USPs have been worked on and we are ready to shout about them as soon as our campaigns launch.

Immersive technology, greater personalisation, unique content. How is the nature of sports betting changing?

The biggest shift we have seen in sports betting is increased accessibility of data around customer behaviours and which products resonate, engage and be something customers use regularly while using our site. Access to this data enables every decision we make to be driven by the what the numbers say.

Personalisation is a great topic to talk about and will certainly be at the forefront of our industry for years to come. The initial play was for operators to focus their attention on changing display, navigation and offers dependant on player history. Now with more data available, operators can make predictions on what customers are likely to bet on, based on similar customers within the business.

This enables them to then advertise different sports and products at key times during their journeys, which facilitates upsell and cross sell and really shows off the breadth and depth of our offerings.

Taking this a step further we can also bring these into product development and decide upon what content would perform the best for our customers. This is something that we are very aware of as a company and always use to drive the key decisions the business needs to make.

What verticals are going to prove key to success for operators going forward?

In terms of our success, it is important to concentrate on making our sportsbook the focus and continue to concentrate on making the changes that the customers require to keep us challenging at the very top, then to use it as a gateway to access all our other verticals on site and enjoy the full extent of the suite we offer.

Within sportsbook we have focussed on horse racing and you will have seen our sponsorship throughout the UK including the Ayr Gold Cup. Our product has been developed for both the hardcore racing fans and for those who simply enjoy a bet on the big races with us. The breadth of our offering is now pretty much 24/7 with fans being able to bet and watch racing from all over the world with us.

One of our Virgin Bet brand pillars is to create a

more rewarding betting experience for our customers. Therefore free to play games is something that we have concentrated on through the creation of Fives and our daily free game in casino too.

This strategy has enabled us to improve retention rates and in turn better player values through using the site more often. This has been very important when you look at how competitive the acquisition market has become.

Mobile also remains the most important channel within the industry with more customers using their devices to bet. New apps and features that improve UX and improve the enjoyment of the action increase the time customers spend on our site.

Why do a lot of the leading sportsbook landing pages look like they did 20 years ago? How are operators differentiating their products through gamification and a more engaging UX experience?

It's a very good question and one that regularly reverberates around the office. Should it provide the base for a customer to easily be able to get to the sport it wants, should it automatically show the prices of the biggest events of the day, or should it show the biggest events live now?

All are valid points of view and one where there is not a definitive correct answer. A lot of landing pages are obviously extremely successful and any change could bring massive uplift but also has the potential to jeopardise everything the operators have spent years building up.

I think one of the biggest innovations is how we display all the data that we receive and how to give the best UX to our customers to ensure they feel part of the action, even when they are not watching live. The improvement in scoreboards and then how we visualise a game has meant the customers spend much more time on site with us then they did before.

However, nothing beats being able to watch the game and we have invested strongly into our offering. We are giving our customers access to games unavailable on their terrestrial TV and often outside of normal football hours with games going on 24/7. This move has seen us as a destination to consume sports as well as provide a best in class betting product.

We also feel like we are on the forefront of gamification too and one of our biggest successes has been Virgin Bet Fives. A free to play game where you get given a player each day you log on and should your player score over the next set of fixtures, you will receive a cash payment. This is only the start and we are looking to add more gamification elements to make our offering even more engaging.

How should operators be exploring the behavioural patterns of bettors as they interact with product offerings to find new ways of engagement?

I think it is crucial to always keep an eye on behavioural patterns in any industry and

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gaming is no different. Understanding how to improve all the key KPI's is something that we strive for every day. Whether we are considering what to develop next or what we should be showing to our customers on site, improving these core metrics is at the heart of those decisions.

Once released and on site, we also conduct further analysis on what else has changed that we might not have anticipated. All behaviours are looked at, from pure transactional ones to frequency of visits and how long customers engage with us.

To quickly talk Fives, we are very proud that this has successfully changed the way customers use our product. We have seen the number of days visited has increased and with the number of customers playing at a record high. It is showing a decent amount of cut through.

Quick market talk to round off. What are sportsbooks doing to prepare for the UK's impending gambling reform?

It's something that we are very aware of, but it's also very difficult to really prepare for. As a business we are focussed on adhering to all current rules and are 100 per cent confident of being agile enough to deal with any new rulings that come out.

What has been the impact of the strict measures that have been imposed in Germany limiting in-play, banning live streaming, and introducing mandatory switching delays?

As we don't currently operate in Germany it is something that hasn't dramatically impacted us as a business. We do always look at new territories and new regulations that come in to play which influence the current landscape.

Personally, I feel like the measures are a step too far and I am sure we will see that in the figures going forward.