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Turning Information into Insight,  
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Panel Discussion

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The world is watching ... Now what?**

This article is based on a panel discussion held at PGRI Smart-Tech Ft Lauderdale on March 12



# The ART of Data-Science: Turning Information into Insight, and Insight into Growth

Left to right:  
Stephen Durrell, Monika McMahon,  
Shannon DeHaven, Rob Wesley, Khalid Jones

**Moderator: Stephen Durrell,**  
Executive Director, Kansas Lottery

**Panelists:**

**Shannon DeHaven,** Senior Vice  
President of Digital Engagement,  
Pollard Banknote

**Khalid Jones,** Executive Director,  
Virginia Lottery and Lead of the Mega  
Millions Consortium

**Monika McMahon,** Senior Director of  
Digital, Allwyn North America

**Rob Wesley,** Vice President of North  
American Customer Development,  
Aristocrat Interactive

**Stephen Durrell:** If entertainment were purely data-driven, every movie would be a hit. Data is indispensable, but insufficient. The challenge lies in applying data science to the emotional, experiential, and culturally embedded patterns that shape human behavior. CRM, KYC, AI, and advanced analytics have become mission-critical to sustainable lottery growth—but data alone is not enough. How are lotteries combining analytics with human judgment to deepen player connection, enhance experiences, reduce attrition, and drive sales? This session explores how digital engagement, player registration, and connected relationships are transforming lottery into a more interactive, insight-driven enterprise.

## From Rearview Mirror to Steering Wheel

Over the past decade, the role of data in lottery operations has undergone a fundamental transformation. As **Shannon DeHaven** described it, data has moved “from being in the rearview mirror to being a steering wheel.”

A decade ago, most lottery analytics were backward-looking. Teams relied on static dashboards, daily reports, and basic segmentation. The central question was: What happened yesterday? Which games sold? Which campaigns worked? What didn't? Even the more sophisticated tools, like focus groups and surveys, were limited by a fundamental flaw: they captured what players said, not what they did.

“Players tell you what they think,” **DeHaven** noted, “but what they think isn't always what they do.”

Today, the paradigm has shifted. Modern data stacks, real-time processing, and machine learning have transformed analytics into a forward-looking discipline. Instead of asking what happened, lotteries can now ask what will happen, and intervene accordingly. Which player is about to churn? Which game should be recommended in the moment? Which message, delivered on which device, will resonate most effectively? When is an RG prompt called for?

This is not just a technological evolution. It is a cultural one. “It's not about making fancier data models,” **DeHaven** emphasized. “It's about becoming more curious... moving from hunches to hypotheses.”

Data, in this sense, becomes the connective tissue linking revenue growth, player experience, and responsible gaming. But that connection only works if organizations are willing to rethink how decisions are made.

## The Shift from Product to Experience

**Rob Wesley** pushed the conversation further, arguing that the explosion of data is not just

changing how lotteries analyze performance. It is changing what lotteries are.

Historically, lottery has been a product-centric business. Success was defined by the strength of the games themselves: the ticket design, the price point, the prize structure. But that model is increasingly outdated. “We should become a player-centric, experience-centric industry,” **Wesley** said. “That is what matters now. That is what is expected.”

This shift mirrors broader trends across entertainment and consumer industries. Players are no longer passive participants. They expect engagement, personalization, and continuity across channels. They expect an ecosystem, not a transaction.

And yet, herein lies a tension. While technology has advanced rapidly, organizational structures have not kept pace. Lottery organizations, by nature, tend to be risk-averse, hierarchical, and deliberate (sometimes even slow-moving). The tools for speed and agility exist, but the culture often resists them. “To leverage the technology and the data,” **Wesley** said, “it's about having a higher risk tolerance, pushing responsibility down to be shared by the teams most involved in the work, and being able to move on the decisions they make.”

The limiting factor is no longer data. It is making the decision to act on the data-driven insights and plans.

