

Review

Steve Sharp: “The industry is desperate for transformation; the last government didn’t have enough time to transform it. Come July 5th we have to ensure they make the time”

STEVE SHARP CHAIRMAN GAMBLING BUSINESS GROUP

Steve Sharp is now into his third year as Chairman of the Gambling Business Group and it’s been a busy time for the industry stalwart in the wake of Covid lockdowns and subsequent crises from shipping and supply shortages to energy and banking price hikes. The eternal optimist has pushed forward with a vigour, helping to drive the trade body’s progressive agenda at this key time of impending gambling reform. He talks to Coinslot about the GBG’s aspirations and how the industry is shaping up for the dawn of a new era.

It’s over 50 years ago that a teenage Steve Sharp left his management trainee’s job at Debenhams to take up an apprenticeship at Music Hire Group. Little Jimmy Osmond was number one in the charts ‘singing’ Tweedle Dee, and the UK was in economic freefall with an oil price crisis, national strikes and the infamous three day week. 1973 was a tough year - especially on the music front.

Not so, though, for young Mr Sharp who came into the amusements and gaming industry and has never looked back. After MHG, there were spells at Inspired, Stanleybet, Leisure Link, thirteen years at SG Gaming, and now he currently serves as chairman of the cross sector trade body the Gambling Business Group.

Not bad for a lad who was brought up in “a scruffy council estate just outside Manchester”. But it’s those less than humble beginnings that have shaped Sharp’s perspective, and dare we say, sharpened it too.

“When I started out and had just moved on to working in the betting sector, community spirit was part of our DNA. Back then we all saw everything through the local people - we were all in the same community. If one of the regular customers didn’t turn up for a while, the shop staff would try and find out why and help out if anything was wrong. They would shop for food if necessary and go round and help wherever it



was needed,” he reflected.

And yet times, Sharp argues, haven’t actually changed.

“Back then, the bookies and arcadians would go round and visit their customers, sit with them and make them a cup of tea if they weren’t well, and that care for the customer is still in the industry DNA now. I’m talking to operators on high streets and they are doing the same kind of thing now. And it’s frustrating that this genuine concern is being turned around by the current narrative into a commercial effort to transform people into gamblers,” he explained with a strong sense of purpose. “It’s so important that we reclaim the community spirited ground - we invented it, we’ve maintained it and yet people out there are refusing to acknowledge it.”

Sharp is in a spirited mood - it’s his commitment to community that has made a mark in his two plus years as chair of the Gambling Business Group. Unveiling the trade body’s goals and strategic plan at ICE earlier this year, the 2024 manifesto outlined a ‘determination to lead on raising corporate social responsibility across the land based sector and demonstrate how gambling operations can contribute to the well-being of communities and society’.

Sharp has clearly found his home in the trade association arena.

And the tenets run through the GBG’s four pillars of activity: there

are commitments for the GBG to hold the government and regulator to account; to ensure that legislation be developed on robust evidence based data; and lead the way through dialogue and stronger relationships with licensing authorities whilst continuing the push for innovation, technical standards and customer service.

It's a hefty challenge.

Although that won't concern Steve Sharp - the man is unacceptably energetic for someone who is journeying through his sixth decade in the industry. "It was important that we set out our strategic priorities and also add greater vision to what we do and what we stand for," he noted.

And that's clearly evident during the Sharp era.

"Over the last two or so years, we've restructured our organisation and set our focus on the land based sector which is crucial to the economy - and most importantly, local economies," he postured.

But that's not all though. The GBG management team, led by Chief Executive Peter Hannibal and General Manager Charlotte Meller, have been building up a network of specialists that weaves neatly into the new needs of businesses on the high street.

Sharp again: "I think the vision of Peter and Charlotte, and the various committees we've established, has enabled us to deliver business expertise in the areas where regulation is directing our industry. We have broadened our membership to draw in lawyers, licensing experts, compliance and recruitment specialists."

"It brings the best value for members," he explained. "The industry is governed by outdated legislation, and yet operates under the most rigorous regulation - this kind of expertise is crucial in making sure the laws and regulations undergo the best scrutiny with the same degree of rigour."

The Gambling Business Group has stayed true to that promise: it has fiercely challenged the Commission's decision to change the calculations for gambling prevalence; it has been a vocal critic of the dodgy data that has fuelled the suicide numbers debate; and it has been the strongest advocate for regulation based on evidence over emotion.

