

THE ODD COUPLE

By Stephanie Maddocks



I, Customer, take thee, Vendor, to be my lawfully wedded partner. To have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness or in health, to honor and to cherish 'til death do us part.

The partnership between customer and vendor is much like a marriage. It is a “better or worse” kind of partnership, but with little honoring and cherishing going on. What would happen if casinos and vendors treated their relationships like marriages—or at the very least, domestic partnerships—with the same level of commitment and support a happy husband and wife espouse?

Partnerships start at the same place any new relationship does: with dating. And in the new millennium, it appears that dating starts with an online search for your perfect fit. In the same way, a casino uses the Internet to match its interests and specific criteria against the vendor’s online profile. However, as many have discovered, online dating has its pitfalls. You are not necessarily getting what is described in the vendor’s “profile”: tall, dark, handsome, reliable, embraces change and learning new things, not afraid of commitment, hard working—you get the picture. Some other casinos take the plunge, meeting vendors at a speed dating site, also known as a gaming show, where they meet, greet and start to get to know each other in a highly competitive environment, surrounded by hundreds of other people who are also looking for the perfect hookup.

Once the casino thinks it has found the perfect match, it’s time to go on a first date, also known as the sales demonstration. At this point, the vendor suitor is in full charm mode, bringing flowers, opening the car door, buying dinner; it may even offer references of some of its other casino partners to vouch for its compatibility. The vendor shows the customer its good side, personifying all the desired criteria. After this point, the casino is in full lust mode, thinking, “How could I have been without this wonderful vendor for so long? My life has been so incomplete!” Infatuated and wearing rose-colored glasses, the casino checks off all the attributes it has been searching for, convinced it has met its perfect match.

At some point, casino management steps in, like any good parent would, and asks if their casino child is sure this vendor is the one because, in their years of experience, they’ve been through this vendor

last before. They suggest a reality check (premarital counseling) in the form of a Request for Proposal, so that the casino is certain all its needs are addressed and that this vendor is truly the perfect match. Still, the casino is smitten with its new vendor and convinces its casino management parents that this is the perfect forever partner. Together, they move on to the next step: the prenuptial agreement.

It's at this stage that typically the casino meets the vendor's family—its legal, compliance, and installation and service teams. The casino may find some of the family a little bit strange, but the casino rationalizes that it only has to spend the occasional day or holiday with these distant relatives, so it can't be all that bad. Little does it realize that this partnership is a marriage of two families, and that each family member is important to the success of the partnership. Nonetheless, the prenuptial contract is finalized, with both the casino and vendor dreaming of the successful marriage they are about to enter into.

Oh, joyous day! It is contract signing day, and now the casino and the vendor are officially wedded partners. Now the honeymoon begins, with each significant other trying to please the other and show its best side, focusing on priorities and communication and respect and actually listening to each other. However, challenges will arise and reality will soon set in, as the newly forged partners are about to discover one of their biggest challenges: the first installation and go live. This is when the agreement to endure "better or worse" becomes paramount.

At this point, either the vendor or the casino may be wishing for more specific vows. Perhaps they should read something more like this:

I, Vendor, take thee, Customer, to be my lawfully wedded partner. I take you, with all your faults and strengths, as I offer myself to you with all my faults and strengths. I pledge to share the good times and misfortune, the achievements and failures. I will help you when you need help, and turn to you when I need help. I enter into this marriage with you knowing that true commitment is not to avoid changes, but to navigate them successfully.

Partnership is defined by the American Heritage Dictionary as "A relationship between individuals or groups that is characterized by mutual cooperation and responsibility, as for the achievement of a specified goal." How do two companies build and sustain a successful partnership? After scouring many books on successful marriages and polling friends, here is a summary of the values for success:

- Common vision
- Effective communication
- Collaborative decision making
- Conflict management and resolution
- Realistic expectations

Many relationships fail because although both parties strive for a common goal, they do not share the same vision. A common vision entails not only that the casino and the vendor have a shared goal of implementing the technology, it is also that they agree on how to achieve that goal. It's about taking time to discuss not only what needs to be done, but also how it needs to be accomplished. This is all about building trust. To create a common vision, the casino's implementation and management teams need to meet with the vendor's implementation and management teams to discuss how they can make the partnership successful, creating a mission/vision-type statement that both parties support and buy into. This is the time to talk about expectations and communication channels and collaboration and resources and issue resolution. Without a common foundation, as soon as one of the other building blocks is stressed, the relationship begins to falter.

Effective communication is critical to a successful partnership. Both partners need to know that they can honestly assess their relationship at any point, discussing concerns as they arise and before they become show-stopping issues. Communication is typically more prevalent on the client side, as they rarely hesitate to pick up the phone and loudly

debate problems with the vendor in terms of quality, delivery schedules and team resources. However, the vendor seldom calls the customer to let them know when they have issues with the casino's team, fearing that it will weaken the relationship. In reality, communication issues are rarely a one-sided problem. Only through effective, honest, two-way communication between the casino and vendor will a successful outcome be achieved.

A large segment of effective communication is collaborative decision making. This is a fancy business school term for compromise. Casinos and vendors need to discuss and make decisions together. Lyle Berman and Lakes Entertainment have the best definition of the group decision method, titled "The Process": "Think Big. Be Frank. Fight Hard. But after the call, move as a team." Partnerships need constructive group discussion and debate to identify all options, but also the ability to overcome difficult interactions and to come together to take action and get the job done. The team building embodied in collaborative decision making produces results that exceed the contribution of any individual because they embrace the common vision and effective communication.

"It takes two to tango," my mother always said. At first, I thought it was about sex, but using my new favorite research tool, Google, I've since learned that it means that two people are responsible for the start and the outcome of a conflict. Therefore, conflict management and resolution is one of the critical steps for success. Disagreement is guaranteed at some point, even in the most cohesive partnership. One measure of success is how well conflict is managed to a productive outcome. It's not necessarily a win/win outcome every time; however, it is one that both sides can accept and put into action in support of the common vision. Resolving conflict is essentially about tolerance and acceptance of opinions that are different and the ability to find a supportable outcome.

Realistic expectations result when both partners embrace a common vision tempered by a dose of reality. The opportunity to identify reality-based expectations happens during the process of defining a common vision, when both sides can define the steps required to achieve a successful outcome. During this process, both the casino and the vendor have to recognize and acknowledge their strengths and weaknesses. In many instances, this is where a consultant can be helpful, to enhance the strengths and diminish the weaknesses of either partner. Quality consultants can help maintain neutrality and refocus both groups on reasonable outcomes.

These values of a common vision, effective communication, collaborative decision making, conflict management and resolution, and realistic expectations build the foundation for a successful partnership.

My final suggestion to create a successful marriage, provided by a sweet friend of mine, was to marry someone rich. But based on my experience and the shift to technology-focused casinos, perhaps it's not about marrying the rich one, but instead marrying the IT guy with the biggest data closet.



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