



What's in a name?: Effective branding of casino properties



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The role of branding in the marketing of casino properties has somewhat lessened in significance over the last two decades. One major reason for this decline in significance are the mergers and acquisitions which have gathered steam during this period. Yet, from the vantage point of the customer, branding remains as important as ever. I would go so far as to argue that despite the consolidation and the consequent rebranding of properties, it behooves casino operators to use the power of individual brands as a key ingredient in their marketing strategy.

An example from packaged consumer goods will drive home the point. Proctor & Gamble (P&G) has hundreds of brands, all having their own identity. In fact, how many consumers would know that Era, Tide, Cheer and Gain are all laundry products made by this company? For branding to serve its key purposes, it needs to be strategically managed with the target customer in mind.

What is a brand?

Over the years, many different definitions of a brand have been offered. David Aaker, Professor Emeritus at University of California, Berkeley, defines a brand as, “a distinguishing name and/or symbol intended to identify the goods and services of one seller and to differentiate those goods and services from those of competitors.” A more contemporary



laborious and costly marketing activities. While individual themed properties (such as New York, New York in Las Vegas or the Venetian in Macau) offer some of the benefits that effective branding does, they are merely the foundation, not the spire, of the branding edifice.

While consolidating many properties under one family name (such as Caesars or MGM) has benefits such as economies of scale, common loyalty programs, and encouraging cross-property visitation), such aggregation detracts from the formation and sustenance of individual brand personality, and the emotional connections customers would otherwise forge with individual properties. Furthermore, negative publicity—for whatever reason—surrounding one property can quickly and adversely impact performance at other properties. True loyalty usually involves individual products or properties. For example, my loyalty may be toward individual airlines such as Qantas (possible) or Jetstar (highly unlikely), it will never be toward the parent company that owns both airlines. Multibrand loyalty toward a company is only possible where the same brand name is given to different products (such as Apple i-phone, i-pod, and i-pad), and there exist significant advantages in owning these products (such as common platforms, or ease of mobility). This, clearly, is not the case with casino properties. Yes, I can use the same loyalty card at Harrah's Las Vegas and at Caesars Palace, but individual differences across the two properties are far too huge for me to form an emotional connection with either property. In fact, many marketing scholars contend that Harrah's made a mistake in its acquisition of casinos formerly owned by Park Place Entertainment (later renamed Caesars). The acquisition and consolidation, they argue, resulted in impoverished brand equity for all brands involved in consolidation. ●

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and useful definition of a brand is offered by Seth Godin who writes, “A brand is a set of expectations, memories, stories, and relationships that taken together, account for a consumer’s decision to choose one product or service over another.”

What casino properties need to do?

In this day of customer empowerment, it would be naïve to think that marketers are in total control of their brands. Rather, the brand is a container of meanings co-created by marketers’ intention, customers’ interpretations and experiences, and associations generated by the broader socio-cultural environment. There are several obvious advantages to branding—a strong brand attracts premium price, creates a loyal following, facilitates instant customer recall and recognition, and generates positive word-of-mouth communication—the strongest marketing weapon of all times.

Given these visible gains from branding, it is obvious that casino operators should redouble their efforts to build strong individual brands for their properties. Specifically, in

their quest to build a strong brand, they need to ensure six things: (1) the brand clearly identifies a set of marketplace offers; (2) The brand is distinctive and unique in the eyes of the targeted customer; (3) The brand has a unique selling proposition (USP) that is hard for the competition to copy or replicate; (4) The brand is imbued with meaning that has relevance to the target market: The meaning could be derived from brand associations, brand personalities, personas, or archetypes; (5) The brand provides strong value to both the firm and the customers. Value to the firm would ultimately translate into financial return whereas value to the customers could comprise of functional benefits, emotional resonance, or status value; (6) The brand must provide the experience to customer that it promises. Sergio Zyman (Remember him? The New Coke guy) goes so far as to suggest that a brand is little more than a container for a customer’s experience with the product or the company.

When correctly orchestrated, the brand name becomes shorthand for bestowing benefits not easily attainable by other