## The Problem with Listening Too Closely

If there was one theme that surfaced repeatedly across the panel, it was skepticism, bordering on distrust, of traditional research methods.

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**Technology, Services, & Games  
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of What  
We Do**

**Khalid Jones** illustrated this with a simple but powerful analogy: the transition from BlackBerry to iPhone. At the time, surveys suggested that users preferred physical keyboards and would resist touchscreen devices. “We all said, ‘I’m never going to switch from my chicklet keyboard,’” Jones recalled. “And of course, people did the exact opposite.”

The lesson is not that players are dishonest, but that they are unreliable narrators of their own behavior. They respond to surveys based on what they believe, what they aspire to, or what they think they should say, not necessarily what they will actually do.

This disconnect has real consequences. **Jones** shared that scratch-off products selected based on top-performing survey results often delivered only average performance in market. In response, his team adopted a deliberate counterbalance: for every data-driven decision, they would also launch a product based on intuition. “For every scratcher you pull from survey data,” he explained, “I want one based on your intuition.”

The result is not a rejection of data, but a reframing of its role. Data should inform direction, not dictate it.

Interestingly, the dynamic shifts in digital

environments. In iLottery, where behavior can be observed in real time and at scale, data becomes far more reliable. “Players tell me what they like,” **Jones** said, “and I don’t have to worry about them misinterpreting their own motivations because they’re actually speaking through their behavior.”

This creates a bifurcated model: intuition and experience play a larger role in slower, less observable channels like retail, while data takes precedence in fast, feedback-rich digital environments.

## Rethinking Research: From Surveys to Signals

**Monika McMahon** described how this realization has led to a rethinking of research methodologies. Traditional focus groups, long a staple of product development, are increasingly seen as flawed. “It’s like going to the doctor,” she said. “They ask how often you exercise or how much you drink, and you tell them what you think they want to hear, or what you’d like to believe about yourself.”

In response, her team shifted toward a more granular, component-based approach. Instead of asking players to evaluate entire

tickets, they analyze individual elements—design features, themes, mechanics; and use data analytics to recombine the most appealing components.

The results have been striking. A \$50 ticket developed using this approach sold out in half the expected time.

On the digital side, the feedback loop is even tighter. A/B testing allows teams to experiment continuously; changing a button color, a message, or an offer, and immediately measure the impact. This is where data delivers its greatest value: not in predicting success with certainty, but in accelerating learning.

## The Tyranny of Too Much Data

As data becomes more abundant, it also becomes more overwhelming. The challenge is no longer access to information, but curation and prioritization. “We have so much data now,” **Jones** noted, “that figuring out what’s important and what’s not is the current challenge.”

This overload can lead to misinterpretation. Conclusions are derived from patterns. Correlations are mistaken for causation.

**Wesley** highlighted how cross-jurisdictional comparisons can be particularly misleading when context is ignored. A state might conclude that iLottery is harming retail sales based on surface-level data, when in reality the decline is driven by unrelated factors such as competing gaming options. Without context, data can lead to the wrong decisions. “Don’t just give me data points,” **Wesley** emphasized. “Provide as rich a context as possible. Talk to me about the various ways to interpret it.”

This is where vendors play a critical role; not just as data providers, but as interpreters. Their value lies in translating data into insight, and insight into action.

## What Actually Matters: The KPIs That Drive Decisions

Moderator **Stephen Durrell** asks: “What data and what KPIs do you look at on a regular basis? What’s the first thing you pull up in the morning that you feel gives you the right starting point to analyze the data and metrics for that day’s work?”

The panelists revealed a pragmatic approach: start simple, then go deeper. For **Jones** and **McMahon**, the first question each morning is whether a major jackpot has been hit. This single data point has immediate implications for player acquisition, engagement, and promotional strategy. “It directly informs my number one digital KPI,” **Jones** explained, “which is first-time depositors.”

