

Sweden's Casino Cosmopol Stayed Open During the Pandemic: What Can We Learn?

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The COVID-19 pandemic has generated countless research questions for academics in every conceivable field. Chief among those are the biomedical questions, particularly those related to diagnosis, prevention and treatment (National Institutes of Health, 2020), as this public health crisis relentlessly spreads across the globe. Meanwhile, virtually every other research field finds itself exploring the intersections of those biomedical questions with more specific queries on a range of everyday impacts.

Of course, all pieces written during these times must begin with the disclaimer, “as of this writing,” but *as of this writing*, Sweden’s approach to COVID-19 has captured the imaginations of critical thinkers worldwide. Sweden has resisted the tendency of governments to shut down society, instead electing for a more sustainable approach where, for example, borders, schools, and many businesses remain open (Paterlini, 2020). While this is still far from a *fully* open society, the jury is still out on whether this “more open” strategy is effective (see, e.g., Dias, 2020).

Our question here is simple: what can the rest of the gaming world learn from what we might call “The Sweden Experiment”? This is a highly important consideration, as it could be that many casinos are entering into a world that Sweden has recently inhabited (as they reopen in the midst of a pandemic). As Anders Tegnell, Sweden’s Chief Epidemiologist, recently pointed out, “(But) if you look at the exit strategies that now many countries have opted for, they look very much like Sweden’s (strategy and restrictions),” (Ellyatt, 2020).

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Given this, can we look to Sweden to learn what to expect as casinos reopen? To find out, we engaged in a highly rewarding conversation with Sweden's leading casino authority, Casino Cosmopol's CEO, Per Jaldung. A longtime Chairman of the European Casino Association and faculty member at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) and University of Nevada, Reno's (UNR) Executive Development Program, Jaldung is both a local leader and a global thinker, and he generously gave of his time as we explored these questions over email and a lengthy Zoom meeting.

As other casinos closed around the world, Casino Cosmopol remained open through the end of March. During that time, they navigated a rapidly-evolving series of challenges at the customer level, the employee level, and the management level. As jurisdictions across the globe return to a sort of "soft normal," casino operators can learn from companies and leaders who have already operated in these environments.

On April 27th, 2020 at 09:05 PST, Jaldung joined our meeting five minutes late – with an apology that was once familiar: "I was stuck in traffic!" This is a phrase we had not heard for a while, and we laughed at the relevance of that simple yet truthful excuse. We jumped straight into discussing what business looked like at Casino Cosmopol when Sweden's more modest COVID-19 policies were enacted.

How did Casino Cosmopol operate during these highly relevant times? As expected, "we put extra hygiene procedures in place," Jaldung says. Then, as the government limited group sizes in public settings, capacity management and physical distancing became more critical. "We separated the tables at restaurants, only four players were allowed at each blackjack table, and on roulette we began with allowing five players but soon went down to four." One can't help but draw comparisons to the numerous casino health and safety plans that were drafted in anticipation of reopening and the current preventative practices now being exercised within reopened establishments. Unlike these "planned openers", however, Casino Cosmopol did not have the luxury of any downtime to construct a multi-page strategy document. The company had to adapt on the run, a familiar scenario to casino operators accustomed to a 24-hour (or near 24-hour) operating schedule.

Throughout this period, Casino Cosmopol primarily looked to official public sources to inform their strategy, but also kept in close contact with other Swedish businesses and casinos throughout Europe, revealing that now more than ever, "best practice sharing" (or more simply, "we tried this, it didn't work, so we tried *this* and it seems to be working better") is vital. Also, as an alumni of the Executive Development Program (EDP) (a gambling industry leadership program co-hosted by UNLV's International Gaming Institute and UNR's College of Business and Extended Studies), Jaldung participated in "EDP Reconvenes" video conferences. EDP Reconvenes was initiated in response to the pandemic and *virtually* brought together EDP's global community, as well as expert guest speakers, to reflect and share knowledge. The initiative allowed Jaldung's geographic scope to expand, as he learned from operators on the other side of the planet.

Revealingly, Jaldung soon learned that "maybe even more important [than the procedures themselves] was the transparency and communication of the practices." Every outlet available was leveraged to expand communications with customers, including "multimedia screens throughout the property, flyers, posters, the website, and even extra floor-persons to inform each guest upon entering about each day's new adjustments." It stands as a management cliché, perhaps, but ours is a time for reminding ourselves of the tried and true: maybe the three most important leadership skills really are communication, communication, and communication.

Also important was visibility, as it seems customers may be comfortable with — and even prefer — highly visible cleaning and sterilization policies at work. For Jaldung, the simple fact that customers could see staff constantly making a concerted effort (e.g., repetitive cleaning of slot machine touchpoints, elevator buttons, and door handles) seemed to have a huge impact on customer morale. More revealing was the development of a spirit of *mutual effort* between customers and the business: "staff and customers had to work

together,” which of course should always be the case in theory, but never more so in practice than it is now.

