

# MAXIMIZING YOUR PROFIT POTENTIAL IN LIVE POKER

By Bill Zender



**B**elieve it or not, there is room to make more money from your live poker games. Over the last couple of years I have found different methods for extracting additional revenue out of poker. You can do it too. All you have to do is focus on the same metrics you would with standard casino table games. Remember, time is money, and your poker games are no exception. By increasing game pace, utilizing new technology, understanding how to handle some problem poker areas and using some common sense, the wise casino executive can achieve some startlingly profitable results in the area of card room operations. Following are a series of steps that I suggest you consider in order to maximize your profit potential in your existing live poker games.

## Step 1: Pay Attention to Game Pace

Poker generates revenue through the collection of a commission or fee taken from each poker pot. It then goes without saying—the more rounds dealt per hour per table, the more poker pots in which to take a collection. For example, let's establish that the dealer takes an average collection per round of \$3. If that dealer achieves a game pace of 30 rounds per hour on a table with eight to nine players, the house will earn approximately \$90 during that hour period ( $30 \times \$3 = \$90$ ). However, if another dealer can achieve 35 rounds per hour under the same conditions, that table will earn \$105 over the same time period ( $35 \times \$3 = \$105$ ). The \$15 difference doesn't sound quite impressive until you examine the "per table" difference over a one-year period ( $\$15 \times 24 \text{ hours} \times 365 \text{ days} = \$131,400$ ). Now multiply this number by the average number of tables open per hour. Even a smaller card room can earn an additional quarter to half a million dollars more per year without attracting a single new customer.

### Conduct Game Pace Audits (GPAs)

It's important that every poker room manager knows what the average game pace is for each category of games that the card

room offers. A general game pace audit needs to be initiated to determine the number of rounds dealt per hour per game category. This includes limit hold'em, no limit and/or spread limit hold'em, Omaha hi/lo, seven card stud and any other game type offered. Use several one-hour segments from different dealers to determine a rounds per hour average. You may consider sampling some of the better dealers. This way you will witness more consistent and quicker time that you can use as a reasonable rounds per hour benchmark for all dealers.

Once the average game pace is calculated per game type, conduct a GPA on each dealer (per game type). Locate the slower dealers, and in a rational and constructive manner, guide them toward increasing their pace. In order to help improve slower dealers, look for areas where they can improve such as shuffle time (transfer time when utilizing shuffle machines), controlling player hand decisions, hand settlement and time spent between rounds.

**Motivate the Dealers to Achieve Maximum Game Pace**

Some dealers need a little nudge in order to get them up to their optimal game pace standards. This can be accomplished by directing their attention toward increasing the amount of tips they receive. In almost all instances, poker dealers keep their own tips. Point out to the dealer that they will increase the amount of tips per hour by increasing the number of rounds dealt. A dealer who achieves a game pace of 35 rounds per hour in hold'em has a 17 percent greater chance of receiving tips than the dealer who only achieves 30 rounds. Using the rounds/tips analogy as motivation places the dealer's interest in direct correlation with the card room's desire to increase their profit potential. In addition, beware of the dealer who literally "drags out" the hand collection process in order to stall the game, waiting for the winning player to toss him a tip. This situation will become very costly for the house if left unchecked.

**Step 2: Utilize Card Shuffling Machines**

Last year, I served as a consultant for Artichoke Joe's Casino in the California bay area. One of the questions I was requested to answer was whether or not to recommend the installation and use of shuffling machines on their poker games. At the time, Artichoke spread an average of 10 tables per hour, mostly limit and no limit hold'em. In order to render a decision, I looked at issues surrounding game security and game pace. I knew the machines would increase game security by eliminating both the false shuffle and hand mucking; however, I wasn't sure about the machines' effectiveness in increasing rounds dealt per hour. When utilizing a riffle, box, riffle, strip and riffle shuffle formulas,

it doesn't take long to complete the task. Would it be possible for the machines to speed up this process?

Prior to the installation of several trial machines, I conducted a GPA of the limit structure hold'em game and found that the average number of rounds per hour was approximately 31 rounds. Once the machine had been on the tables for a month and the dealers had time to get used to the machines, the new GPA indicated that the average dealers were dealing approximately 35 rounds an hour—an increase of about 13 percent from the manual shuffle number.

**Hand Shuffle When the Machine Hasn't Finished Shuffling**

One of the factors that contributed to the 13 percent increase in rounds using the shuffling machine was the inclusion of a manual shuffle procedure. During the trial period, it was noted that on rounds where play didn't make it to the "flop," the shuffle machine was not given enough time to complete its shuffle process. It takes the machine approximately 30 to 40 seconds to finish the entire shuffling process. When it's complete, the machine signals this fact by illuminating a green light on its top. During a standard hour of play, it was noted that there were a number of occasions where the rounds were complete before the machine exhibited a green light, causing the dealer to wait before he or she could start dealing the next hand.

In order to combat this problem, the card room instituted the procedure that required the dealer to perform a manual shuffle if the shuffle machine was not finished when the dealer needed to start the next round of play. Traditionally, poker recognizes the beginning of the next round when the dealer begins the shuffle process. Subsequently, once the dealer started the manual shuffle, he or she had to complete that process regardless when the light turned green once the manual shuffle began.

