

A numbers game

Fun and welcoming, Mecca Bingo has been part of British life for 60 years – and it’s gaining in popularity every day



It might be a lot of fun, but bingo calling is not an easy job. When the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge agreed to host an online bingo game for residents of a Welsh care home during the pandemic, they were told by one unimpressed player that their performance “wasn’t as good as it should have been”. The Duke and Duchess accepted the criticism with amusement, but it does highlight the skills of the professional bingo callers at Mecca Bingo, the UK’s largest bingo operator, with more than 70 clubs across the UK.

“We are very much part of the British community,” says Mecca’s Head of Strategy, Samantha Fay. “Our customers are very patriotic, love The Queen and have a strong connection to the Royal Family, so Mecca has been planning its Platinum Jubilee celebrations for a while. We will create good, sometimes nostalgic experiences in the clubs. We celebrated our own 60th anniversary in 2021, which made us fully appreciate our rich history. One thing our customers tell us is that they trust us and see us as part of their community. People come to our bingo halls to socialise with their friends and family, let off steam and have fun playing a game with a long British legacy.”

While Mecca Bingo dates back to 1961, the Mecca Leisure Group can trace its roots back even further. Between the two world wars, Mecca presided over the nation’s largest chain of dancehalls, which were then one of the most popular entertainment venues, as well as some of the most glamorous public buildings in many towns and cities. Mecca’s post-war general manager was Eric Morley, who created the BBC television show, *Come Dancing*, even persuading the Beeb to record episodes at some of Mecca’s beautiful Art Deco dancehalls. At the same time, Morley invented Miss World, which was launched as part of the 1951 Festival of Britain and held at a Mecca dancehall in Covent Garden – now the Lyceum theatre.

In the 1990s, the Mecca chain was bought by Rank, an entertainment organisation with an even longer history in British popular culture. The Rank family business had originally been flour



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milling (now known as Rank Hovis McDougall) but the founder’s son, J Arthur Rank was more excited by the potential of a growing medium: film. The Rank Organisation was for many decades the most famous name in British cinema, making renowned British classics such as *Brief Encounter*, *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*, *A Matter of Life and Death* and *A Night to Remember*, all instantly recognisable from the famous opening credit of an athlete banging a gong. Rank was even given the honour of filming the 1953 Coronation, a cultural landmark in 20th-century British history.

Rank owned the Odeon cinema chain as well as studios at Pinewood, Ealing and Lime Grove, where countless great films were made. Rank only severed its film connections in 2005, when it focused on other areas of entertainment, including bingo and casinos. As the Rank Organisation diversified, it tried to buy Mecca twice in the 1960s before achieving its goal in the 1990s.

This great history from two of the country’s most important entertainment brands is now entwined in Mecca Bingo. The game, which was invented in 16th-century Italy, was first introduced to Mecca’s dancehalls to fill space in the afternoons but was quickly recognised as a major source of fun and revenue in its own right. What originally set Mecca apart from other bingo operators was its ambience – providing customers with great food and drink – and its ambition, as seen in the glamorous prizes: holidays, diamond necklaces, and fur coats. Today, that commitment to customer entertainment continues in the spacious and cheerful settings and the prizes of holidays, iPhones and home makeovers. Little wonder that bingo is still incredibly popular across the generations, both in person and online.

For many customers, Mecca bingo is an essential source of camaraderie, a place where people from all walks of life can enjoy some inexpensive fun with friends. This has created powerful community bonds between Mecca and its customers who were challenged by the pandemic. In response, Mecca launched itself into a series of projects

designed to support its audience at a time when this was needed more than ever. “We turned over our kitchens to charities and our car parks to the NHS and provided more than 250,000 meals to vulnerable people,” says Fay. “We had free bingo online so people could play with and chat to their friends, and our club teams made 11,000 calls to vulnerable customers who were sheltering at home.”

Mecca also has a long-standing partnership with the Carers Trust, whose patron is Princess Anne. “We have raised more than £3 million for the Carers Trust since we chose the charity as our partner in 2014,” says Fay. “We felt it was a great match as a lot of our customers are carers, many unpaid. They tell us that they spend a lot of time looking after people and their ‘me time’ is playing bingo each week.”

As well as its traditional, older and majority female customer base, Mecca has a new audience among younger people, including more men and couples. The company’s online bingo operation is already significantly younger and more diverse, and Mecca is encouraging these players into bingo halls by reinventing the bingo experience. “We don’t just offer classic 90-ball bingo, we have a variety of engaging new formats, quick-fire games, music-led bingo and novelty games,” says Fay. What she dubs the “Mecca Bingo Club of the future” has already opened in Luton, where bingo is one of an array of leisure experiences that includes food, drink, and entertainment.

“Bingo is at the heart of what we do, but we do it in different ways to enliven the experience. We are bringing entertainment back to our bingo halls and events are one way we do this, with dancing, singing and performances. We also have a brand partnership with *Britain’s Got Talent*, which is the epitome of what we stand for. Mecca really respects the talent and humour of the British public, as well as its spirit of togetherness, and bringing that entertainment experience back into the bingo hall on a local level is a way of celebrating that.”

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