From there, attention shifts to broader trends: sales velocity, player behavior, and engagement patterns. **Wesley** emphasized the importance of focusing on movement rather than static snapshots; who is joining, who is leaving, and how segments are evolving over time. Sustainable growth, he argued, depends on understanding these dynamics. “You can’t just keep cycling the same people,” he said. “You need to grow the ecosystem.”

This concept of ecosystem surfaced repeatedly. Retail and digital are no longer separate channels; they are interconnected parts of a single player journey. Measuring them in isolation misses the bigger picture.

## CRM as the New Competitive Battlefield

If there was consensus on one point, it was the central importance of CRM. **McMahon** shared a compelling case study: a six-month holdout test in which a group of players

stopped receiving all CRM communications. The result was a 25% increase in spend among those who continued receiving messages.

The implication is clear. Direct and consistent communication; whether through email, push notifications, or in-app messaging; is not just a marketing tool. It is a core driver of engagement and revenue. “Even just notifying players that new tickets are available,” **McMahon** said, “makes a difference.”

**DeHaven** reinforced this point, noting that CRM is one of the most cost-effective ways to maintain visibility in an environment of limited advertising budgets. But effectiveness depends on execution. The right message must reach the right player at the right time, through the right channel.

This is where machine learning and automation become critical. CRM is no longer about broadcasting messages; it is about orchestrating personalized interactions at scale. “It’s not just sending emails,” **DeHaven** said. “It’s real-time communication; understanding which players to target, when, and how.”

**Wesley** added a sobering reality: acquiring new players is difficult and expensive. CRM, therefore, is not just a growth tool; it is a retention engine. “The vast majority of revenue is coming from existing players,” he said. “Getting new players is extremely difficult, but is of course key to sustainable growth.”

## The Limits of Data—and the Role of Intuition

Despite the power of analytics, the panel returned repeatedly to the importance of human judgment. When asked when to look past or even disregard data, the answers converged on a common theme: when exploring the unknown. “To some extent, it comes down to gut instinct,” **McMahon** said. “It’s sometimes better to move forward and try something than to be frozen by inconclusive data.”

**DeHaven** took a more structured approach, suggesting that experimentation should be built into the budget. Innovation should not be accidental; it should be intentional. “You should be budgeting time and money to try things that might not make sense,” she said.

**Wesley** framed it in terms of risk management. If the downside is limited and the upside—whether financial, cultural, or informational—is meaningful, then the calculated risk is justified.

**Jones** offered perhaps the most expansive perspective. The moment to ignore data is when creating something that does not yet exist. “How can consumers know what they want,” he asked, “when they haven’t experienced it before because you’re creating something new?”

## Expanding the Pie

**Stephen Durrell** points out that “most data focuses on existing players. Lotteries analyze those already ‘in the barrel’ and often overlook those outside it. This is a strategic blind spot. Growth requires not just optimizing the behavior of current players, but expanding the audience.”

High jackpot moments offer one of the few opportunities for “free acquisition”; an influx of new players drawn by media attention and social buzz. The challenge is capturing and retaining this fleeting audience. “We know new players are coming in,” **Jones** said. “The question is how do we get them into our system so we can reach back out to them and convert them into repeat players?”

This is where the integration of retail and digital becomes critical. The future lies in connecting these touchpoints into a unified ecosystem that can identify, engage, and retain players across channels.

## The Real Takeaway: Data Is a Tool, Not a Strategy

The panel ultimately arrives at a nuanced conclusion. Data is essential, but it is not a substitute for strategy. It does not eliminate uncertainty; it reshapes it by providing additional insights.

The organizations that will succeed are those that can balance three forces:

- **Data**, to inform decisions and accelerate learning
- **Experience**, to interpret context, identify opportunity and avoid missteps
- **Intuition**, to explore possibilities that reside beyond the limits of existing knowledge

Or, as one might put it more simply: the science tells you what is happening; the art tells you what to do about it.

And in a business built on human behavior, emotion, and experience, that art remains as important as ever. ■