



The Casino Entertainment Program

by Kell Houston

Entertainment is the X-factor in all casino business. A good entertainment program helps your casino brand and drives strong consistent business. It ties into your customer data base, keeping your current customers coming back and creating new customers. A casino without a consistent and quality entertainment program is a casino that is missing the opportunity to stand out.

There are big casino properties out there that are spending a lot of money on their entertainment – from concerts 2-3 times or more a month, a serious lounge entertainment program with bands playing weekends and sometimes more, plus added Players Club special events, floor entertainment and special shows for the off days in the lounge. This is a lot of entertainment and it's expensive. At the other end of the scale are smaller properties that may do 8-10 shows a year and have a small lounge/bar with local groups playing on the weekends. Where do you find yourself in this mix? Probably somewhere in-between.

Your entertainment budget will dictate what you can do. A budget for a smaller property may be in the \$300,000 - \$500,000 range. Some larger properties spend \$2 million or more on their entertainment. Your program needs to be based on your customer base, your regional demographic and of course your budget. Here are two examples:

CASINO A – Located in a small secondary/tertiary market. Primarily a local's casino market and typically blue collar, this casino has a small multi-purpose room that can seat around 800 people. It has a smaller budget. The casino has determined that they will focus on providing concert entertainment once a month, except during the summer months, when local festivals, fairs and outdoor family events are more prevalent. They are good community partners and help sponsor some local summer events. Their budget for concerts would reasonably top out around \$25,000-30,000 per show. They are the center in their small region for entertainment. Reasonably speaking, each show they have is very important. They need to focus on quality and be consistent. For the older country demographic, they might look at Ronnie Milsap, Tanya Tucker, John Anderson, Pam Tillis, Neal McCoy, Tracy Lawrence, and BJ Thomas. For the classic rock side, it might be Loverboy, Great White, Night Ranger, Skid Row, Grand Funk, Guess Who, etc. Their customer looks forward to that special night out for a show and some fun. Typically in this kind of regional

marketplace, classic country and classic rock are the go to genres. Venturing too far from this kind of show can be a little adventurous and not always successful. The goal here is to provide a couple of shows for the older demographic, some rock shows for a younger demo and some country shows for the average customer. Once the program is established, the casino can try some different kinds of shows – always being careful to present new ideas carefully, keeping the brand and goals in mind for the program.

CASINO B – Located closer to a larger population base. The venue size may be anywhere from 1,500 – 2,500 seats. Generally this casino has numerous amenities like fine dining, a golf course, hotel, spa and a variety of restaurant offerings and is considered a getaway destination for customers. The entertainment program has a large budget and carefully plans their month by month offerings. Each concert tends to be geared towards a specific customer type. For example, this property may do an Asian show 3-4 times a year. In the Southwest it would be adding a couple of strong Hispanic shows. The casino should look at classic country – Merle Haggard, Don Williams, Charley Pride, Loretta Lynn, etc. – for one demographic and turn around and bring in young country – Frankie Ballard, Dustin Lynch, Scotty McCreery, Kelsea Ballerini, Cole Swindell, etc. – for the younger crowd. Classic rock big names like Heart, Styx, REO, Doobie Brothers, and Foreigner would play this venue and for the younger generation – Collective Soul, Rachel Platten, Breaking Benjamin, Three Doors Down, Tesla, and Queensryche would be in the mix. In addition to these kinds of groups, R&B like Four Tops, Temptations, Spinners, Keith Sweat and Boyz II Men, etc. and comedy like Tim Allen, Bill Engvall, George Lopez, Rodney Carrington, Roseanne Barr, etc., would be in the mix as well. They would also look at variety types of entertainment like Jack Hanna, Terry Fator, Cesar Milan, Price is Right Live, etc. The lounge program would feature top regional bands playing maybe as much as 3-4 days a week, instead of just weekends. This property might also consider running a regional type comedy show like Laugh Catchers mid-week once a month. All of this is a fairly complicated mix of entertainment that has been planned out and tweaked year by year.

The bottom line with any entertainment program is consistency. Too many casino properties struggle to put

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together a strong strategic plan and stick to it. Everyone is in a hurry to see results, but results take time to reveal themselves. A good strong reasonable strategy needs to be put in place and nurtured. Each show you do will give you insights on what you might change or do differently. For instance, a comedy program takes months to become established. Don't just give up after the first couple of shows. It takes time for your customers to adjust and believe in your entertainment. Too often, casinos drop programs before they have had a chance to succeed. This is frustrating for everyone including your customer.

The entertainment program you put in place is the foundation to build from. The research to understand the kind of program needed comes from the Players Club, the property's database, knowledge of the region, and the people involved in putting the program together, both inside and outside of the casino. A good team is very important.

The wrong kind of program that is not tuned into your customer can cost a lot of time and money. There is really no margin for mistakes today. It takes a long time to rebuild a program. It only takes a few bad decisions to undo things. Small steps, careful planning and patience are important. Success leaves clues. The casino business in Las Vegas is constantly changing and tweaking. Look at what is happening all around you and see how to apply that knowledge to your program. ♣

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