

Putting the customers first



Article provided by the Gambling Business Group

In a recent interview with the weekly amusements trade paper Coinslot, Crown Leisure's Andrea Rushworth was talking about the leisure group's latest acquisition in the seaside town of Bispham, the amusements arcade Harbour Lights.

It was the standard line of business questions until the Content Manager made a curious reply when asked what Crown will bring to the new operation. "What we do in all our venues - if an 88-year old customer has lost her gloves, we'll go out and get her a new pair in time for when she goes home."

It was an answer that completely disarmed the reporter. "Gloves? Is that a new Crown promotion?"

Rushworth smiled. "No, but I like to think of it as a company philosophy," she said. "When people talk about customer care and protection - it can't just stay in the realms of a textbook," she explained. "Our gaming operations are about providing leisure and entertainment to people. Many of those people come from the local community, and that community is our community. So it's incumbent on us and all our colleagues on the high streets and seaside promenades to apply this rule. When that local customer, who was born not long before the Second World War, had lost her gloves, she was upset. Our manager sent one of their staff out to get a replacement pair. That's the level of

customer care that we must offer and always will offer. So, yes, that's the kind of crucial things that Crown brings to the new operation."

And, in fairness, that's pretty handy given the new operation in Bispham is one of those arcades that relies upon strong relationships with its community. You only have to read the familial social postings from customers to fully understand this - to them, the arcade is a community hub.

So, when the family who ran the Harbour Lights arcade decided to retire earlier this year, there was no one better equipped to take on that mantle than Crown Leisure. There was no chance of another shuttered retail unit appearing on another north west town high street.

Crown have invested significantly in its gaming operations - and in places where the wider business sectors are not always keen to queue up to put their money. But, in the space of just a fortnight, Crown had moved on site, refurbished and refitted the entire arcade.

No surprise here though: after all, they do have almost 40 operations out there from adult gaming centres to family entertainment centres, on seaside fronts to holiday parks and in the centre of the all-important high street. Crown are one of the leading operators in the seaside sector - and not without reason.



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But make no mistake: it's not just the gloves. It's sitting with a customer's wife while her husband attended a hospital appointment; providing Christmas dinners to customers who were on their own; telephoning customers that haven't visited for a while to check if they're OK or need help with shopping.

“This is second nature in our operation,” Rushworth said. “Our customers' well-being is paramount and that is the cornerstone of all our training programmes. It's imperative that our business model is laser focused on our customers.”

And that focus is as sharp on the technological side as it is on human relations. “All our team now operate with their iPads using the Smart Hub system,” Rushworth declared.

Important note here for the uninitiated: for a large swathe of arcades around the country, Smart Hub is one of the leading player protection and data software systems in the marketplace.

Rushworth explained in a little more detail: “It's all about the Smart Hub now. Everything is on there - it is the ultimate in player protection. In our AGCs, our team are able to keep an eye out on who is coming in, monitor customers for signs of gambling harm, check for information on the Smart Hub particularly relating

to crime, age checks, customer interaction and self exclusion. And our Crown Leisure team members are all trained to use it daily. And this data is available for licensing authorities to look at when they visit.”

At last year's IoL National Training Conference, Andrea Rushworth gave a presentation which included discussing many of the standard questions that she dealt with from licensing officers during visits from council officials in her time.

“A lot of officers like to check the noticeboards and are interested in the breakdown of machines in relation to the 20 percent rule. That may well change in the Gambling Review so we're ready to get that new information across as soon as it's confirmed. But it's useful to note that both the Gambling Commission and the DCMS consider this to be one of the outdated yet key restrictions that needs to be lifted and radically changed in the new regulations.”

Licensing officers are also keen to look at signage and discuss opening hours, and operators are always keen to enter into this discussion.

“There is a lot said about gaming and gambling venues, and much of it misplaced. Arcade operators are a vital part of high street and seaside town regeneration. They bring footfall to the area, employ local people and

invest six figure sums in raising the quality of retail units on the high street," Rushworth argued.

And it's a point worth emphasising she feels. On hours, for example, there is much debate around opening times, and Rushworth sees the benefits. "The night-time economy is very important to town centres and seaside resorts. It's crucial for local employment and the leisure offering for a sustainable local economy. And contrary to the standard, text book objections of bad behaviour and social disorder, well this just isn't borne out by any evidence."

And Rushworth went on to cite the efforts that operators such as Crown employ to ensure public and staff safety. Little is made of the raft of requirements that gambling premises must meet in accordance with their licensing objectives of keeping gambling crime free and keeping their staff and customers safe.

But, to the IoL's huge credit, every licensing officer is well aware of this, although the investment that companies make in this area are, perhaps, less high profile.

Charlotte Meller, general manager of the trade body the Gambling Business Group, added some detail: "From our own members alone, we've been advised of spends ranging from tens to hundreds of thousands of pounds on the necessary security including having high definition CCTV inside and outside premises. In fact, police have been known to access external CCTV footage as part of evidence of crimes taking place on the high street which are unrelated to the gambling premises. And then we mustn't overlook the important fact that many premises are part of Betwatch or similar schemes."

One of the most innovative and vital safety measures supported by gambling premises is WalkSafe which is designed to help any vulnerable people out late who may need a safe space for a short while. Meller again: "Walksafe provides accreditation for businesses that are open during evenings and offer support as safe havens. Many gambling premises appear on Walksafe safety maps where anyone feeling vulnerable when out at night can go into one of those safe havens. They can ask for help and stay until a taxi comes etc. Many of our national operators have signed up to this - in fact, all 280 of Admiral AGCs signed up to the scheme last year."

That said, Crown's Andrea Rushworth was impressed with licensing officers' understanding of the work gaming operators are doing in the community development area. "At last year's IoL conference in

which I had the privilege to speak at, I was pleased to hear one long serving police officer - now a licensing officer - explain how he had never had any crime and disorder problems with gambling premises. And it was a view echoed by others in the room who said they don't get complaints about gambling premises. As good as it is to hear, we are not getting complacent and it's really important that we, through the Gambling Business Group, continue to work in partnership with local authorities and address issues when they arise."

And now, in this new parliamentary make-up with a new Labour government determined to drive economic growth to fund regeneration - the UK's high streets will provide an important focus. And the record since pre-Covid days right up to now shows a single telling trend. One key sector, probably above all others, investing in the struggling high street is the gaming and gambling sector.

As the trade publication Coinslot noted in a commentary a while back: "For some this could be a controversial statement, but whether one gambles or not, and whether one likes gambling or not, gambling is a legitimate business that sits comfortably alongside your high street staples like Wetherspoons, Starbucks or EE and O2 - and with every justifiable right. It is the most regulated industry in the UK and most vigorously overseen by the Gambling Commission and the licensing authorities. The arguments against these businesses at many licence applications just doesn't stand up to any test of challenge."

Andrea Rushworth is a little more embracing and prosaic on this point, albeit equally persuasive. "We consider ourselves a key community hub to our customers. And our customers feel the same. But, so do our neighbouring businesses that benefit from the footfall our operations bring to high streets," she said.

And that footfall is particularly welcome considering the sustained year on year decline in high street visitors in the UK - in October 2023 that had already fallen 4.6 percent on 2022 - and that's in a year when the Covid aftershocks should have well and truly concluded.

But Andrea Rushworth remains optimistic about the prospects. "What businesses like Crown and our industry colleagues try to do is add to the reasons why people should go to their high street," she said. "And once they're there, they can see the multitude of things to do on a visit. From shopping to a coffee to a bit of entertainment in the adult gaming centre - there's a revival waiting on the high street and I feel that businesses like ours are helping to shape that."