

T-MINUS 6 MINUTES TO LAUNCH



"MOST PEOPLE THINK IT IS IMPOSSIBLE to launch an independent, out-of-network poker site nowadays, but I knew we could be different," muses T6 Poker CEO, Torben Hübertz, as he reminisces about his ambitious plans to embark on an extraordinarily innovative marketing and business development plan for his online poker company.

Hailing from a multi-level marketing background that has resulted in successful and profitable online businesses, Hübertz saw an opportunity to apply his innovative marketing practices to the world of online poker.

In a whirlwind of activity during the pre-launch stage, Hübertz not only raised substantial awareness of the T6 Poker brand, but also pre-registered players in record numbers. T6 Poker



was becoming the marketer's dream, but there was just one catch: Its poker software couldn't handle the strain of even the early beta test groups.

This is a tale not of blood, sweat and tears, but of what happens when you mix the creative mind of an entrepreneurial talent with an ambitious launch date deadline, failed software and a good strong measure of gifted and determined software engineers – all whilst the Christmas festivities loomed ominously close.

THE T6 POKER CONCEPT

Black hackney carriages adorned in the enticing wraps of gaming sites are now a familiar sight in London. However, this usually

happens only after the brand has been established, players sought and liquidity accumulated. Hübertz took a different approach for T6 Poker by invading Scandinavia with the company's branding messages. A total of 200 taxis (the largest taxi campaign ever in the region) took to the streets. The campaign was underpinned by high-exposure activities such as an innovative high-stakes affiliate program, and ubiquitous advertising on websites, in magazines and on billboards.

The idea was to create a buzz about the product, to generate hype so consumers would be seduced. "The marketing campaign was brilliant; T6 Poker was everywhere. What's more, it was converting into thousands of players registering on the site well before launch date," says Hübertz. So much so that as the launch date of January 1 approached, Hübertz discovered the software he was using was crashing almost hourly once any reasonable load was applied to it. "We had tested the software thoroughly," Hübertz continues, "but we exceeded registration expectations and the system just couldn't cope."

A CHRISTMAS MIRACLE

Failing to hit the launch date was not an option for Hübertz. "We had put in a considerable investment to build momentum toward the launch on January 1. We had huge guaranteed tournament payouts planned. Everyone was counting on us – players, affiliates and partners. We could not fail them, but for a short while it looked as if we might. I couldn't contemplate that."

On December 14, 2007, Hübertz contacted Ken Arnold, Chairman of CyberArts, the gaming software platform that had powered household names like Mansion, World Poker Tour and PurePlay. Hübertz made a very simple request: "I need to launch my website on new software for January 1, 2008. Can you do it?" A quick calculation says that the time frame included Christmas and New Year – traditionally holidays for most people and a time to spend with families. Another quick calculation says software development of this kind normally takes three months. Hübertz's call came 17 days prior to launch date and contracts had not even been drawn up.

Furthermore, T6 Poker wasn't looking for a simple undistinguished platform. It wanted the full works: highly customized brand and game play, expressed in several different European languages, and capable of handling transactions in a variety of currencies. T6 Poker's request would stretch most software companies, and to be completed in just three weeks? Surely an impossible task? Arnold doesn't remember how long he thought about it, but his answer was a resounding yes. "I like T6 Poker's attitude. Hübertz is a great marketing innovator. Their brand deserved to be on a platform they could trust," says Arnold. "I knew I had the team to create such a platform: one that is reliable, robust and bespoke. The time frame was daunting, but our engineers are fast and accurate. From my perspective, this was doable with perhaps a week to spare."

On December 15, the project was signed off and handed over to CyberArts VP of Technology, Rudi Diezmann, with but 16 days until Launch Day. Diezmann briefed his global team of engineers and got right to the task of building a fully

customized poker system with features unique to T6 Poker. Integral to the build was the need to have software that was scalable, reliable, glitch free and invulnerable to system crashes. "Our team are enterprise software programmers, rather than ordinary gaming developers," commented Diezmann. "This means they are used to dealing with the server grid configuration necessary for this kind of project. In other words, their experience enables them to connect multiple servers communicating and distributing load effectively. Crucial to the success of this project was our reputation for stable software, which got us the work."

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Notwithstanding Diezmann's confidence, one issue threatened to put a halt to the whole project. It was discovered that T6 Poker's data centre was a poor facility for bandwidth optimisation. On inspection, Arnold recalls thinking, "Even after we complete our work in a record 17 days, it won't be a full solution because the data centre's bandwidth quality is not adequate to support thousands of players."

"It was just two weeks before Christmas. Most technology companies were shutting down for the holidays. I couldn't think how we would get the 60 servers we needed in time," said Diezmann. "I thought it would be impossible – we were working 15 hour days, and we had the commitment to T6 Poker to deliver on time, but these things normally take 4-8 weeks. Amazingly, Dell came through." Servers installed and configured, software completed and loaded, the system came to life and was certified ready for launch – on December 31 – six hours early.

CUSTOMISED FEATURES FOR T6 POKER

"I had great ideas for what I wanted T6 Poker to do. My vision had to be realised. CyberArts

understood this and created a poker site that clearly differentiates us from our competition."

Customisation is CyberArts' mantra. They believe every gaming operator should develop a site that hones in on the player's needs, displaying brand-specific information, images, marketing messages and games in a customised manner. "Foundation™ was perfect for this task," commented Arnold, "as its open architecture allows unprecedented ability to customise operations and the player experience."

A factor corroborated by Diezmann: "There are around 40 features requested by Torben that are unique to T6 Poker. No other gaming site has them."

Those customised features built by CyberArts especially for T6 Poker include special reports and different configurations for rakebacks; Step tournaments with a seven step progression; and the ability for professional players to transfer money between themselves without T6 Poker administration approval.

T6 POKER IN 2008

Happy – and relieved – after the successful launch, Hübertz says, "The site is doing tremendously well. We already have player liquidity to rival the major networks. Most importantly it looks fantastic and it doesn't crash. The panic we experienced in December was worth it, as I think, by working with CyberArts, we've come out of this with a much stronger market proposition, and the players are the big winners."

To this, Arnold's reaction is modest, "There were times when I thought, "This is the craziest thing I've ever done. There were a lot of risk factors, and it took great work from both teams to overcome every last one of them and hit the target date."

Diezmann agrees: "Every day there were several new obstacles to overcome. We needed to spend more time with the client, but given the tight 17 day schedule, talking time was wasted time, so we had to just do it. We learned a lot that can be applied to any client who comes to us for development projects – preferably with a launch timeframe of more than 17 days. We know we have the capabilities to achieve what they want."

With the luxury of more time post-launch, the CyberArts team are working on additional language localisation, to be followed by special in-game features, to bolster the second release of the product. On this, Hübertz concludes: "I wish before I started this process with CyberArts that I understood more of what I wanted from my software, and what was absolutely essential to the first release of the product. In hindsight, we wanted everything for January 1. We could have settled for less and still had a successful launch, but I'm glad that instead, I found the right software guys. Switching software companies mid-marketing campaign is no fun. It's expensive, stressful and jeopardises your business development plans. I'd advise anyone looking for a software platform to really think through what you need. For me, it's all about a stable platform whose flexibility and distinctive features echo your brand values." ■

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