"It's interesting watching the current election campaigns and the teams of people at news agencies fact checking the stats and information the parties are putting forward," Sharp observed. "That's the kind of thing we need in our industry. I know Commission chief executive Andrew Rhodes has called for it - which we welcome and we are willing to support them on ensuring that continues to happen."

And the industry is going to have to put that to the test very soon when the Commission issues its first set of gambling stats under the new prevalence survey criteria.

"Those figures are going to be a radical departure from the last six years - they'll be virtually incomparable. The Commission recognises this and accepts that they need to be read with caution," Sharp said with a



STEVE SHARP WITH NOVOMATIC'S PAUL TERRONI AND CEO PETER HANNIBAL AT THE LAUNCH OF GBG'S 2024 STRATEGIC AIMS AT ICE IN FEBRUARY

tone of some concern. "The industry needs to ensure that the Commission makes good on its promise.

These stats need to be released with clear caveats and notes of caution - otherwise we will end up with unreliable data being manipulated as fact. And there has been far too much of that so far."

These are unusually strong views from Steve Sharp. He's a man who, privately, is politically vocal, but publicly on industry matters, politically pragmatic.

"We have to continue dialogue with every stakeholder," he said. "We can challenge, contest and continue to press our case. I'm all for talking to the anti-gambling groups: I believe we have a strong story to tell them. And we must continue to press our case with government and the regulatory bodies. Evidence and fact based data is crucial - but as is the case with the current prevalence survey, that data must be trustworthy and credible. And not even the Commission's own appointed independent assessor believes that to be the case with the prevalence survey."

Those will be interesting conversations.

It's difficult not to like Steve Sharp, nor dismiss his experience across the industry sectors. But one area where he will need to be on his A-game is the state of affairs on the UK's high streets.

The demise of high streets up and down the country have become the biggest challenge to national and local governments. It's one of a number of issues where there is cross-industry agreement - GBG, Bacta, the Bingo Association, BGC, UKHospitality are all fighting the cause, something which Sharp is pleased to see.

"I think we're all pushing in the

same direction here, and using all our skillsets to make progress. For GBG, we've been working very closely with the Institute of Licensing over recent years, getting the message across about the importance of gaming and gambling operations to local economies. In fact, we had nearly 20 licensing officers join us at our High Street Hub at ICE in February and they got a clear view of how seriously our industry takes SR issues," he explained.

But at local level, the battle is tough - and getting tougher? "The narrative surrounding gambling clearly doesn't help, not least because it's very much a false narrative. But our story is much wider - it's about the community and the economy. The industry is the driving force behind our high streets' revival. There are vacant shops lain empty for years and years, and one of the only sectors willing to invest in these areas is gaming and hospitality. Businesses such as Merkur and Admiral are investing millions and millions into their operations - and they are joined by smaller groups and independent operators who are looking to revive local towns. They bring footfall, attract other business and provide employment. With economic growth now the vital cog in the UK economy in the coming years, our businesses are the ones desperate to drive this on."

And yet, there remains opposition - in the main from the usual suspects, but opposition just the same.

Sharp gets it. "We just need to be more vocal. It's as simple as that. We need to let people know that we offer great entertainment at an affordable price and that our businesses operate under the most rigid regulations, run the most vigorous customer care programmes, are the leaders of

social responsibility measures. We are the ones protecting high street standards, stopping anti-social behaviour and transforming the vista from boarded up fronts to high quality frontages etc."

He added: "And most importantly, we have to make sure we don't let people lose sight that we're about entertainment: people seem to be forgetting that we're about a night out at bingo, a pint and a game of pool at the pub, high end gaming entertainment in an AGC, an evening at the casino."

It's a positive mantra, so what's in the offing over the coming years?

"To be fair, it's more of what we've started already. The GBG must continue its work to educate, challenge and innovate on the industry's behalf. We are the leading body on technical standards and compliance - and we must continue to drive this on and keep the space open for safe and exciting innovative products; we've got to continue setting the scene for industry protocols. And we must fight the fight for the land based sector, and bring in all the specialist skills that businesses under a dual regulatory system require and to that end we will continue to build our important relationships with the local licensing authorities."

Sharp answered enthusiastically. "And on a final note, we can't escape the disappointment of a Gambling Review in limbo? "Now that's an interesting challenge! We need to push for the changes outlined by the DCMS in their response to the Gambling Review consultations. The industry is desperate for transformation; the last government didn't have enough time to transform it. Come July 5th we have to ensure the new government makes the time."

Sharp as ever.

The revivalists

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