

# Safer Gambling on the high street



by Tony Boulton, Director of Public and Political Relations, Merkur UK

## **Merkur UK: 'We agree with organisations including the Gambling Commission that safer gambling is a journey that does not have a final destination'**

The Gambling Business Group (GBG) is the leading strategic body representing licensed gaming operators on the high street. GBG member Merkur UK is recognised for having set the 'gold standard' for safer gambling on the high street courtesy of its 360 Social Responsibility Program. Tony Boulton, the company's Director of Public and Political Relations explains why safer gambling is so important to the business and outlines some of the initiatives which are driving the 360 Program.

## **Can you start by providing some background to Merkur UK?**

We are part of the family-owned Gauselmann Group of companies which is a global enterprise employing 14,000 people worldwide. In the UK, where the workforce numbers circa 2,500 Merkur brands include Blueprint Operations which manufactures and distributes the latest digital gaming machines, Regal Gaming Technologies – which operates gaming machines, juke boxes and pool equipment in the pub sector and our two consumer-facing brands, Merkur Bingo and Merkur Slots – which is one of the most popular low stake low prize high street entertainment centre brands on the high street. Merkur Slots has a broad customer base attracting an equal balance of both men and women. Our venues fulfil an important community role: they are places where people meet with their friends, where the staff know their customers by their first name, where they feel comfortable and where they can enjoy safe and responsible gambling entertainment. We employ local people, support local supply chains and attract customers from the community.

## **What is the Merkur UK approach to safer gambling?**

Safer gambling is an 'all in' commitment – it's impossible to practice it on a part-time basis. When we launched the 360 Program, we went on the record to say that we wanted to be the very best exponents of safer gambling in our sector. You can only achieve this by being 100 percent committed which means extending awareness and protocols throughout the Group – even to the teams who do not have contact with machine players. We see safer gambling as being something that a business and its employees practice every minute of every day and which can be broken down into a programme of tangible actions supported by a culture that every member of the team at every level of the business commits to.

## **How do you ensure that safer gambling is embedded in the business?**

It's crucial that the safer gambling philosophy is embraced at the very top of a company which is why the Merkur UK General Manager Sascha Blodau created an independent advisory board. It's a policy making body which meets six times a year and comprises a mix of the senior leadership team at Merkur UK with individuals who have specialist knowledge of safer gambling and the customer journey including our Customer Experience Manager Lola Wood and Pieter Remmers founder of Global Gambling Guidance Group (G4). The 360 Advisory Board plays a key role in confirming and driving Merkur UK's commitment to safer gambling and social responsibility generally. At our last meeting we discussed the progress made by Regal Gaming Technologies in trialling the latest machine age verification technology which is an important tool for establishments such as pubs where machine playing is an ancillary activity unlike for example high street gambling



entertainment centres where it is the primary reason for visiting.

### **What initiatives have you launched?**

The Merkur UK 360 Program comprises a dynamic 52-week a year commitment underpinned by an evolving programme of initiatives and investment in people. Key activities have included the launch of the Merkur Portal - a tool for in-venue staff that provides an additional touchpoint for safer gambling insight and information. We are also running a continuous programme of Customer Experience focus groups in order to gain an insight to the techniques implemented by players to gamble safely and within their means. All of our 200+ Venue Managers have undertaken City and Guilds Assured safer gambling training run by the leading safer gambling charities YGAM and Betknowmore; we undertake regular consumer surveys to measure progress and we share information and knowledge with industry bodies and competitors. Essentially, we agree with organisations including the Gambling Commission and DCMS that safer gambling is a journey that does not have a final destination: there will always be a requirement to do more which in turn underlines the importance of our 360 Program. Quite simply safer gambling is a responsibility that we take extremely seriously.

### **What processes do you have in place to test how the organisation measures up in terms of its commitments?**

When we launched the 360 Program in August-2020 we did so with a robust commitment to set new standards in the delivery of safer gambling across the entire UK low-stake

gambling sector which is why we insist that all of the brands which are part of the Merkur UK family undertake an independent audit of Responsible Gambling (RG) practices and procedures which is undertaken by the Global Gambling Guidance Group (G4) which has worked on the development of policy in jurisdictions including the Netherlands, South Africa, Germany, Belgium, Italy, Spain, Malaysia, Singapore, Canada, Malta and Sweden. The aim of the Audits is to establish best practice and identify any stress points in terms of delivering a safer gambling experience and of course putting them right. Working with the experts at G4 is another example of what we are doing as a business to identify and protect those customers who may experience problems with their gambling. Having a holistic, company-wide understanding of what safer gambling entails improves awareness and helps establish a culture of responsibility which lies at the heart of what we are working to achieve on a daily basis namely to ensure that gambling entertainment remains an enjoyable activity for all of our customers.

#### **Further information:**

<https://merkurgroupuk.co.uk>

<https://gamblingbusinessgroup.co.uk>

