

CRACKING THE POKER CODE

Stephen McLoughlin from PokerTracker explains how poker software can actually help attract the recreational market

in summary...

■ The online poker industry is too heavily focused on attracting new players to the game. A more useful marketing strategy would be to retain existing players. PokerTracker can play an important role in helping aspirational players improve their game and remain active

POKERTRACKER

factbites

■ PokerTracker was launched in 2002 and became the first commercially available tracker for online poker play. The developers of PokerTracker created the commonly used statistical terms such as 'Voluntarily Put Money in Pot' and 'Pre Flop Raise'. The company's founders also created 'PokerAce' the first commercially available Heads-Up Display.

How can the poker industry attract more recreational players? This is the 100 billion dollar question that has all the poker networks spending millions to research. It seems like everyone has an answer, yet none of the solutions proposed have proven to work long term. The most successful marketing campaign to-date is probably PokerStar's 'Bring out the PokerStar in you' campaign. This was a good foundation for attracting recreational players, but I feel this branding exercise got lost in its own message over time by over-promoting the young stars of poker. The campaign may have been more effective if it promoted the ability of the average person to bring out the inner poker star by de-emphasising the importance of pro players.

It appears the industry is focused too heavily on trying to bring new players into the game. I see this as a wasteful marketing strategy. New players tend to fall under the casual category, this is a customer that is very costly to retain. The path of least resistance is the conversion of existing recreational players into active players via retention, and marketing to the millions of people who were former casual or recreational players who the industry has lost. Leave the conversion of casual players to the players themselves, poker players tend to be the least used marketing tools available.



■ Aspirational poker players continue to look to tools like PokerTracker

Consumers take social cues from their peers, they are listening to their friends wax poetically about the \$1 rebuy tournament they just won online. The best way to take advantage of this missed opportunity is to provide social networking tools the players want to use, that are co-branded with the respective rooms.

That means empowering players to complain about their bad beats, or the big win of the day, and in turn they will market the poker rooms they play at without the need of any incentive. This is the missing key that everyone has been looking for yet it has been sitting under our noses all along. PokerTracker 4 was built with this in mind, our users can automate the creation of a hand from our built in replayer which is branded by the poker room, send it to YouTube, and share the results on Facebook, Twitter, email, or even post them to an online forum complete with embedded SEO heavy links back to the site the hand was played at. This is the first non-invasive solution to social networking for poker players, I expect others to follow suit as soon as PokerTracker 4 is released.

OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

Aspirational players need education to remain in the game and that is where poker tracking tools come into play. PokerTracker helps interested players learn from their mistakes, review hands and find errors in their decision process. Notice I said 'interested', not all players find this method of self-education helpful, but for those who do the tools are available. This education process does not happen overnight, it is a long process that users of PokerTracker tend to embrace.

The use of PokerTracker encourages social communication with other players, which in turn sells the poker 'lifestyle'. We're under no illusions, poker tracking software is not the final answer to attracting players, but it is one of the many optional parts of a bigger picture solution. I am a perfect example of this.

I was first introduced to PokerTracker in 2003 when I was a big losing player. Through time and effort I gradually went from being a steady loser on the brink of abandoning poker, to becoming a break-even player, and then a winner over a few years. PokerTracker was not the reason I became a winning player (self-education was the reason) but it was an important tool to help me educate myself through post-game review and understanding common player types.

To date, every major poker site or network that has chosen to not permit HUDs (Heads Up Displays) in its terms of service has altered its policy to allow HUDs once the demand from the player base was proven to be great enough. An example of this is the Cake Network, which decided to allow a single session HUD during the summer of 2011 for the first time. This experiment was so successful that the single session restrictions were lifted and the screen names of players were no longer obfuscated in the hand history to allow compatibility with PokerTracker; our company was the first authorised third party to create a full HUD and personal tracking solution for the Cake Network.

It may surprise some in the industry that we embrace anonymous tables such as those introduced by bwin.party and Microgaming, provided that they are given to users as a choice. Anything that empowers the player to have more choice is good in our eyes. PokerTracker recently released beta support for Microgaming's anonymous tables after receiving approval for our plans from the network management. Our new solution is within the terms of service at Microgaming because the identity of each player remains anonymous with PokerTracker's table session-only HUD and tracking. Our competitors already have support for bwin.party's anonymous tables and we intend to do the same once development resources become available.

TRACKING AHEAD

PokerTracker currently supports 22 different poker networks, and we work very closely with 18 of these networks to assure continued support by our built-in live hand parser. We could not exist if it were not for the cooperation we receive from these networks, it is a synergistic relationship that allows us to provide the services that our players want while empowering players to generate more rake for the poker rooms. Our developers continue to strive to make our software easier to use, and our upcoming PokerTracker 4 is a testament to our hard work creating an easier to approach user interface. We are also adding training videos and tools to help the recreational player approach PokerTracker without fear, the steep learning curve that was common in prior versions of PokerTracker has been almost eliminated. The entire setup process has been rebuilt with automated wizards to guide new users. We joke that it is harder to make a first withdrawal from an online poker room than it is to install PokerTracker 4.

“ Anything that empowers the player to have more choice is good in our eyes ”

POKERTRACKER 4 10 KEY NEW FEATURES

- 1 New interface designed to appeal to both recreational and active players without interfering with the in-game playing experience.
- 2 Interface features graphs that can filter reports by allowing users to zoom in to view data details and reports
- 3 Redesigned replayer with social networking functions featuring YouTube video export and built-in hand equity calculator
- 4 Vector HUD Engine allows scalable heads-up display with drag and drop HUD profile editing
- 5 New data tools including scatter and global player graphs and money flow chart previously only available through purchase of third-party add-ons
- 6 Big Blind per player stack size counts calculated before the beginning of each new hand and in/out of position properties for all post-flop stats.
- 7 LeakTracker statistical range analysis designed to help plug poker leaks
- 8 Personalise the look of the HUD, reports, replayer and ICM via PokerTracker Themes
- 9 Extensive video tutorials included to flatten the learning curve for new users
- 10 ICM Analysis and Quizzes featuring hand range and player modeling editors users

With that said, I anticipate that personal tracking will remain a choice rather than the standard. PokerTracker is fundamentally an automated note taking solution that provides probability of actions based on past hands that you play against your opponents; this is no different than the statistics you commonly find in professional sports or the stock market. Database software tools exist for sports betters and trading tools exist for investors, yet not everyone in these fields uses the tools available to them. Software databases do not guarantee success just like PokerTracker is not a magic bullet that turns its users into winning players. I predict that we will continue to find that the aspirational players who are most interested in poker will gravitate towards using tracking tools like PokerTracker, but this does not make that player a shark. This player type is most likely a break even player that with enough time invested, and a little skill learned along the way, will someday become a winning player – if he is one of the lucky ones that survives that long. 🎲

authornotes

■ Steven McLoughlin is a noted poker strategist and industry expert who is the public face of the popular online poker application PokerTracker. Prior to his role in management at PokerTracker, Steven was the marketing and advertising director for the TwoPlusTwo Forums