



Lessons from Visiting Over 900 Casinos

by Andrew Klebanow

Casinos, at their core, are very similar. There is an entrance in the front, a loading dock in the rear, and a place in between where customers and employees converge in an area that houses slot machines and table games. The products that casinos sell are also similar. Casinos provide entertainment, a chance to win money, and a place to escape. Oftentimes casinos provide a place to stay and get something to eat. Some of the best properties in the world are not necessarily the largest or the most opulent. Rather, its leaders understand what matters most to their customers and they deliver on that promise.

Hospitality Matters

No customer is obligated to go to a casino and spend money. Unlike going to a store to buy a product that one needs, going to a casino to spend money is a purely discretionary endeavor. The best casino operators recognize this and train their employees in providing their customers with a sense of hospitality. This may sound simple enough, but too few casinos succeed in executing it.

Hospitality in a casino can be communicated in three simple steps: a greeting, a sincere wish of good luck, and a thank you when a customer departs. While simple to explain, it is often a hard task to implement. In some countries, such as the casinos in the former Soviet Union, a sense of hospitality is not an inherent part of their culture. Enter a casino in the Republic of Georgia and one is likely to encounter stern-looking security guards, and customer service agents tasked with checking passports who provide all the warmth and hospitality of border guards. Once inside, dealers perform their tasks with grim faces. No one smiles and no one provides those three simple manifestations of hospitality. It is not something that comes naturally to them and it is not something that they are trained to do.

In contrast, the best casinos imbue a sense of hospitality in all of their employees. They do so by first treating them well, providing the tools to do their jobs, sufficient training, and reminding them of the importance of treating their guests well. Great hospitality can be manifested with a security officer opening the door for patrons and welcoming them, or a restaurant cashier that wishes each departing patron with the words, “good luck.”

One of the world’s largest casinos, Galaxy Macau, went so far as to create a unique hand gesture, where the employee touches their heart and bows slightly. All their employees use this greeting when encountering a guest. It is multi-lingual

in that it does not require knowledge of any one language, and is thus ideal for a casino serving customers from different nations. Even the most stoic of security officers employ this gesture and its disarming quality makes every guest feel welcome.

Even older casinos with established workforces can succeed at maintaining an outstanding service culture. Ballys Casino in Las Vegas is one of the oldest properties on the Strip – one with an older workforce, and one that has had a succession of owners. That can have a demoralizing effect, particularly as newer properties with more amenities attract a greater share of visitors. Nevertheless, its leaders have succeeded in teaching their employees to provide those essential elements of hospitality. One need only walk through their gaming pit and see every dealer that is not dealing game look up, make eye contact and smile at every customer passing by.

The Air Matters

Air quality matters. Nothing irritates both smokers and non-smokers alike than poor air quality. In both focus groups and customer insight panels, the most often cited complaint among gaming patrons is a casino’s poor air quality. In the worst situations, poor air handling is immediately noticeable. It strikes customers as soon as they enter the property. In others, it may be more insidious where smoke lingers through both smoking and non-smoking zones, leaving a pall over all public areas.

In the defense of many casinos that were not purpose-built but were rather converted into casinos, their original air handling systems were never equipped to handle the amount of people and smoke that a casino can generate. Nevertheless, the best operators invested in robust air handling systems that remove smoke effectively, and restrict areas where smoking is allowed. Approximately 17% of adults in the U.S. smoke. While it is generally acknowledged that smokers comprise a larger part of the gaming population than the general population, casinos must make the effort to provide healthful environments for both their non-smoking customers and their employees. Clean air matters.

A Sense of Winning Matters

People like to win money. It is one of the reasons they go to casinos. The challenge for any operator is to create an environment that provides a sense of winning. Years ago, before the implementation of ticket in/ticket out technology, creating gaming environments that communicated a sense of

winning was fairly easy: the sounds of coins dropping into steel bowls, along with bells and other audio cues created an atmosphere of winning. Also, the advent of multi-line video reel slot machines have succeeded in keeping customers engaged at slot machines by providing a steady stream of small payouts, but top-line jackpots and their associated sounds are harder to come by today. Nevertheless, winning matters. The best casinos maintain initiatives that continue to communicate this sense of winning. They allow their dealers to congratulate customers. They encourage table game players to celebrate. Whether through announcements over the public address system, a wall of photos displaying recent winners, or even a list of machines that recently paid a jackpot, the best operators communicate a sense of winning all of the time.

Food Matters

While larger casinos have well-developed food and beverage programs that are successful at attracting both gaming and non-gaming customers, the vast majority of casinos tend to struggle with matching their restaurants with the wants and needs of customers. The fact is, most visitors to casinos, particularly those that patronize smaller properties, do not visit a casino in order to get something to eat. They go to gamble and may include a meal as part of that gaming experience. The challenge is to match the right food program with what customers want.

In Southern California, one large card room developed a truly innovative kind of cuisine to meet the needs of their customers. Servers pushing dim sum carts pass through the gaming floor, selling a variety of dumplings and savory pastries that are popular with many Asians, particularly those of Chinese descent. Players can order small plates of food and eat at the gaming tables. The casino operator knows what their customers like and they devised a way to deliver on it while keeping them engaged at the gaming tables.

Today, many casino operators are re-imagining their food and beverage programs, trying to better match the kinds of food that they serve to better meet the needs of their customers. Buffets are being reinvented as food courts or other concepts. The best casino operators successfully match the right kinds of food with the needs of their customers. Food options in a casino matter because they keep players on property longer.

Knowing Your Customer Matters

The most successful casinos in the world know their customers. They know what their players want, make a commitment to deliver it, and fulfill on that promise. Learning what customers want requires a top-down commitment. The best properties are run by managers that walk the floor, greet customers by name, listen to their concerns, and

promise to address them. The best properties also employ an ongoing program of market research, conduct customer insight panels, as well as surveys.

One of the most successful casino resorts in Manila employs an ongoing program where they measure customer service. They conduct focus groups and meet with players. The property also is led by someone who was schooled in casino operations in the U.S., and that leader makes a point of walking the floor on a daily basis, greeting customers, and listening to their gripes. Knowing your customers, listening to them, and acting on their concerns truly matters.

It can be said that the best properties are run by leaders that have common sense. They understand that by providing clean and entertaining environments, treating their employees well, and understanding their customers wants and needs, customers will reward the property with their loyalty. ♣

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