

Leprosy, Ebola Virus, Bubonic Plague and Problem Gaming

By Steve Karoul

What do they all have in common? Probably not too much but how else do you focus ones attention on such horrible diseases. One could possibly argue that Leprosy, Ebola Virus and Bubonic Plague are not common illnesses but nevertheless their effects can be both devastating and catastrophic. Problem gaming is also an illness that can also have catastrophic consequences not only for the victim but also for the innocent families of the victims. Nobody likes to talk about negative topics and therefore it is often easier to avoid talking about them or even worse, pretending that they do not exist.

So, who really cares about problem gaming? I do for one and fortunately most responsible casino executives and managers also care about it. In recent years the casino industry overall has begun to take a much more proactive rather than reactive approach to the way they handle problem gaming. Senior management does seem to understand all of the various issues. However, as an industry we still have a way to go to properly educate as many employees as possible in the gaming industry.

I used the term educate rather than train for how we deal with our employees. We train horses and we train dogs but we educate people. Therefore, an on-going progressive educational program about problem gaming is one of the keys to success. The gaming industry in general needs to be commended on their efforts in recent years to properly train their staff to recognize the early signs of problem gaming to allow management an opportunity for intervention before it is too late.

I also want to comment that I personally do not believe that the problem is as large as the casino adversaries would like to portray it to be. However, I also do strongly feel that it is still sufficiently large enough to warrant serious measures to help reduce it and to help its victims before catastrophe occurs. We as casino operators and managers do have the ability to help some of the victims of problem gaming if we want to make the effort. Unfortunately we cannot help them all. The two key issues are educational and economic.

The educational aspect is easy. There are lots of excellent educational materials available that can be incorporated into an employee educational program about problem gaming. It doesn't matter how large or how small the casino is. The issues revolving around problem gaming are universal. Unfortunately, not all casinos around the world today view problem gaming in the same light. In many smaller casinos the loss of a "good player" could negatively impact the financial results of that casino. Therefore, they may tend to look the other way and ignore a potential problem gaming issue.

To me, that operating philosophy is wrong both economically and morally. There is an old expression that says, "Don't kill the goose that lays the golden eggs". In other words, if you don't practice education and some form of supervised intervention to try to identify and help a problem gambler in the early stages of their illness that gambler will more than likely self-destruct. During the self-destruction phase many other horrible things are often occurring in sync with the illness such as theft to help support their gambling habit or addiction, anti-social behavior, divorce and possibly suicide. All of these can leave a very negative impression on the public about how callous and non-caring the "casino" was toward their sick customer.

Problem gaming is a very sensitive subject because it is nebulous and not easy to identify and not easy to fix. There is no one simple solution for problem gaming. I have listened to numerous casino executives tell me that they cannot and will not offend their good customers who come frequently by asking them too many personal questions.

I am sorry but I cannot accept that type of excuse. I agree that we are not mind-readers and that we do not have any magical crystal balls that we can look into to help us determine if our customer has a problem. That is not the issue. The real issue is "know your customer". Problem gaming does not happen instantaneously. It is an illness that develops slowly and progressively gets worse. Consequently, we will never be able to totally eliminate problem gaming but with care and dedicated programs, we can help many of the victims who are oftentimes many of your regular steady customers.

Using the "know your customer" approach is a big step in the right direction. In addition, by taking the time and making the effort to know your customers you are also building relationships with them. These personal relationships help to build customer loyalty and they also will enable you to privately approach anyone that that you suspect may have a gaming problem. You have a much greater chance for success with problem gamblers that know and trust you. Most of them know that you are sincerely trying to help them and will react positively to your approach.

