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Gambling TV backers hopeful

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Anyone who has watched any television over the past year has likely stumbled upon a program or series related to casino gambling.

The Travel Channel's "World Poker Tour," ESPN's "World Series of Poker," NBC's "Las Vegas" and the Discovery Channel's "American Casino" are among a few of the programs that transport viewers to a Las Vegas that is part fantasy, part reality. For people who can't get enough, several groups of investors are vying to be the first to market with an all-gambling television network.

Several factors -- the most important of which is the booming popularity of poker on television -- has brought the gambling channel concept closer than ever to reality, experts say.

Some say up to eight groups of investors are hunting for partners and distributors. Most of them are startup enterprises with contacts that gear toward the cable industry rather than companies affiliated with casinos or gaming companies.

One is Casino Gaming Network Television, which burst on the Las Vegas scene a year ago with an idea to show poker and other casino games in action along with programming dedicated to other segments of casino entertainment such as nightlife, shopping, concerts and spas. The network, led by an executive who helped launch the Fox Sports and Outdoor Life Network channels, aims to get distribution sometime next year.

CGTV Chief Executive Nick Rhodes, who attended the Global Gaming Expo in Las Vegas this month, said there's pent-up demand for a gambling network.

"It's a big market," he said at the conference. "They're passionate about it."

There's a much larger market of potential gamblers and casino-goers than for fishing, tennis or even golf -- all of which have their own special interest channels, Rhodes said.

The economics also make sense, he said. Programming could be created relatively inexpensively using camera-friendly Las Vegas as a backdrop.

"We're not buying rights from the NFL," Rhodes said.

Another group that is already well-established in the casino industry is Players Network, a public company that has been broadcasting gambling-related material into casino hotel rooms for more than a decade.

Company Chief Executive Mark Bradley claims his company is the "furthest along" in creating a gambling network than any other group and that he is close to announcing a cable distribution deal.

"This has been a very long haul for me," said Bradley, a former television producer who arrived in Las Vegas in 1989 with plans of launching a gambling channel.

Years ago, broadcasters were skittish about showing gambling on television and some are still bound by contracts that prohibit them from airing shows that discuss sports betting because the networks also broadcast sporting events, Bradley said. Today, digital cable is opening up new opportunities for niche content but broadcasting costs have skyrocketed, making a new cable launches more challenging, he said.

While new channels are expected to front some \$200 million or more for distribution, proposals that have top-notch contacts and content will be able to attract that kind of money, he said.

"You need the right strategy and the right partners," Bradley said. "There's a lot of guys who will write checks."

Gary Thompson, an executive with Harrah's Entertainment Inc. was among a group of investors who tried to start a gambling channel in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Thompson said the idea didn't fly in part because his business partners were not committed to the concept and because of the difficulty in persuading broadcasters to offer the service.

Thompson is still bullish on the concept and thinks the winning proposal will ultimately receive backing from a major media company.

"I believe this will ultimately happen," he said. "The advertising potential is phenomenal. (Gamblers) are people with discretionary income and free time. The World Series of Poker is the third highest-rated programming on ESPN, behind football and NASCAR."

Gambling has since proliferated and major companies such as Disney and Sony that wouldn't have touched casino deals in the past are involved in promotions with Harrah's, Thompson said.

Anthony Curtis, publisher of the Las Vegas Advisor consumer newsletter, is a regular on cable shows about Las Vegas and has so far refused repeated requests to help produce or approve content for various gambling channel concepts.

"No one at this time is properly funded or connected enough to pull this off," he said.

Barry Shulman, a poker player who publishes Card Player magazine, has already signed on to a group that is backing The Edge TV, yet another gambling network concept.

"They have the right people, the right money behind it," Shulman said. "They know what they're doing."

Shulman, who is also an adviser to the World Poker Tour, isn't being paid by Edge TV but has volunteered to lend his name and expertise as a poker expert.

The explosion of televised poker games has led to a lot of second-rate material and games that are more akin to reality-show entertainment than gambling dramas involving real poker pros, he said.

Edge TV aims to avoid the flash and fluff of Vegas culture and instead feature experts on various games besides just poker, including backgammon, chess, fantasy sports and crossword puzzles.

"These (viewers) are upscale, high-income people," said Reagan Silber, one of Edge TV's backers and a poker circuit player from Los Angeles. "They're online, they're early adopters and they are passionate about games." Silber, who often plays poker with celebrity friends, already owns a piece of Las Vegas: He and a group of investors bought the Bourbon Street casino on Flamingo Road in January and have plans to redevelop the property. Curtis' smart money is on GSN, a 10-year-old network that got its start airing classic game shows and is growing its gambling content.

The network, which changed its name from Game Show Network in March, is owned by Sony Pictures Entertainment and Liberty Media Corp. It broadcasts in 57 million homes nationwide and counts Las Vegas as one of its top markets.

Gambling content became a "top priority" for the network just as poker was starting to proliferate on the airwaves, GSN President and Chief Executive Rich Cronin said.

GSN aims to be the top network for games "just as ESPN is the network for sports" and is proving to be a rich "promotional tool" for Las Vegas, he said.

The network expects to debut several gambling shows over the next few months including a horse racing reality show, a blackjack tournament, a billiards tournament and a poker tournament.

"American Dream Derby" is a reality show set at Santa Anita Park in California in which contestants compete for cash and horses, and viewers will be able to bet on the final race from home. "Poker Royale" will air a recent World Poker Player Association championship at the Orleans casino with members sharing in the broadcast income. And "World Series of Blackjack II," the second installment of an invitation tournament, is taping at the Golden Nugget casino.

Viewers can play along with televised blackjack tournaments and classic game shows from

their home computers, racking up points that can be redeemed for cash and prizes.

GSN is well ahead of the competition in offering interactive content, the final frontier for aspiring gambling channels, Curtis said.

While laying money on casino games from home is technically illegal, there are loopholes in federal and state laws that allow subscribers to bet on horse races via phone or Internet. HorseRacing TV and TVG Network already are exploiting that opportunity nationwide and are working on interactive television features.

Cox Communications in Las Vegas hasn't been pitched on any gambling networks and can't offer any new channels unless it further upgrades its digital service, spokesman Steve Schorr said.

"We just don't have the bandwidth," he said.

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