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## Delivering Outstanding Customer Service

For years many Indian tribes have recognized the importance of customer service in their casino operations. Gaming is, after all, an entertainment experience and, while winning money is an important part of that experience, the majority of customers walk away from a casino with less money than they had than when they entered. They are left with the memory of the experience, hopefully positive, that will prompt them to return. Great customer service adds value to that experience and acts as an inducement to return. Rude or indifferent service can easily sour these experiences and discourage patrons from returning.

To advance the concept of quality customer service, many tribes have invested in employee training programs that teach employees how to deliver outstanding customer service. These programs focus on teaching the importance of a good attitude, a smile, empathy towards player concerns and *taking ownership* in order to solve a customer's problem. While smiling and caring employees are an important factor in the delivery of outstanding customer service, it is just one component of the service delivery process.

### The Customer Service Vision

In order to be successful, any major service initiative in a business organization starts with a clear vision from senior leadership. Leaders of most Indian casinos have just such a vision. This commitment to customer service often appears prominently in mission/vision statements. "Outstanding customer service" is discussed at employee orientations and appears prominently in employee handbooks. Some gaming organizations go so far as to print their customer service commitments on business cards and collateral material.

The human resources department within the gaming organization is often tasked with training employees and managers on effective customer service. Often they employ outside consultants to conduct seminars. Marketing may also be employed to measure customer service, either through intercept studies, mystery shopping programs or other measurement tools. Yet, despite these initiatives, customer service in casinos is often perceived as lackluster.

### The Components of Customer Service

What are the components of outstanding customer service? Certainly, a well trained work force is an important component, but just as important, are the systems that help deliver that outstanding customer service. Even well trained employees with great attitudes can get frustrated when the transactional systems that they use prevent them from delivering outstanding customer service. A simple example would be a customer's request to charge a purchase at a casino's gift shop to their room

bill. If the transactional system cannot accommodate this request, the employee has to deny what appears, to both customer and employee, as a reasonable request. Employees, schooled in the delivery of outstanding customer service, do not like to say "no" to these simple customer requests and they, in turn, get frustrated.

Other examples are the transactions that occur at the casino's slot club. In many casinos, customers are issued a paper comp with a maximum dollar value that they take to a restaurant for a meal. When customers exceed their limits, they are often asked to go back to the slot club for an additional comp. The end result is that the value of a customer reward (a comp meal) is diminished because the system that was designed to deliver that reward was flawed. Recently, some casinos have developed transactional systems that allow patrons to redeem their comps electronically, bypassing the club altogether. The result is a smoother process to deliver customer rewards.

Ticket in/ticket out technology is another example of a transactional system that delivers outstanding customer service. Rather than have to wait for a friendly and smiling employee to fill a slot machine hopper, customers simply take a ticket when they are ready to cash out of a game and go to the cage (or another machine). Great customer service is achieved because the customer did not have to wait for anyone to help them.

### Examine Other Industries

Very often, consumer expectations of great customer service are not defined by the gaming organization or the competition but by other industries. Today, banking customers can go online; check their balances, pay bills or transfer funds. If there is a particular problem that cannot be addressed electronically, a customer can visit their bank branch where they are greeted by friendly and caring employees. Airlines allow customers to easily book travel and print boarding passes online. If there is a special request, a customer can still call the airline directly and be attended to by a friendly and caring employee. There is an expectation among consumers that, if one industry can provide such services, others should also.

In casinos, customers now have an expectation that they should be able to go online and check their point and comp dollar balances rather than have to visit the casino slot club booth. If customers want to register for a slot tournament, their expectation is that this kind of transaction should be done online and they expect to receive an instant confirmation of their enrollment. Yet the vast majority of casinos still require customers to phone the casino, speak with the tournament manager and register over the phone. In other words, other industries continue to raise the expectations of casino

customers. Casinos in turn, must continue to develop new systems to better meet those expectations.

### Create Systems to Deliver Outstanding Service

Great customer service requires an evaluation of all of the transactional systems that can affect the customer. Is the slot club designed, from a systems standpoint, to deliver outstanding customer service? Do customers have to go to the slot club booth to get a paper comp or can they bypass the booth completely? Likewise, do customers have to go to the cashier's cage in order to redeem a mail offer for cash or can they simply insert their slot club card into a slot machine and redeem their offer at the game? Do hotel guests have to check out at the front desk or can they do so on their in-room television?

Each one of these systems reduces the interaction of employee and guest but in fact, they improve the customer service delivery process. While some casino managers may recognize a labor savings in upgrading these systems, others realize that it frees their employees up to address the more serious issues that require personalized attention.

### Continuously Improve the Service Delivery Process

Outstanding customer service is more than a training program. It is a continuous process in which all managers strive to improve the organization's service delivery process. In gaming organizations, each departmental manager must continually look at service delivery processes and find ways to improve them. They must be receptive to comments and suggestions from other department heads. They must involve the IT department to find ways to make their systems better. Most important, they must engage their employees and ask them for ways to make the system better. Line employees, who interact with the casino's customers every day, have a very good understanding of what customer expectations are. It is only logical then, to include them in the continuing process of improving customer service.

Friendly, smiling and caring employees are important to the success of any gaming organization but it is only one component in the overall delivery of outstanding customer service. ♣

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