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## Selecting the Appropriate Advertising Agency

There is a tendency among people who are recruited for leadership roles in gaming organizations to change things. The logic is that, by shaking things up, the organization's business performance will improve. New marketing directors and property managers often target the casino's advertising agency as one of those institutions that must be changed.

The motivations to change a casino's advertising agency are varied. There is often a tendency to criticize current advertising as ineffective. There is also a desire by the new manager to bring in an agency that he/she had worked with in the past. Rather than first evaluate the capabilities of the existing agency and to provide new direction, the new marketing director or property manager will sometimes summarily dismiss the current agency as incompetent and bring in an agency that he/she knows can do the job.

There is a large expense associated for any casino when it chooses to change its advertising agency. In addition to the fees that the outgoing agency may charge for transferring files, the new agency's creative team will have a natural desire to change everything, from logos to television commercials. There is also no guarantee that the new agency will be able to perform any better than the previous one. They may not understand the tribe's values or the past appeals that have worked with the casino's customers. There is risk associated with such a change.

There are certainly many situations when a change in the advertising agency is appropriate. The agency may have failed to properly position the property in the marketplace. It may be more motivated by profit and not have the client's best interests in mind. The creative director may have sold the casino on a series of advertising campaigns that failed to work. Chronic billing errors and a lack of accountability may also be evident. More often than not though, the old agency may just not understand what motivates casino customers. In those cases, a change in an advertising agency is appropriate.

### Develop a Process

Before casino leadership moves forward with recruiting a new agency, it must first develop a process that will assure tribal leadership that it has identified the agency that is most capable of achieving its strategic marketing goals and that the new agency's values are aligned with those of the tribe. To do this, the casino's marketing director must first document the reasons that the agency must be changed and to present that case to tribal leadership. Once leadership agrees that a change is in order, it must task the marketing director with developing a process that identifies the best agency that will help achieve the casino's strategic goals.

The process begins by first writing a "Request For

Information" (RFI) and distributing it to a list of agencies under consideration. An RFI is just that, a request from the casino to candidate agencies for certain information that it will use to evaluate each agency's capabilities.

The list of candidate agencies should include a variety of agencies, both from the local region and those from other markets that have experience in both casino advertising and Indian casinos. This "long" list should contain no less than ten candidates and probably no more than twenty. In developing this list, the casino and tribe will need to rely on a wide variety of sources, including the experiences of other Native American casinos, advice from industry consultants and vendors of other casino services. Alternatively, it may post this request in the form of an advertisement in an industry journal. This will generate more than enough interested candidates.

### The Request for Information Document

While each RFI is unique, there are certain components that are common in all such requests. At the very least, an RFI should do the following:

State The Objective: What is the purpose of the RFI? Is it to identify an advertising agency that will become the casino's agency of record or is the casino seeking an agency only for project work or perhaps, public relations. There are significant costs associated with the preparation of an RFI and an agency under consideration must know beforehand if this is an assignment it wishes to take on.

Describe The Selection Process: What is the process that the tribe/casino will go through to select a new agency? Most often, a tribe will request information from many agencies and, after reviewing each agency's capabilities, narrow the field down to no more than five. Those five would then be invited to make a formal presentation to tribal leadership and casino management. It is imperative that the RFI describe this process so that each agency understands what may or may not take place.

Agency Experience: Ask the agency to provide an overview of its capabilities and experience. It is imperative that the RFI ask for specific information on the following relevant capabilities: branding, marketing plan development, media production and placement, database marketing, consumer research and public relations. Most important, the agency should be asked what experience it has in gaming in general and Indian gaming in particular. Casinos offer unique products and services that offer certain appeals. Indian casinos are also unique



entities. What relevant experience does the candidate agency have working in these environments?

**Fee Structure:** Understanding how an agency charges for its services is very important and should be clarified as early in the selection process as possible. Too often, acrimony occurs when the issue of fee structure is not fully clarified up front.

**References:** Ask each candidate to provide a list of past and current clients who can provide references.

**The Timetable:** Describe the timetable that the casino will follow in the selection process. Be sure to give the candidate agencies a minimum of four weeks to properly answer an RFI. Also, provide ample time for the tribal leadership and casino leadership to review all candidates. Then state the date that selected candidates will be invited to make a formal presentation. It is important that the casino show the same respect for time that it will demand from the agency.

#### The Review Process


Once a RFI has been issued, it is incumbent upon both tribal and casino leadership to evaluate each agency for its specific

capabilities. To identify the best candidates, leadership must first ask the question: "Where does it hurt the most?" What aspects of marketing and advertising need the most attention? Does the casino need help in managing its database marketing campaigns? Is the advertising uninspired? Are relationships with the surrounding communities strained? Only by understanding the most relevant needs can the tribe and casino management identify those agencies that can help it achieve its marketing objectives.

After leadership has narrowed the field of candidates to no more than five, they then invite those candidate agencies to make a formal agency to both tribal leadership and casino management.

The decision to change an agency should not be taken lightly. The costs associated with this change are significant as are the disruptions to ongoing marketing programs. By developing a formal process that involves tribal leadership, casino leadership and property marketing, the casino stands the best chance of finding the agency that will best meet its business needs. ♣

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