

Success is in the doing, not the knowing

Guest Column by Martin R. Baird

I've been writing recently about the importance of casinos turning their guests into advocates. But there's more to it than simply understanding that advocates can generate new growth. Casinos will not move down this path to success if they don't take action to make it happen.

First let's review what advocates are and why they are important. Advocates are guests who would be willing to risk their reputation and act as advocates for a property by spreading positive word-of-mouth advertising of their own free will. Guest advocates are highly likely to return to play again and generate new business through the positive word they spread about the casino. I want to make it clear this is not a "satisfied" guest because guests are fickle and change with the wind. Measuring and trying to create satisfied guests is a waste of time, energy and money.

That knowledge should get any casino interested in creating as many advocates as possible. But in order to do that, they must have a turnkey system in place to gather data on guest advocates, put the data into action, make people accountable for leveraging it and keep the process rolling forward smoothly. The heart of this system should be a set of best business practices that not only makes things happen but also gets everyone in the casino out of their old habits.

I read a quote in a new book recently and it was the same thing I have said so many times after speaking at conferences. The presenter left the stage and could see the excited faces of the executives. But he was disappointed. When asked why, he said, "Because people are leaving happy and motivated but they do not have the people or processes in place to do what we have just shared with them. Once they get back to the office, they will do it the same way they have done it in the past."

Casino employees all too often do things the same way they did when they were at another property across town, across the state or on the other side of the world. But best practices will change all that and generate the action needed to create future success.

Here are my suggested best practices: leadership, program management, goals and metrics, incentives, action planning, improvement, and guest and employee closure. If you introduce a new system and want it to succeed, these are the areas where you must focus your attention.

I only want to make one point about leadership. For improvement to happen, the casino's leadership must do more than just support the changes. It must truly lead. I work in the area of guest service improvement and I laugh when I hear casino executives say service is their No. 1 priority. Later when we walk through the halls in the back of the casino, they don't smile, make eye contact or say hello to the employees. If you want change to happen, management must lead through example.

Program management is critical but challenging. Why? If improvement is going to happen and it affects multiple departments, centralized management of the change is difficult to achieve. Slots never likes to hear people from table games telling them how to run their business. This makes it challenging to manage the change or to apply the new system.

Another challenge of program management is that the people who are expected to "manage" already have full-time jobs. Asking a person who works 50 to 60 hours a week to manage a new program is not easy. It can help sometimes to use outside resources that are focused on implementation of the new system and designing it so the casino can take over when the time is right.

I get frustrated when I talk with casino leaders about goals and metrics. The idea of having measurable goals and metrics for departments is hot right now. Casinos understand that the performance of all departments should be measured. The part I don't understand is what people are thinking when they create the measurements.

For example, if my bonus is determined by turnover in my department, I may hesitate to fire an employee who provides less than great guest service. That will bump up my turnover and there goes my bonus. As the casino rolls out its new system for creating advocates, the goals and metrics for all departments must be tied to a common goal. That common goal is what creates incremental improvements.

Employee incentives are the next step in the process. You have this new system and a clearly defined common goal. Now dangle a carrot out there so people work to achieve it. If people know they will be rewarded for doing what's expected of them, they will bend over backward. The incentives need to be the same for all departments. This creates synergy that delivers a clear message to all employees.

The next two best practices, action planning and improvement, are the cornerstones of progress. This is where the talk turns to action in the form of an actual plan. To me, this is the weakest link for most casinos because this is where change happens and that creates fear. It's said that water follows the path of least resistance and so do people. The word "improvement" is just another way of saying "change" and most people don't like to change. Expect a variety of resistance.

Now comes closure. What was started needs to come full circle. ResponseTek did a study and found that 95 percent of companies collect feedback but only 5 percent of them inform customers and employees of the resulting changes. Your casino's employees will want to know how things are progressing, so keep them informed. As part of the system, guests should be asked how the casino can be a better place to play. Let them know how their input was used.

The path to success is not in the knowing, it's in the doing. Understanding that guest advocates are important to a casino's success is not nearly enough by a long shot. Success will only come when that knowledge is put into action with a turnkey system that has everybody on board and excited.

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