**Keep the Shuffling Machines Clean**

One holdup in the shuffle process is when the shuffle machine jams and malfunctions. This is usually caused by dust and felt that collects inside the machines during the normal shuffling process. At first, it was the card room's standard procedure to remove the machine from the table and substitute a reserve machine. This procedure sufficed as long as there were machines available to exchange; however, it was soon discovered that the machines started jamming in too large a number to make the exchange process effective. In order to correct this problem, the card room dedicated an employee to maintaining and cleaning the machines. Upon receiving maintenance and cleaning instruction from the manufacturer, this employee was responsible for establishing a machine cleaning process that

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## GAMING OPERATIONS ■ table games

allowed for the inspection and cleaning of each machine every week. Once this procedure was initiated, shuffle machine jams dropped to nothing.

[Note: The poker shuffling machine that I described in the previous narrative is Shuffle Master's Deck Mate. Information about the Deck Mate can be found at [www.shufflemaster.com/02\\_eu\\_products/utility\\_products/shufflers/shufflers\\_sd/deck\\_mate.asp](http://www.shufflemaster.com/02_eu_products/utility_products/shufflers/shufflers_sd/deck_mate.asp).]

### Step 3: Regulate Player Lobbying Time

Even though hold'em and Omaha table will seat 10 or 11 players, live games maximize their table capacity at nine. By limiting the number to nine players, the card room will be able to spread more games and make more revenue while still providing a good game for the players at the table. Tables with eight to nine players are considered "strong" games, while tables with six to seven players are considered "weak." It's in the best interest of the card room to spread strong games because it provides the customer with more play action and bigger pots, and provides the card room with more revenue from larger pots in commission games while justifying the fixed dollar take in fee structured games. The card club will also continue to build on six and seven player "weak" games, only spreading additional games when the weak games increase to a minimum of eight players. It's in the best interest of everyone to encourage players at the table to remain at the table. Most card rooms not only allow eating at the table, but provide tableside food service.

Every card room will allow players at the table to take breaks "lobby" to smoke, make phone calls or stop at the restrooms. Lobbying players are restricted as to the time they can be away from the table. This period is usually limited to 20 minutes. Some players abuse this privilege. This abuse, if allowed to go unchecked, will cost the card room revenue due to decreased commission collection, games that are reduced to a point they break (close) and customer dissatisfaction because of poor quality games. This problem can be eliminated if the card room adheres to the following policies:

#### Institute the "Third Man Walking" Rule

Once two players from the same table are lobbying, a third lobby request falls under the "third man walking" rule. This rule allows a third person to leave the game, but restricts him or her to 5 minutes of lobbying time. If the person is not back in 5 minutes, their chips are picked up by the floor person and the seat made available for the next player on the table waiting list. The person who violated the third man walking rule can pick up his chips at the poker desk and will be able to place his name on the waiting list (but at the bottom). This penalty will also befall the player who violates the lobbying rule. If they are not back and on the table in 20 minutes (or whatever designated time the room deems appropriate), they are called back by the poker desk. If they don't respond to the page, their checks are picked up and the next person on the waiting list is assigned to that table.

#### Lobbying Players Pay All Blinds on the Third Pass

Some card rooms do not support a consistent poker game waiting list and will have a difficult time enforcing a lobbying restriction policy as previously mentioned. In this situation, a lobbying problem can be resolved by charging the lobbying players for all blinds missed after the button has passed their position two times. As the deal button approaches their vacant

table position for the third time, the dealer will be obligated to take money from the missing player's chip stack equal to the blind required under normal play for that table position. This will continue until the lobbying player returns to the table or until his table chips are exhausted. It's amazing how fast players return to their seats as soon as they realize they are contributing to an unplayable poker pot.

Here are some other suggestions to consider when thinking about improving your live poker profit potential:

**Schedule dealers for their best games.** All poker rooms allow the dealers to keep their own tips. In order to be fair with their employees and give them an equal chance to make tip money, the dealers are rotated evenly through every poker game. The rotation system is a plus for employee morale, but it has some limitations when matching a dealer's ability with certain game types. Take Omaha hi/lo for example. Omaha is a difficult game to deal. Each player receives four "pocket" or hole-cards instead of the standard two. This means that during the final hand showdown, the dealer is required to look for different hand combinations when determining hand ranking order. In addition, in the interest of making the game more exciting, the card clubs usually structure the game a high hand/low hand split pot. The dealer not only looks through the hand combination of each player for a high hand winner; he also has to look for a low hand winner. In some instances, the high hand winner can also be the low hand winners and might not utilize the same two pocket cards. In order to keep Omaha moving, management needs to assign only experienced dealers to that game. I once watched a dealer, unfamiliar to the game of Omaha, anguish through eight rounds during his 30-minute shift on the table.

**Be consistent with table rulings.** Table rulings by the floor person need to be consistent. In most situations, lack of communication and unclear and inconcise procedures for live poker game mistakes cause table ruling to differ greatly. This can be very upsetting to the players, lower employee morale, and delay the game unnecessarily. Management needs to get every floor person and supervisor on the same page. Even though the correction of dealer mistakes and rule violation should be settled on a case-by-case basis, standardizing the basic actions taken and communicating situation settlement methods to all shifts is a must. The fewer problems that arise from mistakes or violation, the quicker the games can continue, and the players get back in action.



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