How you actually approach a problem gambler is very important. There is a big difference between approaching someone and confronting someone. I worked for many years as the Vice President of Casino Marketing for the largest casino in the world. It is a huge casino with an equally large customer base. Therefore, it was impossible to personally know all of our customers. However, Ken Davie, our Vice President of Table Games developed a comprehensive educational training program for our casino division. Ken summarized the basics of the program as follows:

"We have a Responsible Gambling Committee here which meets every two months. I am the co-chair. The other co-chair is Marvin Steinberg, the Executive

Director of the Connecticut Committee on Problem Gambling (CCPG). It includes representatives from Slots, Security, EAP, the Gaming Commission and other departments. The Foxwoods program was one of the first in the country, formed back in 1992 when we first opened. We have several initiatives in place currently. There are Responsible Gambling pamphlets at each entrance to the casino, at public telephones and in the Hotel rooms. We place spots periodically on FNN, our in-house video channel for our employees. There is information at orientation regarding problem gambling for all new hires. There are also pamphlets at Credit. We have a self-exclusion option for patrons that is available through the Gaming Commission. The CCPG helpline number is printed on all ATM receipts. There are back-of-the-house posters for employees to see, and which are changed periodically. We fund the CCPG along with the Mohegan Sun Casino. We place signs and messages on Plasma screens throughout the property during Problem Gambling week in March. We periodically have training for shift managers and above in all departments (Marvin leads this effort). We also send representatives to the Problem Gambling seminars that occur throughout the year. I am a member of the Connecticut Committee for Gambling Awareness which includes Marvin from the CCPG, the Connecticut Division of Special Revenue, the Connecticut State Lottery and both Foxwoods Casino and Mohegan Sun Casino representatives.

While we would like to develop a comprehensive educational training program for all 3,500 employees to 'observe, identify and refer', it's just not practical. Several other major casinos have tried and can't do it either. Instead, they have Problem Gambling counselors who are especially trained to recognize the signs of problem gambling in individuals. Their program is more comprehensive and difficult to administer than ours but may not be as effective as ours.

Bottom line, this is almost an impossible affliction to identify, particularly at the line level which is why we spend so much time, money and effort training and educating our more experienced casino management staff. Problem gamblers are generally slot customers and can hide away in the back of the house feeding the machines without anyone ever knowing about it. Slots and non-casino gambling (lottery, scratch-off etc.) accounts for the majority of problem gamblers in New England. The majority are in the lower wage bracket (making less than 25k per year). 49% of this group is female. How can a person be trained to spot a problem? They certainly can't decide based on the win/loss figure as they have no idea what the resources of the individual really are. Even behavior is ambiguous. A person making \$100,000 a year may get as annoyed on a game losing \$100 as a person losing their life savings. We have always shied away from approaching players and only allow properly trained management personnel to do so. Most of the time if the player says something negative (I'll kill myself or something else out of norm), then we will intervene and point them in the right direction, but it's always escalated to the shift manager level. As for Credit, few problem gamblers are Credit players. They are generally controlled by the

system, which ascertains their history and habits before extending further credit. This lesson was learned a long time ago.”

Ken and his staff do a great job at Foxwoods Resort Casino and should be commended for their efforts.

I found that in the majority of the cases that the customer was both relieved and appreciative of our concern for their well being. By surfacing the potential problem and bringing it out into the open Ken or I were usually able to get the problem player to both recognize and admit to their problem. In addition, we were often able to get them to ask for help and to voluntarily ask to have themselves excluded from the casino. I made sure that they fully understood that they would not be allowed back into the casino from that point forward for a pre-set time period.

However, this process did not always go smoothly and some customers went into denial and quite vocally objected to my “accusations”. What do you do at this point? Basically, you have two choices: 1) allow the customer to continue playing in the casino but also keep a close eye on him or her, or 2) proceed with an involuntary exclusion banning them from entering the casino. I have done both over the years. Regrettably, many of the customers that I allowed to continue to gamble actually went on to self destruct. It was sad to watch. Therefore, my tolerance diminished over the years and I tended to go more with my gut feelings and sometimes excluded players on an involuntary basis once our properly trained senior staff and I or Ken concluded that the customer really did have a gaming problem. We always offered the player recommendations for additional help. Whether they used it or not is difficult to judge.

Some customers actually came back at a later date to thank me and others basically told me to go to hell and took their business to another casino that was more liberal or tolerant or unaware of their problem. Unfortunately many of those customers eventually went on to self destruct hurting both themselves and their families oftentimes losing their marriage, their jobs or their business and their friends. With reference to their friends, I was oftentimes very pleasantly surprised when these same friends who were also our customers would come to see me about their friends gambling problem. In summary, they said, “Thanks for caring about us”. You can care too. Good luck.

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