Another critical management skill that we often overlook as we grow complacent during normal times: the ability to be *agile*. While Sweden overall was much more open during this time, the situation progressed quickly, as it has in the rest of the world. More subtly, but perhaps even more important: consumer and employee psychology changed, as information from public health officials evolved.

Here, technology has been key, enabling Casino Cosmopol to be nimble in a highly unpredictable operating environment. However, it is not advanced technology like thermal scanners (to detect fevers) or UV lighting (to clean chips) that has been most valuable. In fact, Casino Cosmopol realized there was an unnecessarily large amount of chips on the casino floor and reduced the total number to make manual cleaning more manageable. Instead, the technology that made a real impact and allowed the company to leverage its employees’ social intelligence is the humble chat group. Casino Cosmopol Stockholm’s General Manager Therese Liljeqvist spearheaded “Corona Chat,” and with it has effectively improved communication and connectivity during these difficult times. Liljeqvist came up with the idea when rumors began to proliferate in unofficial forums: “there were stories about secret plans we had.” Created on a messaging platform facilitated by Microsoft Teams, Corona Chat provided every employee (from dealers to security, from cashiers to shift managers) vital information – and more importantly, a voice. “It’s been a game changer,” according to Jaldung. “It’s allowed a fluid flow of communication, without hierarchy and other barriers becoming a hurdle.” The Microsoft Teams application was available on all company cell phones, and all employees were able to download the app onto their personal phones to get involved. Early adoption of the app was slow, but the introduction of Corona Chat brought a surge of use: “we encouraged everyone to download the app, and once a few people started using it, it spread . . . we estimate well over half of our employees, at all levels, engage on the chat and the number continues to grow”.

Corona Chat also enabled real-time intelligence to be shared on what was happening in the trenches, the kinds of lessons that can only be learned via experience, with information flowing directly to decision-makers. What’s more, the chat facilitated interaction amongst all levels of employees and encouraged employee empowerment. Employee empowerment, something we all were taught in our HR classes, might be a straightforward concept, but how often do we really achieve it?

Jaldung recalls one Corona Chat interaction between a dealer and cashier, where a concern aired by the dealer with regards to the frequency of chip cleaning was swiftly resolved by the cashier, and “there was no need for a manager to be involved.” With the success of Corona Chat at the Stockholm location, the idea was soon rolled out at Casino Cosmopol’s three other locations, which grew its impact exponentially, enabling knowledge sharing across properties.

The lesson, according to Jaldung, is that “The virus drove us to change how we had done things in the past. This was trial and error now, [and] we had to talk and communicate to everyone quickly. The old protocols would not have been sufficient. The chat has become the primary source of information. We’ve never had this kind of ability to contact every staff member at the same time.” While everyone *talks* about the importance of “turning your property into a lab” (to invoke director of IGI’s Hospitality innovation labs, Robert Rippee’s, favorite phrase), Casino Cosmopol was able to do it, at the very time they needed to innovate most, thanks to enhanced communication and empowerment tools.

So what are the lessons we can learn from Jaldung, Liljeqvist, and their team at Casino Cosmopol? Many operators understandably feel that these are unparalleled times, and that as a result, the answers feel dauntingly complex. But perhaps the lesson here is a reassuring one: many of the solutions are simpler and already familiar. Specifically, here is what we can learn from a group that has been navigating an environment that many are about to join:

1. *Constant best practice sharing, even across previously “unbridgeable” gaps (e.g., with competitors and across geographic borders) is the best way to get smarter, faster.* If you’re the kind of leader who usually keeps things close to the vest, as your competitive impulses win out over information sharing — stop. Now is not the time. And who knows, these networks may well yield long-term benefits as relationships forged in the cauldron of crisis tend to be those that endure and produce.
2. *More important than your procedures themselves: communication, communication, communication.* This is not only important as a basic health strategy (after all, COVID-19 health matters will need to be addressed quickly on the floor as they emerge), but also as customers and employees alike now have an enormous thirst for information. Communication is not only verbal: showing your commitment to cleanliness and health by visible sterilization actions will speak loudly to all of those present on the casino floor.
3. *Try stuff, evaluate the best you can, and adjust.* Once more, this is the basic lesson of positive evolutions in all business settings. However, in these dynamic times, it is particularly important to remind ourselves that we will not have all of the answers at hand. Casino Cosmopol did not have the benefit of widely published operations guides to deal with the coronavirus, and yet they arrived at smart, flexible solutions.
4. *Employees want to contribute.* They want a seat at the table, and they know more about how customers are *genuinely* feeling than anyone else in the company. Management needs to leverage this, and let employees know that they are a critical component to the recovery strategy.
5. *Finally, technology is key, most notably as an enabler of human social intelligence.* Casino Cosmopol’s “Corona Chat” was the best “game changer” for the company, as it empowered employees across hierarchies to lead, to share, and to bond in their common interest of continuing to serve during difficult times.

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